

# Writing Science

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Medical and Mathematical Authorship  
in Ancient Greece

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**DE GRUYTER**

ISBN 978-3-11-029505-4  
e-ISBN 978-3-11-029512-2  
ISSN 2194-976X

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston  
Typesetting: Meta Systems GmbH, Wustermark  
Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen  
∞ Printed on acid-free paper  
Printed in Germany

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

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## Galen on Poetic Testimony

**Abstract:** Galen had an abiding reverence for the classicized Greek poets of his day, in keeping with the prevailing cultural norms of the educated elite. He wrote monographic works on Attic comedy, and often peppered his medical treatises (particularly the psychological and propaedeutic works) with quotations from Homer, the Greek lyric poets and the tragedians. But while he regarded the study of poetry as essential for a complete education, however nebulously construed, he was conflicted about its utility for the scientific enterprise. Often in *On the Opinions of Hippocrates and Plato* (*Plac. Hipp. Plat.*), for example, Galen ridicules the Stoic Chrysippus for misusing the testimony of poets in the service of philosophical and scientific argument, while elsewhere in the treatise he freely cites classic poets as illustrative of his own arguments. In *Protrepicus*, too, he includes *mousikē* (encompassing for Galen something like our notion of ‘the literary’) as one of the ‘elevated arts’ (*semnai tekhnai*), the cultivation of which will help humans live according to truth and reason. This paper will examine Galen’s complicated, often inconsistent, attitude to the role of ‘literature’ in his work, focusing specifically on questions of poetic vs. logical/philosophical authority. In particular, I will discuss how Galen aligns his own practice of invoking poetic authors as evidence or exempla with Plato’s, and attempt to clarify what he believed literary testimony could contribute to his argument, both rhetorically and philosophically.

In his short treatise, *Protrepicus* (*Exhortation to Medicine*), Galen’s formulation of what constituted an educated, intelligent man was by and large consonant with prevailing norms of his day, and can be summed up well in the contrast he draws early in the work (ch. 3) between those who follow Fortune (*tykhē*) and those who follow Hermes. The followers of Fortune live random, unpredictable lives, largely devoid of reason, while the followers of Hermes are devoted especially to the literary and scientific *tekhnai* – the ‘high’ (*semnai*) and rational (*logikai*) arts, as Galen calls them (ch. 14), to distinguish them from the less desirable banausic arts, which exercise the body rather than the mind. Galen’s main criterion for defining an art was that it be useful and ‘beneficial to life’ (ch. 9), and he railed in *Protrepicus* against such frivolous and useless arts as acrobatics, or athletics, which he regarded as pernicious to both mental and physical health. It will come as no surprise that he ends the treatise, doubtless with a touch of humor, with the claim that medicine is the ‘best’ (*aristē*) of the arts (14.5). Although he defers discussion of the matter to another time, it is not difficult for anyone to consider medicine one of the ‘useful’ arts, and the same can be said for most of the other arts that Galen exhorts his readers to study (14.4), which are largely scientific (mathematics, astronomy) or rhetorical (grammar, law). But among these ‘high’ and ‘useful’ arts

he also includes poetry and music.<sup>1</sup> Galen is clearly working with a broad notion of ‘utility’ here (*biōpheles*) here, since however ‘useful’ we can claim poetry is for a good life, it seems to offer a far different sort of utility than that of medicine or mathematics.

Galen was, as I will suggest in this chapter, conflicted in his attitudes towards poetry, and towards literary authors more generally, especially when it came to incorporating them into his own scientific enterprise. He had a scholarly, even philological interest, in some authors who had become classics by his time, as he notes in his autobiographical works,<sup>2</sup> and he seemed to believe that there was genuine knowledge to be gained from studying poets and other literary authors – if not quite an intrinsically ‘scientific’ kind of knowledge, at least something ancillary to, and illustrative of it. Even by Galen’s time the tension between poetic and scientific or philosophical knowledge would have already been ancient: this is precisely the question at hand in Plato’s *Ion*, for example, and Galen would also have been familiar with Plato’s notion of an ‘ancient quarrel’ between poetry and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The *Ion*, for example, famously showed Plato’s skepticism about the epistemic claims that poets and rhapsodes might make about their subject matter, but even he would quote freely from the poets in philosophical discussion, and often invoked poetic testimony to corroborate or embellish an argument.<sup>4</sup> Literary

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1 For Galen, a true *tekhnē* must be ‘useful’; cf. *Protr.* 9.3 (p. 130.25–26 Barig.): ὁπόσοις τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων οὐκ ἔστι τὸ τέλος βιωφελές, ταῦτ' οὐκ εἰσὶ τέχνηαι. (...any practice whose goal is not useful for life is not a *tekhnē*.) Galen’s interest in the question of the utility/non-utility of knowledge taps into a philosophical debate that extended back to Plato and Aristotle. Galen’s endorsement of “useful” knowledge aligns his thinking with a Socratic-Platonic tradition rather than an Aristotelian one, which ranked “theoretical” knowledge higher than practical knowledge precisely because of its impracticality and “uselessness”. See, e.g., the opening of Aristotle, *Metaph.* A 1–2, 981b13–982b27, and Nightingale 2004, 222–240, on Aristotelian *theōria*, and the privileging of “uselessness”.

2 See in general his treatise *On my own books*, and esp. ch. 20.1, where he mentions his 48 books on writers of Classical Athens, which include many commentaries on the poets of Old Comedy. Cf. Boudon-Millot 2007, 233–34, De Lacy 1966, 265. The recently discovered treatise, *On Avoiding Distress*, also discusses his works on Old Comedy, all of which, we learn here from Galen, were destroyed in the great fire in Rome of AD 192. See *On Avoiding Distress* (Περὶ ἀλυπίας) chs. 20–29, in Boudon-Millot and Jouanna, 2010, with commentary, pp. 83–92.

3 For the locus classicus, see *Res publ.* X, 607b–c; see Murray 1996, 14–19, and most recently, with bibliography, Most 2011, 1–20.

4 In general, see Murray 1996, 9–24. For one example of Plato’s engagement with poetic texts for philosophical purposes, cf. Nightingale’s discussion (1992 and 1995, 47–62) of his use of Euripides’ *Antiope* in *Gorgias*. At the same time, Plato was well aware of the pitfalls of poetic exegesis in the service of philosophical discourse, as his occasional parodies of poetic interpretation show; cf., e.g., the discussion of Simonides’ poem in Plato, *Prot.* 339a–347b. Part of the point of Socrates’ long analysis of Simonides’ poem is to show the inadequacies of literary interpretation, as his dismissive statement at 347c3 makes clear: “...for it seems to me that discussing poetry is most like vulgar and low-class drinking-parties” (καὶ γὰρ δοκεῖ μοι τὸ περὶ ποιήσεως διαλέγεσθαι ὁμοιότατον εἶναι τοῖς συμποσίοις τοῖς τῶν φαύλων καὶ ἀγοραίων ἀνθρώπων). Later in this passage, 347e5, Socrates complains that when men bring poets into a discussion, “many people say that the poet means one thing in his work, and others something else, and they keep on discussing an issue that they

citation, then, in the service of philosophical and scientific writing was commonplace enough from an early period not only for rhetorical purposes, but also, no doubt, to mark a writer's elite cultural background. But literary citation in the context of *medical* writing, specifically, might give us some pause, especially in a writer as devoted to logical thinking and empirical truth as Galen was.<sup>5</sup> The Hippocratic Corpus, after all, which Galen admired and assimilated so deeply, was strikingly devoid of allusions to literary (and especially poetic) authors.

In a paper entitled 'Galen and the Greek Poets', written in 1966 while he was working on his great *CMG* edition of Galen's *On the Opinions of Hippocrates and Plato* (De Lacy 2005 = *Plac. Hipp. Plat.*), Philip De Lacy noted a prevailing ambivalence about, and occasional hostility towards, poetry during the second century AD, at least among philosophical writers such as Plutarch and Epictetus, and he points out various places in Galen where he specifically disparages the use of poetic testimony in scientific discussion.<sup>6</sup> It seems all the more curious, therefore, that in a work presented as a 'protrepticus' to the study of medicine, Galen not only recommends the study of poetry (*mousikē*), along with the other higher arts, but also freely invokes poetic authors throughout the work, as if to demonstrate how one would put into practice the advice of the treatise. Galen, it seems, was pulled in two directions by different forces: on the one hand, he wanted to show off his broad, polymathic education as something genuinely useful to intellectual endeavors, not just as an ornament or empty symbol of social status. On the other, his commitment to rigorous syllogistic thinking often made the poets and *their*

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can never actually confirm one way or another...", and he concludes by urging that "we put the poets aside and hold our conversations just with each other, and put to the test the truth and our ourselves" (...ἐπαγόμενοι τε αὐτοὺς οἱ πολλοὶ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις οἱ μὲν ταῦτά φασι τὸν ποιητὴν νοεῖν, οἱ δ' ἕτερα, περὶ πράγματος διαλεγόμενοι ὃ ἀδυνατοῦσι ἐξελέγξαι... καταθεμένους τοὺς ποιητὰς αὐτοὺς δι' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι, τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πείραν λαμβάνοντας).

5 By 'literary' here I mean referring to literature that is not itself, in its original context and genre, medical or otherwise technical. Galen did cite some poetry we would refer to as 'didactic' or 'scientific', such as the pharmacological treatises of Andromachus the elder and Damocrates (both 1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD), but both of them were physicians in their own right, and, as we would expect, Galen regarded such poetry differently from non-scientific 'classics' such as Homer or Euripides. On Galen's use of didactic poetry, see von Staden 1998, Vogt 2005; see also Fabricius 1972, and Nutton 1997.

6 De Lacy (1966, 265) cites *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* V 742–43 as a passage that shows Galen's respect for the ways in which poets portray human behavior, but even so, his repudiation of poetic testimony in the service of scientific argument here is unambiguous. In criticizing the views of "Chrysippus and many Stoics" on reason and the passions, he says: "Ignorance of a thing is pardonable...but it is not pardonable to handle the argument so ineptly as to cite as proof of so important a doctrine the words of comic and tragic poets – men who do not try to prove anything but only adorn with beauty of language the speeches they think appropriate to the character speaking in the play – and to fail to mention what Plato said in proof of it...". Cf. also *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* II 2.5.

ways of thinking seem distracting or frivolous at best, dangerous at worst.<sup>7</sup> I propose here, then, to examine in detail Galen's own ambivalence towards the use of poetic texts in his work, and to attempt to understand what might have drawn him, like a moth to a flame, to a literary practice so fraught with philosophical and logical peril.

It has to be said at the outset that *Protrepticus* is hardly a work of science – its overall cast is, as its title suggests, hortatory and quasi-philosophical, and even though it ends by claiming that the best *tekhnē* is medicine, there is little explicitly medical about this treatise. Still, we might call it a *para*-medical, in that it ends up focusing on a topic that has a variety of medical consequences – namely, as it turns out, the evils of athleticism – and deploys poetic citation in the same ways that we find it in his more straightforwardly medical discussions.

We may begin by examining closely a section of *Protrepticus* that shows just how conflicted Galen was about rhetorical strategies that relied heavily on the authority of poets. In ch. 9, Galen has introduced, not altogether smoothly, the subject of athletes, which will occupy him for the rest of the work (in fact, more than half of the whole). While he spent the first half of the work speaking in platitudinous generalities about the differences between high and low *tekhnai*, and about the need to avoid greed, vanity and other vices that ruin body and soul, he suddenly – and in keeping with Galen's often free-associative writing habits – gets fixated on athletes. Everyone will know, he says, that such activities as acrobatics are hardly real 'arts' (9, Barig. 130.25–27), but, he continues:

τὸ δὲ τῶν ἀθλητῶν ἐπιτήδευμα μόνον ὑποπτεύω, μή ποτ' ἄρα τοῦτο καὶ ῥώμην σώματος ἐπαγγελλόμενον καὶ τὴν παρὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς δόξαν ἐπαγόμενον, δημοσία παρὰ τοῖς πατράσι τετιμημένον ἡμερησίαις ἀργυρίου δόσεσι καὶ ὅλως ἴσα τοῖς ἀριστεύσι τετι[μη]μένον, ἐξ-πατήση τινὰ τῶν νέων ὡς προκριθῆναι τινος τέχνης. (9, Barig. 132.2–6)

But I'm suspicious only of the occupation of athletes, in that, because it promises them strength of body and offers popular fame, publicly remunerates them with daily gifts of silver in accordance with our ancestors, and honors them as if they were the full equivalent of heroes, it may deceive some young men into thinking that it's preferable to a (real) art.

From this point Galen constructs an argument in ch. 9 along the following lines:

- Humans should try to cultivate their kinship with the gods, not beasts. (9, Barig. 132.8–12)
- The excellence of the gods stems from their logos (καθ' ὅσον λογικόν ἐστί), and by implication has nothing to do with bodies or materiality, in contrast to athletes.

<sup>7</sup> See De Lacy 2005, 624, comm. ad p. 104.9, which lists the passages throughout *Plac. Hipp. Plat.*, and elsewhere, where Galen discusses both illegitimate and legitimate uses of poetic testimony.

- Athletic training is an art that concerns only the body, which aligns the person with beasts; which is to say, it suggests a largely non-rational life.<sup>8</sup>
- Athletes have nothing useful to contribute to society, and everyone knows, he says, that men are considered excellent not because of their prowess at throwing the discus or at wrestling, but for the “beneficence that derives from their art”. (ἀλλὰ διὰ τὴν ἀπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν εὐεργεσίαν, 9, 132.18 Barig.)

Galen ends this paragraph with a reference to two exemplary figures who straddle the human and divine realms, Asclepius and Dionysus, each of whom invented an art of enormous benefit to humankind, medicine and winemaking, respectively. This is hardly one of Galen’s more rigorous arguments, and most of his premises could be easily enough contested, if one wanted to do so. It seems that Galen sensed this as well, which is why he felt compelled to advert, towards the end of ch. 9, to poetic authority. “If you are not willing to believe me...” (εἰ δ' οὐκ ἐθέλεις ἐμοὶ πείθεσθαι...9, 132.22 Barig.), he says, the reader should at least have some respect for the utterances of the Pythian Apollo, since he has impeccable credentials. Apollo was the one, after all, as Galen points out, who addressed Socrates as ‘wisest’, and praised Lycurgus as god-like in four verses which he then proceeds to quote (9, 133 Barig.).<sup>9</sup>

The point of this quotation is, however, extremely opaque, and a second one that immediately follows, in which Galen notes that the Pythia referred to Archilochus as a “friend of the Muses”, hardly helps. The opening of ch. 10 finally makes it clear that these verses are supposed to show little more than that great men are referred to as divine by a very authoritative source. He challenges an imaginary adversary here to name any athletes who are given such epithets:

λέγε δὴ μοι καὶ σὺ τὰς τῶν ἀθλητῶν προσαγορεύσεις. ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐρεῖς ὅτι μηδ' ἔχεις εἰπεῖν, εἰ μὴ τι τοῦ μάρτυρος ὡς οὐκ ἀξίόχρεω κατέγνωκας. (10, 134.7–8 Barig.)

Tell me, then, what epithets you use for athletes. And don’t go saying that you have no reply to this – *unless you reject as unworthy the evidence from this witness.*

The logical bullying here is practically comical, and this may in fact be part of Galen’s intent here: Galen started out wanting to argue that athletes are more bestial than divine, but adduces as a “witness” (*martyrs*) oracular citations that say nothing more than that some people who are excellent are called divine. Obviously

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**8** σώματος δ' ἄσκησις ἀθλητικὴ ἀποτυγχανομένη μὲν αἰσχίστη, ἐπιτυγχανομένη δὲ τῶν ἀλόγων ζώων οὐδέπω κρείττων (Protr. 9, Barig. 132.12–14). (Athletic training of the body, when it fails, is utterly shameful, and even when it succeeds makes one no better than irrational animals).

**9** ἤκεις, ὦ Λυκόοργε, ἐμὸν ποτὶ πίονα νηὸν / Ζηνὶ φίλος καὶ πᾶσιν Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσι. / δίξω ἢ σε θεὸν μαντεύσομαι ἢ ἄνθρωπον, / ἀλλ' ἔτι καὶ μᾶλλον θεὸν ἔλπομαι, ὦ Λυκόοργε. (You have come, Lycurgus, to my rich temple / dear to Zeus and to all who hold Olympus. / I’m not sure if I should call you god or man, / but I expect that you’re even more a god, Lycurgus). Herodotus also quoted these lines at I 65.3.



such ‘evidence’ does nothing to ‘prove’ that athletes cannot also be excellent men, worthy of being called divine as well. Galen must realize this, and so cudgels any antagonist with the Pythia’s very *authority*. His train of thought runs like this: look at the kind of people that the Pythia calls divine – you will find no athletes in that group; therefore, no athletes can ever be divine. As if bad logic were not enough, Galen then makes the authority of his witnesses a matter of class and culture. For if, he says, this opponent here *does* reject the authority of the Pythia, (ὡς οὐκ ἀξιόχρεω), it would indicate that he has succumbed to the benighted opinions of “the many”:

ἐμφαίνειν γὰρ ἔοικάς τι τοιοῦτον, ὅταν ἐπὶ τοὺς πολλοὺς τὸν λόγον ἄγῃς μάρτυρας καὶ τὸν παρὰ τούτων ἔπαινον προχειρίζῃ. (10, 134.9–10 Barig.)

For you seem to imply something of this sort [i.e., that the testimony of the Pythian verses is worthless], when you appeal to the many as your witnesses, and offer your praise [of athletes] based on their opinions.

Galen’s reasoning here is again suspect, but rhetorically powerful: even his antagonist, he goes on to say, would consult only “a few” trained professionals – not “the many” – when he is sick, or needs a builder or shoemaker, so why would he trust the masses, who do not have the knowledge or expertise that his witnesses do? Showing that a doctor is wiser in matters of medicine than a layperson is straightforward enough; but the only claim Galen could make for the superiority of his poetic witnesses is one of tradition, and the cultural assumption that poets are wiser than the common person. There seems no other justification, in any case, for Galen’s next witness (10, 134.18–26 Barig.), nine verses from a now-lost play by Euripides, probably his *Autolycus*, which begins, “of the thousands of evils throughout Greece, there is none worse than the race of athletes...”, and proceeds to enumerate the familiar complaints against them – their unreflective life, their overeating, and their general cluelessness in life. Two other Euripidean quotations follow (10, 136.1–8 Barig.), one of which Galen even calls “more refined/subtle” (λεπτομερέστερον), each reflecting on the uselessness of athletic training for military service.

What follows, however, is striking; it is almost as if Galen felt some guilt at browbeating his imaginary opponent with his poetic authorities, and a need to defend himself. The passage is worth quoting in full:

πότερον οὖν Εὐριπίδου μὲν καὶ τῶν τοιούτων καταγῶμεν, τοῖς δὲ φιλοσόφοις ἐπιτρέψωμεν τὴν κρίσιν; ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς τούτων ἀπάντων ὡσπερ ἐξ ἑνὸς στόματος ὠμολόγηται φαῦλον εἶναι τὸ ἐπιτήδευμα. οὐδὲ μὴν οὐδὲ τῶν ἰατρῶν τις ἐπήνεσεν αὐτό· πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ Ἱπποκράτους ἀκούση λέγοντος ‘διάθεσις ἀθλητικὴ οὐ φύσει, ἕξις ὑγιεινὴ κρείσσων’, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων τῶν μετ’ αὐτὸν ἀρίστων ἰατρῶν. ὅλως μὲν οὖν ἐπὶ μάρτυρος οὐκ ἐβουλόμην κρίνεσθαι· ῥητορικῶς γὰρ τὸ τοιοῦτον μᾶλλον ἢ τιμῶντος ἀλήθειαν ἀνδρός· ὅμως δ’ ἐπειδὴ τινες ἐπὶ τὸν τῶν πολλῶν ἔπαινον καταφεύγουσι καὶ τὴν παρὰ τούτων κενὴν δόξαν, ἀφέντες αὐτὸ <τὸ> ἐπιτήδευμα γυμνὸν τῶν ἕξωθεν σκοπεῖν, ἠναγκάσθη καὶ γὰρ τούτους προχειρίσασθαι τοὺς μάρτυρας, ἵν’ ὅτι μὴδ’ ἐνταῦθα πλέον ἔχουσί τι γινώσκωσιν. (10, 136.8–19 Barig.)



Should we then condemn Euripides and the testimony of such people, and instead trust in the judgment of philosophers? But they too are absolutely unanimous in considering this practice [athletics] vulgar. Not even has any doctor ever approved of it. For, first off, you can hear Hippocrates saying, ‘The athletic condition is not natural; the healthy condition is better’, and then all the other doctors – the best ones – after him. And so, in the end, I would not want to form a judgment (or, ‘for the matter to be judged’) on the basis of a witness: that is the kind of thing a rhetorician does, rather than one who respects the truth (ῥητορικοῦ γὰρ τὸ τοιοῦτον μᾶλλον ἢ τιμῶντος ἀλήθειαν ἀνδρός). Nevertheless, because some take refuge in the praise other people give them, and in empty glory they get from them, and abandon an unbiased consideration of the practice itself, I am forced in this crowd to offer these kinds of witnesses, so that they will realize that they do not have the upper hand even on this subject.

So now, it seems, Galen is claiming – after having just adduced five poetic citations in the service of his rant against athletes – that he knew all along that this was not an especially legitimate strategy! He was driven to it, however, only because this is how the ignorant masses tend to argue – subjectively, emotionally and without applying objective standards of *alētheia*. It was a prophylactic move on his part, as he claims, an attempt to beat the enemy at their own rhetorical game, assuming already that true logical argument would get him nowhere with such a crowd. It is very difficult to assess how much of this is meant to be taken ironically, how much seriously. Indeed, it is certainly a familiar enough ploy from satirical genres for writers to offer ironic disclaimers about questionable rhetorical strategies they may adopt, and then turn them against their targets, and there is plenty in Galen that one can call satirical.<sup>10</sup> The line between seriousness of purpose and playfulness in such cases is usually very blurry. In Galen’s case, the irony, if not outright contradiction, that arises from his dismissal of the validity of poetic citation, immediately after engaging in the very practice, is itself its own sort of rhetorical strategy, and helps make the larger case of the treatise for the importance of cultivating the literary arts. Literary authors, that is – or at least the ones selected for citation – offered dogmatic versions of the values that Galen wanted to argue for philosophically, and their authority as “enduring classics” afforded them an exemplary, rather than a syllogistic, function. A citation, in other words, could cut straight through an argument to the philosophical pay-off. This is what Galen means, it seems, when he claims that people who fall back on the authority of poets are “rhetoricians” (in the pejorative, sophistic sense): because they tend not to bother with any kind of formal argument, they cannot necessarily be trusted if one is trying to persuade on a given question with an appeal to reason and logic. But this only means that the testimony of poets is not rigorous, *not* that the conclusions they offer are not valid or even powerful in the way they are expressed. Galen calls popular thinking “empty opinion” (*kenē doxa*) and claims to be quoting authorities as “witnesses” because this is a strategy that “the many” would understand (since they engage in it themselves). Galen never states what kinds of author-

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<sup>10</sup> See Rosen 2008.

ities the *people* are quoting for their “praise” (*epainos*) of athletes, but presumably they are as dogmatic in their own way as those adduced by Galen.

Given Galen’s claim in ch. 10 that he was driven to quote authorities by his need to match popular strategies, but otherwise found the practice objectionable, it might give us pause to see that the rest of the treatise is full of similar quotations from poetic authors.

At ch. 13 (144.4–5 Barig.), for example, asking what practical good an athlete’s strength is, he even recycles two lines from the quotation from Euripides he used in ch. 10 (about how useless an athlete is against the enemy if he is holding a discus), with this sarcastic introduction, “Again, you can cite Euripides, who will exalt them [athletes] (*hymnēsei*) by saying...” Another noteworthy poetic quotation occurs at the end of the same chapter (13), where Galen has just finished showing, “clearly” (*saphes*), as he says, that athletic training provides nothing useful for practical life. As if this is not enough, he then wants to show that there is simply nothing *intrinsically* worthy of athletics, i.e., that even among themselves their achievements are of no consequence (ὅτι δὲ καὶ ἐν αὐτοῖς, οἷς ἀσκοῦσιν, οὐδενός εἰσιν ἄξιοι λόγου, 14, 146.15–16 Barig.). He says we can “learn this” by recounting a *mythos* from a poem of one of the “great literary men” (τῶν οὐκ ἀμούσων ἀνδρῶν τις). The poet is unknown, but Galen tells the story, with likely roots in the fable tradition, of a contest pitting animals against humans, in which, of course, humans come off the worst in all areas of competition (14, 146.17–148.9 Barig.). After quoting a few verses, Galen concludes (14, 148.10 Barig.): “In a thoroughly delightful way (*pany khariētōs*) this story demonstrates that (*epideiknusi*) athletic strength is not a part of human activity”.

Once again, it is difficult to gauge the tone of this passage: it is hard to believe that Galen actually thought that a fable-like story would ‘prove’ anything, especially since comparing human athletics to the physical prowess of animals is an obvious red herring, and the fact that he stresses the *kharis* of his exemplum may show what his real motivation was – namely, to let a pleasant bit of imaginative literature stand in (in this case, with questionable legitimacy) for an actual argument. The combination of the passage’s *kharis* and poetic authority with Galen’s own rhetoric, functions, in the end, as a *captatio benevolentiae* that aligns the sympathies of the reader with Galen, encouraging them to share in the author’s *Schadenfreude* against his targets and not to worry too much about the strength of the case.

*Protrepticus* has a lighter, more sweeping, theme than most other Galenic treatises, so we can perhaps forgive him for what appears to be a rather cavalier, inconsistent use of literary citation in the work. But he cites poetic authors frequently in more rigorously scientific works as well, and it is worth considering his attitude towards that practice in these contexts. To this end, we may consider the use of poetic testimony in Galen’s major work, *Plac. Hipp. Plat.*, which is full of citations from the classicized poets of his day, as well as plenty of criticism of

those who misuse them in scientific discourse. We will find here the same ambivalence about the poets as we saw in *Protrepticus*, but a more consistent application of the device, and a more fully developed critique of its misuse.

*Plac. Hipp. Plat.* is an expansive work ostensibly comparing the opinions of Hippocrates and Plato, but in fact with a special focus on the problem of the nature of the soul, from both behavioral and biological points of view.<sup>11</sup> The work as a whole is noteworthy for the amount of poetic citation it contains, partly because his main target throughout, the Stoic Chrysippus, seems to have cited poets frequently in his own work on the soul (which Galen in turn will sometimes cite), and partly because Galen himself found them useful to bolster his own arguments.<sup>12</sup> But it is clear that Galen is as fraught as ever about what the poets can offer, and on numerous occasions he even makes this explicit. One revealing example occurs at II 5.94–95, where Galen had actually just endorsed one of Chrysippus' arguments. The details of the argument need not concern us here, but in general it involves the question of whether speech emanates from the brain or some other part of the body more continuous with its physical manifestation, such as the chest. At 95, Galen says:

ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ὀρθῶς εἴρηται τῷ Χρυσίππῳ καὶ διὰ τοῦτ' ἂν τις αὐτῷ καὶ μᾶλλον μέμψαιτο, διότι καὶ κατιδῶν τὸ ἀληθὲς ὅμως οὐ χρῆται· τὰ δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς θέσεως ἐπικειρημένα καὶ τούτων ὅσα μᾶλλον ποιητὰὶ μαρτυροῦσιν ἢ οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἢ ἐτυμολογία τις ἢ τι τοιοῦτον ἕτερον, οὐκ ὀρθῶς, κάλλιον γὰρ ἦν ἐπιμείναντα τοῖς κατὰ τὴν ἀποδεικτικὴν μέθοδον ὑποβαλλομένοις λήμμασιν ἐξετάσαι τε καὶ κρίναι διὰ τῆς αἰσθήσεως, αὐτὸς δὲ ὥσπερ οὐ κατ' ἐπιστήμην, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τύχην εἰρηκῶς τὸ ἀληθὲς ἀπεχώρησέ τε τῆς ζητήσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ ποιητὰς ἐπάγεται μάρτυρας.

Now Chrysippus was correct in saying this, and therefore one might blame him the more, because even though he sees the truth he does not use it; but what he said about arguments from position and about those among them that rest for the greater part *on the evidence of poets, or the majority of mankind*, or an etymology, or something else of that kind, was not correct. He would have done better to remain with the premises supplied by the scientific method, and to examine and judge them through sense perception. It is if he had spoken the truth not from knowledge, but by chance; of his own accord he abandoned the investigation of it and *brings in poets as his witnesses* (tr. De Lacy 2005).

This is part of a long, belabored theme that comes and goes throughout *Plac. Hipp. Plat.*, as Galen works his way through Chrysippus' arguments about how various bodily functions relate to the soul. Galen's major complaint against Chrysippus'

<sup>11</sup> See De Lacy 2005, 48–50, for an account of Galen's organization of *Plac. Hipp. Plat.*. See also Hankinson 1991 and Donini 2008, 186–91.

<sup>12</sup> Galen cites an impressive range of canonical Classical poets in the course of *Plac. Hipp. Plat.*, although the bulk of the quotations are taken from either Homer, mentioned by name 17 times, or Euripides, 15 times (and these poets are also quoted many other times when their names happen not to be mentioned). See Tieleman 1996, 219–48, on Stoic (and specifically Chrysippus') use of poetry for philosophical purposes.

use of poetic testimony is that he adduces passages that are either irrelevant to his argument or actually work against it. His comment at *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III 8.28, for example, at the end of a long discussion of Chrysippus' analysis of the myth of Athena's birth, is typical:

ἐχρῆν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἢ μηδ' ὄλως ἤφθαι τοῦ μύθου μηδὲν γ' ἀναγκαῖον ἔχοντος ἀνδρὶ φιλοσόφῳ πρὸς ἀπόδειξιν δόγματος, ἢ ἀπτόμενον, ὅπερ ἦν μάλιστα τὴν ἀντιλογίαν συνέχον, ἀκριβῶς ἅπαν διεξελεθεῖν, εἰ καὶ πλείονων ἔχρηζε λόγων, οὐκ ὀκνήσαντα τοὺς πολλοὺς προσγράψαι.

Either he should not have used the story at all, as it does not contain anything necessary to a philosopher for the proof of a doctrine; or in using it he should have dealt carefully and exhaustively with the point that was the crux of the contradiction, and even if it required a rather full discussion, he should not have hesitated to add it. (tr. De Lacy 2005)

The issue at hand here was the nature of psychic pneuma, whether it originates in the hearts and travels up to the brain, or vice versa. Chrysippus felt this could be illustrated – with a little finessing of the details – allegorically with the myth of Athena's birth. Galen found Chrysippus' analysis of the myth wanting, deems it irrelevant, as we can see from the passage just quoted, but then proceeds in sections 29–32 to show how one *could* (as Galen puts it) “bring the myth in line with the facts” if one wanted to:<sup>13</sup>

ὥστ' εἴ τις βούλοιο τοῖς ἀληθέσι συνάπτειν τὸν μῦθον, ἐν τοῖς κάτω μέρεσι κυηθεῖσαν τὴν φρόνησιν, τουτέστι τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ψυχικόν, ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ φήσει τελειοῦσθαι καὶ μάλιστα γὰρ κατὰ τὴν κορυφήν, ὅτι κατὰ ταύτην ἐστὶν ἡ μέση καὶ κυριωτάτη τῶν ἐγκεφάλου κοιλιῶν.

Therefore, if a person wishes to fit the myth with the facts, he will say that wisdom, that is, psychic pneuma, after being conceived in the lower parts, reaches full development in the head, especially the top of the head, because that is the location of the brain's middle and most important ventricle. (tr. De Lacy 2005)

Here we have another amusing – doubtless intentionally so – example of Galen's competitive bravado in manipulating non-scientific literary discourse. He immedi-

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**13** Chapter 8 of *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III is largely given over to Chrysippus' allegorizing of a Hesiodic version of the birth of Athena (although the lines Galen quotes are only preserved here; cf. De Lacy 2005, 640 comm. ad p. 226.4–22). Chrysippus wanted to argue that when Zeus swallowed Metis, and Metis became pregnant with Athena, the fact that Athena is said to have been born from the head of Zeus was an allegorical *façon de parler*: wisdom comes out of one's mouth, which is located in one's head, but the 'gestation' and 'birth' of wisdom can be said to take place internally, in Zeus' belly, where, according to the theogony that Galen quotes from Chrysippus' text, Metis “lay in hiding” (*Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III 8.13, p. 226.12). This interpretation would allow Chrysippus somewhat more easily to maintain that the rational part of the soul is located in the heart. But Galen just finds this to be special pleading, presumably because the myth so clearly offers the image of Athena ('wisdom') coming forth from Zeus' head (the brain as seat of reason). At sections 29–32, Galen then proceeds to interpret the myth (“to make the myth fit the facts”) as an allegorical reflection of “psychic pneuma”, engendered in the “lower parts” of the body, pumped up from the heart through the arteries to the ventricles of the brain, where it completes its development.

ately catches himself, however, and makes it clear that such allegorizing, even if *properly* done, is more ornamental than essential to an argument. He makes this point by citing Socrates' famous dismissal of the practice in Plato's *Phaedrus* (229d3-e4), when Phaedrus had asked Socrates about the myth of Boreas and Orithyia. Quoting Socrates' words in this passage, Galen says that he considers such interpretations of myth "as otherwise charming", but the mark of an "excessively ingenious and laborious, and not entirely enviable man" ("τὰ τοιαῦτα" πάντα μυθολογήματα "ἄλλως μὲν χαρίεντα ἡγοῦμαι, λίαν δὲ δεινοῦ καὶ ἐπιπόνου καὶ οὐ πάνυ εὐτυχοῦς ἀνδρός", *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III 8.33), in the end, not worth the time and effort it would take to sort out all the details.<sup>14</sup> Galen concludes: "Chrysippus should have read this passage and then abandoned myths, and he should not have wasted his time explaining his hidden meanings ... It would be better," he says, "for the man who really seeks the truth not to ask what the poets say; rather he should first learn the method of finding the scientific premises (τῶν ἐπιστημονικῶν λημμάτων)" that is, to be able to know when it is legitimate to use premises from sense-perception, experience, from life, from the arts, and from intellection (τίνα μὲν ἐξ αἰσθήσεως ἀπλῆς, τίνα δ' ἐξ ἐμπείριας ἦτοι τῆς κατὰ τὸν βίον ἢ τῆς κατὰ τὰς τέχνας, τίνα δὲ ἐκ τῶν πρὸς νόησιν ἐναργῶν χρῆ λαβόντα περαίνειν ἐξ αὐτῶν ἤδη τὸ προκείμενον, III 8.35.10). This training, Galen says, would have led Chrysippus to the truth, not the poets, myths and non-experts "whom he quoted as friendly witnesses in his first book on the soul" (οὓς ὡς ἐαυτῷ μαρτυροῦντας ἐν τῷ προτέρῳ περὶ ψυχῆς ἔγραψε, *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III 8.38).

This stance by now will feel familiar enough: a cocky, satirical Galen lording his methodological superiority over a long-dead, and so defenseless, author. Indeed, this attitude directed specifically against Chrysippus permeates *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* But it is worth emphasizing that what Galen really objects to is not so much Chrysippus' integration of poetic testimony into his scientific arguments, as his *misuse* of them; what really irritates Galen is that Chrysippus wastes everyone's time with poets and myths because he misunderstands their relevance to his arguments. Time and again in *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* we find Galen explaining what Chrysippus' misunderstood poetic exempla *do* show, and this involves him in the same sort of poetic explication that he found misapplied in his predecessor. At *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* IV 6.18–38, for example, in a discussion of the difference between passions (*pathē*) and errors (*hamartēmata*) of the soul as the forces that account for a person's bad behavior, Galen objects that Chrysippus misreads the cause of Medea's crime in Euripides' play. Galen is here quarreling with Chrysippus over whether "passions" are "judgments" (*kriseis*) (cf. esp. *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* IV 6.10), which is to say, whether they are *rational* elements that have somehow gone bad

<sup>14</sup> Galen continues with Socrates' complaint in the *Phaedrus* passage that myths involve so many fantastic and absurd creatures that one would need 'a lot of leisure time' to make allegorical sense out of all of them (...πολλῆς αὐτῷ σχολῆς δεήσει, *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III 8.34).



(as Chrysippus), or a distinct part of the soul entirely different from reason (as Galen). Galen notes at IV 6.19 that Chrysippus had quoted Euripides, *Medea* 1078–1079 to make his point: “I understand the evils I am going to do / but anger prevails over my counsels” (καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἷα δρᾶν μέλλω κακά, / θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων). Galen never says that a quotation from Euripides “proves nothing” (*vel sim.*) about human psychology, but instead he proceeds to offer (IV 6.20–27) his own analysis of the verses, designed to show that Medea’s crime must have been caused by something very different from a judgment, i.e., a *pathos* that works *against* one’s rational decisions.

Galen would never regard the testimony of poets as a substitute for “doing science”, but there can be no question that he felt the poets important as a part of the *rhetoric* of science.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, he never completely abandoned a hint of skepticism, even cynicism, at times, about how scientific writers adduced the poets. At *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* III 2.18, for example, again taking Chrysippus to task for his indiscriminating approach to poetic evidence, Galen says that anyone familiar with many poets will know that “sooner or later, in some verse or other, they are witnesses to all doctrines”.<sup>16</sup> He makes this revealing statement after having quoted some of Chrysippus’ citations of Hesiod:

ἐν οἷς ἐγὼ μὲν ἐκπλήττομαι τῆς μεγαλοψυχίας τὸν Χρύσιππον. δέον γὰρ ὡς ἄνθρωπον ἀνεγνωκότα τοσοῦτους ποιητὰς καὶ γινώσκοντα σαφῶς ἅπασι τοῖς δόγμασιν αὐτοὺς μαρτυροῦντας ἄλλοτε κατ’ ἄλλα τῶν ἐπῶν, ὥσπερ καὶ Πλούταρχος ἐπέδειξεν ἐν τοῖς τῶν Ὀμηρικῶν μελετῶν, ἐκλέγειν μὲν ἐξ αὐτῶν ὅσα μαρτυρεῖ τῷ σπουδαζομένῳ πρὸς αὐτοῦ δόγματι, παραλείπειν δὲ τὰ μαχόμενα καὶ πᾶν ἐνίοτε κατασκευάζοντα τούναντίον· ὁ δ’ ὁμοίως ἐξῆς ἀπάντων μέμνηται.

In these citations I am amazed at Chrysippus’ loftiness of mind. *Being a person familiar with the work of so many poets and knowing perfectly well that sooner or later, in some verse or other, they are witnesses to all doctrines*, as Plutarch also showed in the *Homeric Studies*, Chrysippus should have selected from them whatever supports the doctrine he favors and omitted lines that disagree and at times prove the contrary view; but he quotes all alike, one after another.

And perhaps even more startling is when Galen as much as says (III 3.2) that, when a poet presents conflicting views on a given topic, the truer position will be the one that is represented by the greater number of passages! It has to be said, I think, as passages like this make clear, that Galen was not an especially sensitive or insightful reader of poetry, but he had internalized its cultural authority so thoroughly, as *Protrepticus* makes clear, that he could draw on it for its rhetorical power, even in the context of scientific argument, which privileged a very different form of authority, with different standards of inference and truth.

<sup>15</sup> In this regard, Galen surely owed much to Stoic conceptions of *to pithanon*; see Tieleman 1996, 264–87.

<sup>16</sup> See also Tieleman 1996, 244–45.



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