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Review of Vivian Nutton, ed., *Galen. On My Own Opinions. Corpus Medicorum Graecorum 5.3.2 Galeni De Propriis Placitis*

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Review of Vivian Nutton, ed., *Galen. On My Own Opinions. Corpus Medicorum Graecorum 5.3.2 Galeni De Propriis Placitis*

**Abstract**

Galen surely numbers among the most insistently self-referential authors of classical antiquity. Although one can think of many others who felt called upon at various points in their careers to explain or defend themselves in their writings, few were as systematic as Galen in creating an official persona for himself or attempting to direct the future reception of his writings. Most of Galen's works (and his voluminous output is always astounding to contemplate) contain at least some autobiographical touches, and several treatises are explicitly devoted to his own career and writings.

**Comments**

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Galen surely numbers among the most insistently self-referential authors of classical antiquity. Although one can think of many others who felt called upon at various points in their careers to explain or defend themselves in their writings, few were as systematic as Galen in creating an official persona for himself or attempting to direct the future reception of his writings. Most of Galen's works (and his voluminous output is always astounding to contemplate) contain at least some autobiographical touches, and several treatises are explicitly devoted to his own career and writings. The two most famous works of this sort, *On my Own Books* and *On the Order of my Own Books*, are part career retrospective and part protreptic, and reveal as much about the literary culture of the time as they do about Galen's own bibliography and contemporary medical praxis. Less well known, for reasons that will become clear below, is Galen's final work, *On my Own Opinions*, in which he reflects on some of the fundamental medical problems that occupied him throughout his long and rich career. This treatise is not quite the comprehensive survey of a lifetime's work that the title might lead one to expect; in fact, it is surprisingly disorganized and hardly useful as a clinical guide. It is rather more accurately seen as a work about epistemology and medical methodology, in which Galen considers what aspects of medicine are knowable or not and how one formulates principles in the face of our inconsistent knowledge of the body and, indeed, of the world.

If *On my Own Opinions* were in fact the great *summa* of one of the world's most influential physicians, presumably history would have taken a little more care with its preservation. As it stands, however, this little work seems to offer few new insights into Galen's better known works and few particularly revelatory moments of self-exegesis, and so it never aroused much interest after the author's death. To read Vivian Nutton's account of the early history of the work in his authoritative and engaging new edition, it seems a miracle that any of it has come down to us at all, and it becomes clear why only now something approaching an *editio princeps* is possible. As an exemplum of the vagaries of textual transmission, the tale is priceless: the (almost) complete text of the work survives only in a medieval Latin translation of an Arabic translation of Galen's original Greek. The Arabic translation is lost, and the Greek exists as a continuous text for less than twenty percent of the whole in a handful of manuscripts (essentially the last three chapters). Obviously anyone editing this work faces a dizzying array of philological and codicological problems, for not only must one assess the textual evidence across as many as four languages (there is even an extract of a Hebrew translation of the Arabic translation, the significance of which was unappreciated until 1995), but the lack of an actual "original" for so much of the work is enough to make any editor feel a little anchorless at the end of the day.

Those familiar with Vivian Nutton's distinguished contributions to the study of ancient medicine will hardly be surprised to find that he has confronted these editorial challenges masterfully and has produced an exemplary edition of the text, with expansive introductory material and a full

commentary on substance as well as text. Nutton mentions that he has been working on this edition sporadically for nearly thirty years, and one can easily sympathize with the delay, given the peculiarities of transmission. Although others have published sections of the treatise previously (Helmreich and Kalbfleisch in 1902, Einarson in 1959 and Moraux in 1987), Nutton's edition is the first to assemble all the known parts into what he modestly calls a "partial *editio princeps*." Overall, Nutton's achievement is remarkable not only because he has produced a real "first" in Galenic studies, but also because of how elegantly and persuasively he conveys just how much this relatively obscure work has to offer.

Nutton would be the first to admit that *On my Own Opinions* is not one of Galen's most central works and that it will ultimately have the most appeal for specialists in the history of medicine, but his combination of erudition and palpable passion for his author make his edition quite intriguing reading. The textual history of the work is an exciting story in itself, which Nutton sets out with exemplary clarity in his Introduction. Here he presents the evidence in a conventional form, cataloguing the Greek mss. (such as they are) and the Arabo-Latin mss., but pauses at critical points to assess the relationships among all the varied sources. Along the way there are stories worthy of *The Name of the Rose*, such as the Greek manuscript mysteriously cited as the Codex Adelphi "among the notes of two English medical men with a passion for Galen, John Caius (1510-1573) and Theodore Goulston (1572-1632)" [p.19], or the lost Paris manuscript, which probably contained a 14th century (Arabo-) Latin translation of the work, once ceremoniously handed down from one medical faculty Dean to the next, but lost some time after the middle of the 18th century. Despite the diverse strands of transmission from Galen's original Greek, the state of the Latin versions at least allows Nutton to propose a working *stemma codicum*, which reflects his argument that the surviving Latin translation shared a common source. The date of this particular hypothetical ms. (= a) is unknown, but Nutton argues that the Arabic version of the treatise would have been translated into Latin some time in the 13th century, possibly in S. Italy. Perhaps the greatest irony of all these multi-lingual versions and fragments of the work is that at certain moments they can provide added linguistic and editorial checks unavailable to the editor of an author who survived only in his original language. Thus, Nutton can use the actual Greek of Galen that exists for the final chapters of the work to help him assess readings of the Arabo-Latin translations, and so to establish a clearer relationship among the Latin manuscripts.

The obvious question raised by all these versions of the work is how or whether they can be used to reconstruct Galen's complete text of *On my Own Opinions*. Nutton is optimistic that we are in the end capable of reconstituting Galen's thoughts reasonably well, but reconstruction of the lost Greek is essentially impossible. As Nutton summarizes, p. 30: "the order and structure of Galen's Greek, changed once to suit the demands of an Arabic grammar and syntax, is further altered by the intervention of the Latin translator to produce something at times almost unintelligible." Nutton is able to explicate a good deal of this unintelligibility, but he too must concede that by the time we get to the Latin versions, we are working with a fairly "crude approximation" of Galen's original. To complicate the story even further, there exists in a group of manuscripts a fairly accurate Latin translation directly from the Greek of the last two chapters of the work, ascribed to the 14th century Niccolo da Reggio, and circulated independently as *De substantia virtutum naturalium*. As Nutton shows, Niccolo's Latin is of only the slightest importance for establishing the Greek text (which section of the treatise, we must remember, does exist independently in several Greek manuscripts), but it certainly highlights the relatively inferior quality of the Arabo-Latin tradition.

A textual history such as this poses a real dilemma for the editor in deciding how best to present the actual "text." Indeed, a quick perusal of the printed text of this edition can be a little jarring. The work opens in Latin, but the second page splits into columns, with a parallel Hebrew text on the left running alongside the Latin on the right. The facing translation likewise splits accordingly, with the

left-hand column translating the Hebrew extract, the right translating the Latin. When the Hebrew ends after a few pages, we return to a single Latin text for a few more pages until extant Greek extracts intrude, and the columns again split. And so it goes back and forth until the last three chapters (Chs. 13-15), where we have continuous Greek and Latin text juxtaposed in columns up to the end. Beneath the text, the *apparatus critici* run the entire width of the page, in three sections: citations and parallel passages first, followed by two separate apparatus keyed to each column of text above. One can think of any number of alternative ways to present a body of texts of this sort, some of which would surely be easier on the eyes. But despite its visual oddness, Nutton's system does seem the most rational, offering as it does the ability to collate two parallel texts virtually line-by-line with the most efficient physical exertion.

By piecing together with painstaking care the *disiecta membra* of *On my Own Opinions* Nutton has, in effect, offered the world what is likely to be the first glimpse of the work as a whole since it disintegrated not too long after Galen's death. While this achievement in itself is quite extraordinary, Nutton has worked equally hard, and with equal success, to situate this newly constituted work within the Galenic corpus. His English translations make for much more appealing reading than the often inelegant, utilitarian Latin version, and the commentary leaves few stones unturned in its philological and philosophical exegesis. Indeed, out of this patchwork text Galen's voice emerges with the poignancy of an old man reminiscing about his past achievements and contemplating his legacy. Galen's trademark self-confidence (or, some might say, arrogance) is still there, but the ideas flow here more clumsily and a sense of mental disarray is occasionally evident. There is decidedly less invective at the opening of this work than we find in some of his earlier prolegomena, (nothing, e.g., quite like the choice squib from *On the Order of my Own Books*, in which he sarcastically suggests that in his own time a book written by the Muses would be less admired than "the writings of total ignoramuses"! ). *On my Own Opinions* is by contrast more businesslike, less personal, and, I would say (at the risk of reading too much into a final work), more consumed by the kinds of philosophical questions that might weigh upon the mind even more in old age.

The work is, to be sure, organized as something of a checklist of Galen's contributions to medicine. Many chapters begin with "*demonstravi / edeikhthei*" and treat of topics familiar from his earlier works--the physiology of temperament, the sensitivity of nerves, embryology, bile, and so forth. But the guiding principle of this treatise seems to be epistemological: the particular contributions of his writings that he singles out for the most part respond to the task he sets himself in the prolegomenon, namely to distinguish among the things he knows for certain, the things he knows to be plausible, and the things of which he must profess ignorance. In itself, this is hardly a novel activity among ancient philosophers, and, as Nutton discusses fully in the commentary, the philosophical conundra that Galen takes up in the treatise are not especially original. Still, it is almost moving that Galen chooses to begin his discussion in Ch. 2 by admitting he has no knowledge of the creation of the world -- whether, in fact, it is a thing created, who the creator would be, and whether it is divine. Galen feels no doubt about the existence of the gods, nor about their intervention in human affairs (he even refers here, as he had done in earlier writings, to an occasion when the gods had cured him of an illness), but, he claims, he simply cannot know what substance the gods are made of. Galen moves directly from the nature of god to the nature of the soul, and once again he remains agnostic about a problem that had nagged him (as it did others, of course) throughout his career: *substantiam autem anim(a)e renuncio scire* (3.1).

This is a problem, in fact, that he cannot seem to abandon for very long in this work, and even the most specific physiological discussions somehow end up returning to the question of the soul's nature. In Ch. 6, for example, Galen describes and defends his position that nerves are less sensitive than flesh; nerves imply sensation, of course, and sensation was felt to flow out of the soul to the

parts of the body. This prompts him to reiterate in the next chapter his inability to know the substance of the soul despite its co-dependence on the body. In other words, although unable to decide whether the soul is corporeal or incorporeal, one cannot deny that the life itself of a body requires a sensible, animating force, or in Galen's own (Latinized) words: *corpus donec est custodiens complexionum sensibilem non moriatur* ("so long as the body retains its sensible temperament, it does not die"). He cites (not altogether accurately, as Nutton shrewdly notes, p. 160) his own *On the Preservation of Health* for the notion that the "body is continually changing towards coldness and dryness until it dries up and is completely chilled in extreme old age" (7.3). The natural processes of gradual corporeal and spiritual decline do seem very much on his mind here, and it is possible that his own advanced age made such stock questions particularly urgent.

The explicit problem of the soul returns, however, in Ch. 14, and occupies Galen for the remainder of the work, but although these final chapters stay focused on a single topic somewhat more successfully than the earlier discussions, they are, as Nutton points out, unfocused and rambling, and seem verbose even for Galen. The upshot by this point is familiar: we know that the soul lies behind the interactions of the four elements in a living organism, but we cannot identify its substance, and the treatment of disease does not require this knowledge anyway (15.5). It is indeed tempting to suppose, along with Nutton (p. 218), that Galen's powers had simply become weak in his old age, or that he had no opportunity to revise, but we can say little more that would not be purely speculative.

While no one would regard *On my Own Opinions* as one of Galen's most significant works, Nutton's superb edition will be most welcome to a variety of constituencies on many levels. As an editorial achievement, his careful reconstitution of the text is itself monumental; that subject alone will surely interest not only scholars of ancient (and medieval) medicine but also codicologists concerned with transmission of mss. across languages and cultures. When it comes to self-referential works such as this, one can never have too many, since even the most inelegant examples can hardly fail to add new insights into the author's other works. With exemplary clarity and erudition, Nutton has made this difficult text of a less commonly read author not only accessible, but even attractive, to historians of science and philosophy, as well as to literary historians interested in the rhetoric of autobiography.

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