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Erasmus and Medicine

by

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Erasmus and Medicine

Simone Mammola *

If it is true that the history of humanistic culture begins with Petrarch's polemic against the physicians of his time—that he commanded to remain in their own field and not to mingle with things they did not know—with Erasmus we can observe an important development. The propelling element might not always have been Erasmus himself: it is often said that Linacre was part of the group of 'English Erasmians'—what if, on the contrary, Erasmus was a 'Linacrian'?

This paper examines Erasmus' relations to medicine and his contributions to the knowledge of medical writings and to a renewal of the ethos and of the general image of the medical science, From Erasmus' letter to Caduceator to the Encomium medicinae, from Erasmus' youthful interest for the medical writings published by Manutius, to the development of his network of physicians versed in the study of letters, with a clear interdisciplinary approach.



1. "If I were a doctor, I would take care of myself"

In the course of his life Erasmus had to deal with many different opinions on his person, from both an ethical-religious point of view and a literary one. In a charming letter of which we will talk again, an old friend who for some years had followed him from a distance went as far as to liken him jokingly

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to Pythagoras and Proteus—thanks to his ability to take on a different form from time to time, always surprising his readers: “but you have turned from a poet into a theologian and effected a transmigration from theologian to Cynic philosopher, and then finally exchanged the Cynic for an orator”: “marvellous metamorphoses” which could raise suspicion that not only a single author, but more than one, were behind his many writings¹. From Erasmus’ insistence in always claiming the coherence of his conduct, we often get the impression that his wonder for the wonder of others was greater, even in cases in which it was frankly inconceivable that certain choices or certain silences would not have aroused opposing feelings. However, there are situations in which such wonder looks more justified.

In April 1527, Erasmus received a letter from a student of Erfurt University named Henricus Caduceator, who picked up the courage to turn to the great master and submit him a serious personal problem. The particularity of this message lies in the fact that Erasmus, there, was neither consulted as a philologist or a theologian, nor for literary or religious advice, but as a doctor. With a deferent tone which slowly goes well over the top, Caduceator writes that he has been plagued since his childhood by problems at his sight that prevent him from clearly discerning the words when he reads, unless he keeps his eyes close to the books. This is for him a real torment: what a miserable fate for a man, living half-blinded, especially if he is a scholar who must read every day? “Therefore, (...) again and again I ask you, I beg and beseech you to write me if you think there are some remedies to solve this eye disease. I well know (...) how much you exceed (...) the professionals that exercise medicine here. (...) So, I pray and I beg you, (...) even in the name of our savior Jesus Christ: get going, so that I can quickly recover my sight, thanks to you or other medical experts, and prescribe to me some healthy and trustworthy advice”².

¹ CWE, VI, 57 (= *Allen*, III, 353, ep. 854: “Quamobrem alterum visus sum videre Pythagoram. (...) Verumetiam de poeta in theologum inversus es ac de theologo in cynicum philosophum transmigrasti, item demum cynicum cum oratore commutasti: quae mirae metamorphoses Protei illius solius videbantur. Vidimus enim innumeros libros tuos impressos (...); non ut unus idemque sententiarum magnarum autor fores, sed tanquam tres quatuorve autores illarum essent”).

² *Allen*, VII, 33-34, ep. 1811: “Proinde, (...) te etiam atque etiam rogo, obsecro, obtestor, ut ad me prescribere digneris, num ullis medicis rationibus isti oculorum malo obvianandum esse videatur. Scio equidem (...) quam tu facile omnis qui isthic medicam artem ex professo agunt (...). Et qui, quaeso,

If this was meant to be a way to wheedle Erasmus and touch him, then Caduceator completely missed his strategy. His letter is as insistent and querulous as the answer which Erasmus gave him a few weeks later is detached, not without a veil of his proverbial irony. “If I were a doctor—he begins, with no preamble—first of all I would take care of myself, because I am always afflicted with very painful kidney stones”¹. This observation is relevant. To get an idea of the problems that the “stone disease” caused him regularly, it is enough to read the very detailed letter which Erasmus had sent to the British physician John Francis, the winter before². After an explicit call to the discretion that Hippocrates himself demanded from doctors³, given the roughness of the topic, this page provides a wonderful example of “auto-anamnesis”, wherein he methodically speaks about sleepless nights, strong stabs of pain in the lower abdomen, difficulties to urinate, enforced diets based on soups in order to dissolve the stones. Erasmus even acknowledges that the pain would have surely killed him, if, at a certain point, it had not become slighter, but constant⁴. Compared with his pain, the myopia of his correspondent must have seemed a really small thing to Erasmus, who did nothing to hide it: “since we read that many well-educated men were completely blind, I’m surprised that you face this tolerable inconvenience with so little fortitude...”⁵. Given these premises, the only advice which he gave to Caduceator was to avoid the drugs and rather to try to find some lens (*vitrea conspicilla*) appropriate to his visual needs, if his defect was congenital. He had heard that with their help also almost blind people have been able to regain sight. If it was instead an occasional problem, he could be surgically op-

latere to possit huius morbi et causa et medela? (...). In summa te rogo et obsecro, (...) etiam per nomen servatoris nostri Iesu Christi, des sedulam operam, quo vel per te vel per alios medicae rei peritos integro visui restituar, et perscribe ad me sanum ac fidum consilium”. Caduceator is almost unknown to us. About him, see CoE, I, 238.

¹ Allen, VII, 81, ep. 1833: “si medicus essem, mihi primum essem, cui nunquam non res est cum immanissimo calculi malo”. Probably Erasmus echoes here the famous evangelical proverb “medice cura te ipsum” (Lc 4, 23).

² About John Francis, one of Erasmus’ long-time friends, see CoE, II, 53; Krivatsy 1973, 140-141.

³ See Hippocrates 1924, 301 (= *Oath*, ll. 29-32): “And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets”.

⁴ cf. Allen, VI, 422-424, ep. 1759.

⁵ Allen, VII, 81, ep. 1833: “quum legamus multos eruditissimos viros plane caecos fuisse, demior te levius incommodum tam impotenti animo ferre”.

erated in several ways. The first and most important caveat, however, remained to avoid anything that strains the eyes, as studying after dinner or in the light of a lamp. It probably was not the kind of comfort that Caduceator expected. They are, however, requirements that Erasmus actually considered valuable, as evidenced by the fact that he tried to conform to them in his own way of life¹.

An exchange of letters like that can not raise some curiosity: the literature on the diseases of Erasmus is so vast that it is striking to see him once at work in the role of a physician². Although hypochondriacs often tend to develop some forms of unprofessional competence in the field of health and medicine, this was not a self-image that Erasmus had ever tried to convey, and this makes even more difficult to explain why Caduceator has attempted just that kind of approach. As far as we know, before this episode, Erasmus was mistaken for a doctor only by some “ruffians” that, during an epidemic of plague in Bologna, had confused his religious clothing with a medical dress and they had nearly attacked him—or at least that is what Erasmus himself said to his superior to justify the abandon of the habit during his journey into Italy³. Caduceator maintains that he came to know of this Erasmus’ supposed medical expertise many years before from a servant of Wolfgang Köpfel (Capito), who had actually been a friend and collaborator of Erasmus (however, their relationships cooled after Capito adhered to the Reformation). Allen suggests instead that Erasmus’ reputation of good doctor could be ascribed to the publication of a little work enti-

¹ Effectively, in the above-mentioned letter to Francis (see fn. 2 on page 3), Erasmus identifies in the excessive workload that led him to break these rules the principal cause of the illness that has struck him: “Originem morbi divino. Iam annis plusquam viginti consuevi stans scribere; nec unquam fere sedere, nisi vel prandens vel coenans, vel a prandio dormitans, quod interdum soleo, praesertim lassus negociis. At interdum urgebant praela, maxime epistolae, quas cogor innumeras scribere, ut statim a prandio fuerit accurrendum ad scribendum. Nam a coena cogor ab intensione cessare: aut fabulor sine contentione, aut inambulans audio famulum aliquid praelegentem, quod mihi sit usui futurum. Quodam autem tempore quum essem occupatissimus, venit nuncius a quodam amico qui de vita periclitabatur. Ad huic opitulandum scripsi plurima, non habita ratione valetudinis, quod et ante saepenumero feceram. Rursus idem paucis post diebus misit alium nuncium. Huic quoque dum cupio gratificari, malum hoc obortum est quod exposui. Quoniam qui stans scribit, fieri non potest quin stomacho sit aliquantulum inflexo, suspicor stomachum cibum semicoctum coepisse deiicere, spiritibus alio vocatis, itaque fieri ut calculus non concreseat in magnitudinem. Fortassis natura rupit et vias aliquas, quo facilius sit transitus” (*Allen*, VI, 423-424).

² For a summary on this argument, see Brabant 1972; Krivatsy 1973.

³ *CWE*, II, 301 (= *Allen*, II, 17, ep. 296).

tled *Encomium artis medicae*¹. Such a conjecture seems questionable, because—as we will further see—this is a rhetorical, not medical text, but any serious consideration about the presence of the medicine in Erasmian thought can not be exempted from an examination of this booklet, to which we turn now our attention.



2. “To be a God to man”: the Praise of Medicine

Even those who do not know anything of Erasmus have heard at least once mention his most famous “Praise”, that dedicated to the Folly (*Encomium Moriae*). Erasmus had cultivated this literary genre, albeit in a more conventional mode than in his masterpiece, since its first writings. He himself affirms he had written in his early twenties a *Laus vitae monasticae, hoc est solitariae*, more or less in the same period in which he composed also an *Encomium matrimonii*². The fact that he then lived a whole life as an unmarried layman, immediately gives us the measure of his personal adherence to the arguments raised in these works composed on behalf of other people or for educational purposes. Therefore, to know that in the same years Erasmus even wrote a praise of medicine, makes us think that, as in previous cases, here he lent again his pen to please some friend, using his erudition to articulate a commendation to which he did not necessarily believe, especially if these unripe pages are compared with the

¹ Allen, VII, 33, note to line 55. The text of *Encomium artis medicae* is now in ASD, I-4, 145-186 and CWE, XXIX, 31-50. About the *Encomium*, see Albury and Weisz 2001; Siraisi 2004, 201-203; Pender 2006, 1-4. About the genre of humanistic *declamatio*, see van der Poel 1989. About Capito, see below, § 4 n. 58.

² Allen, I, 18 (ep. 1 to Botzheim, dated 1523). The *Encomium matrimonii* would be published with the *Encomium artis medicae* in 1518 (cf. Erasmus 1518). A modern edition annotated by Jean-Claude Margolin is available in ASD, I-5, 333-417.

brilliant prose of his maturity, when physicians are often portrayed in their less edifying features (as in the satire contained in the beginning of *Funus*¹). The available data seem to confirm this picture. Erasmus implicitly provides us the identikit of customer when he writes in 1523 that this man is a friend who “recently was physician to Emperor Charles”². The character in question responds to the name of Ghysbrecht Hessels, a Flemish doctor who Erasmus cites as Ghysbertus and who had long worked as a medical officer at the town of St. Omer and the nearby Abbey of St. Bertin, in the border area between Flanders and Picardy, before making a career at the Habsburg court³. Erasmus visited these places in February 1499, when, in a desperate quest for patrons, stayed a few days at Tournehem, at Anna Borrsele’s place, whose son was tutored by his friend James Batt. Since the first mention of Ghysbertus by Erasmus dates at next May, in a letter in which Erasmus informs Batt that this doctor had just left Paris⁴, you may think that their friendship is just sort during these months and that even the *Encomium* dates at the same period, perhaps originally conceived as a lecture that Ghysbertus would have given at the Faculty of Arts of Paris to encourage the students to medical learning⁵.

The structure of the discourse seems to correspond to a purpose of this kind. In the first lines it is stated that medicine is so useful to mankind that its inventors were considered as gods, “for if the gift of life belongs to God alone, then it must be granted that the next best thing is the art which protects and restore that life”⁶. This is so true that the Greek proverb *anthropos anthropou daimonion* (in Latin: *homo homini deus*, that is “man is to man a deity”) applies particularly to “the trusty and virtuous physician who not only assists but also saves”⁷. We must be grateful to doctors even more than to our parents, because if the former gave us life only once, the latter return it to us again and again.

¹ cf. ASD, I-3, 538-539. About the *Funus*, see also Olivieri 1998.

² Allen, I, 18: “(...) qui nuper Caroli Caesaris medicus fuit”.

³ About Ghysbertus cf. CoE, II, 94; Krivatsy 1973, 129.

⁴ CWE, I, 186 (= Allen, I, 233, ep. 95).

⁵ This is the opinion of Julius Domanski, editor of *Encomium artis medicae* (cf. ASD, I-4, 147).

⁶ CWE, XXIX, 38. (= ASD, I-4, 166: “Etenim si dare vitam proprium Dei munus est, certe datam tueri iamque fugientem retinere Deo proximum fateamur oportet”).

⁷ CWE, XXIX, 39 (= cf. ASD, I-4, 168: “(...) in medico fido proboque locum habebit, qui non iuvat modo, verum etiam servat”). The proverb *homo homini deus* is commented in the *Adagia*(I, 1, 69); cf. ASD, II-1, 180-182

Moreover, taking care of our bodies in such a way as to keep them vigorous and healthy as much as possible, the physicians prolongs life so much as to make it almost an image of that immortality which is promised us by faith. Erasmus knew well the traditional criticisms that were levelled against medicine and that often drew sap from the violent charge made by Pliny in the twenty-ninth book of his *Natural History*¹.

According to such representations, the doctors administered poisons to patients; they were the only ones who could kill people with impunity, being even paid for it; they were motivated solely by their ambition and thirst for gain; they devoted themselves to sordid activities such as the inspection of excrements and urine. Erasmus' answer is very clear: even though there are some physicians who behave in this way, "what could be more perverse than to turn the shortcomings of its practitioners to the malicious misrepresentation of the art itself? Adulterers exits even among priests, murderers and pirates among monks; but how can this detract from the essential goodness of religion itself? No profession is so pure as to be without its share of rogues"². But if you look at medicine as such, there is no other art that can be near it for dignity (because, "what could be held in higher esteem than that which approximates to the charity of God?"), for necessity ("what could be more necessary than that which is essential for life or birth?"), for virtue ("what could be more honourable than the saving of human life?"), and for utility³. Even the theologian must give way to the physician: in fact, the priest "sees that men are saved from sin, but without the physician there would be no men to be saved. The former would be an ineffectual physician of the soul if the soul that he was trying to cure had already departed"⁴. Not only a good health is required in order to receive the exhortations of religion ("how can a theologian advise a sufferer from lethargy,

¹ See Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, XXIX, 1-27.

² CWE, XXIX, 49 (= ASD, I-4, 184: "Quid iniquius est quam hominum vitia in artis calumniam detorquere? Sunt et inter sacerdotes adulteri, inter monachos homicidae ac piratae; sed quid hoc ad religionem per se optimam? Nulla tam sancta professio est, quae non alat sceleratos aliquot").

³ CWE, XXIX, 49 (= ASD, I-4, 186: "Si dignitate rem aestimamus, quid excellentius quam ad Dei benignitatem proxime accedere? (...) Si necessitate, quid aequè necessarium atque id, sine quo nec vivere nec nasci licet? Si virtute, quid honestius quam servare genus humanum").

⁴ CWE, XXIX, 40 (= ASD, I-4, 170: "Theologus efficit ut homines a vitii respiscant; at medicus efficit ut sit qui possit respiscere. Frustra ille medicus sit animae, si iam fugerit anima").

when the latter cannot hear his advice?”¹), but soul and body are so closely associated that many moral defects can be attributed to bad disposal of the bodies and humors, to forms of delirium or madness on which the physician can intervene in a way much more effective than any mere sermon. In the face of such great benefit, how can we keep from paying a fee? Per se—Erasmus continues—the doctor does not demand it, as God does not spread his benevolence in order to have an advantage, but just as one who receives a benefit from God can not refrain from thanking him, similarly who is healed is brought to reward the doctor as a sign of gratitude. “Christ himself, the author and originator of all branches of knowledge, professed himself not a juriconsult, not a rhetorician, not a philosopher, but a physician, when, in referring to his own ministry, he said that they that be whole need not a physician; when, as the Samaritan, he bound up the man’s wounds, pouring in oil and wine; when he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and anointed the eyes of the blind man”².

According to Domanski, the use of expressions like these constitutes one of the main innovations introduced by this text in the writing of Erasmus³. Until that time, in fact, he had not harbored a particular liking for doctors. Only two years earlier, in January 1497, he wrote to Nicolas Werner that he had been cured from a quartan fever, not thanks to the work of the doctors, but instead to the miraculous relics of St. Genevieve⁴. The *Encomium* instead would be a sort of gym where Erasmus would experiment for the first time a collection of arguments inspired by medicine, which would subsequently be recalled several

¹ CWE, XXIX, 40 (= ASD, I-4, 170: “Quid suadebit lethargico theologus, qui suadentem non audiat?”).

² CWE, XXIX, 45 (= ASD, I-4, 178: “Quid quod Christus ipse, disciplinarum omnium et autor et princeps, sese non iureconsultum, non rhetorem, non philosophum, sed medicum professus est, dum de se loquens negat opus esse medico iis qui bene habeant, dum Samaritanus vulneribus oleum ac vinum infundit, dum sputum terrae mixtum illinit oculis caeci?”).

³ cf. ASD, I-4, 149-154.

⁴ cf. CWE, I, 105-106: “Lately I fell into a quartan fever, but have recovered health and strenght, not by a physician’s help (though I had recourse to one) but by the aid of St. Geneviève alone, the famous virgin, whose bones, preserved by the canons regular, daily radiate miracles and are revered: nothing is more worthy of her, or has done me more good” (= *Allen*, I, 164-165, ep. 50). Allen assert (note to line 3) that “there can be little doubt” that the physician mentioned here is William Cop (about him, see below). Erasmus composed also a “votiv poem” in honour of Saint Genevieve, published many years later (Erasmus 1532; now in ASD, I-7, 253-263; cf. Margolin 1978). About this episode, see also Krivatsy 1973, 119.

times in various contexts moral and religious¹. For the purposes of an assessment of Erasmus' attitude towards the medicine, however, perhaps this text is more useful for what it does *not say* rather than what it says. When Erasmus will retrieve it among his papers and finally publish it in 1517, in contemporary writings we find a completely different perception of the importance of medicine and especially an insistence on the historical and cultural significance of the new translations of the Greek classics, as well as also an appreciation of the knowledge of Greek for physicians, which he does not mention in the *Encomium*. This is a sign that, in the meantime, something has changed. Probably just from that same 1499.



3. There is nothing better than a physician as friend

Shortly after writing to Batt the letter which gave him news of Ghysbertus, Erasmus sailed for England. As is known, it was for him a fundamental experience, that definitely opened his horizons, until then confined to the lousy student underworld in Paris. In England, instead, he found the environment to be congenial to him: it was accultured, elegant, refined. Here he met those who would become friends of a lifetime, such as John Colet, William Grocyn or Thomas More². It was here that he developed the idea of learning Greek

¹ For example, Erasmus employs again the medical analogy to the religious sphere in the preface to *Paraphrase on St. Luke*, dedicated to Henry VIII (cf. *Allen*, V, 312-322, ep. 1381). See moreover the *Institutio Principis Christiani*, where Erasmus insisted on analogy between doctor and prince (cf. *ASD*, IV, 1, 194. 196-197. 205). According to Siraisi, this medical oration “far from being routine productions, reflect[s] an authentic interest in medicine both as a humanistic discipline and a human science” (Siraisi 2004, 201).

² About the England humanists and their relationship with Erasmus, see Schoeck 1988, particularly 10-12; Tilley 1938; Lowry 1979, 259-263; Trapp 1991.

to devote himself to the philological study of the Bible—a capital decision for which Erasmus has taken a major role in the history of Europe. It seems that the inspiration in this direction had come first of all from John Colet, but we cannot underestimate the influence of another intellectual, which Erasmus came to know and appreciate during these months: Thomas Linacre, of whom he extolled the acuity and depth of judgment in his famous letter to Robert Fisher, written shortly before returning to France, where he took stock about that experience which was for him so enriching¹. At about the same time that Erasmus landed for the first time in England, Linacre returned after twelve years spent in Italy, where he had graduated in medicine at the prestigious University of Padua (1496), but especially where he had studied Greek with the best teachers available at the time, Demetrio Calcondila and Angelo Poliziano. Not only that: in Ferrara he had come into contact with Niccolò Leonicensio, the father of Italian medical humanism, and with his vast personal library of Greek manuscripts; in Venice, then, he had found a way to get into the *familia* of Aldus, taking part in the editing of the *editio princeps* of Aristotle in Latin, and achieving a translation of Proclus' *Sphaera* that came off the presses a few months after his departure, in October 1499, in a collection of *Astronomici veteres*. When he went home, therefore, Linacre brought with him an almost unique expertise, made of skills and relationships: in him, more than in anyone else, Erasmus found at other latitudes that Italy which he had long wanted to visit but that for other seven years would have been precluded to him. Is it not then just an hyperbole of courtesy the statement entrusted to a letter of 1517 written to William Latimer, another one of his English friends, in which he confides that “if I could have Linacre or Tunstall as a teacher, to say nothing of you, I should not feel the need for Italy”². It is rightly said that Linacre reappeared in

¹ cf. CWE I, 236-237: “Could anything be more clever or profound or sophisticated than Linacre’s mind?” (= *Allen*, I, 273-274, ep. 118). About Linacre see CoE, II, 331-332; Kivatsy 1973, 130; Schmitt 1977; Durling 1977; Nutton 1979; Nutton 1999.

² CWE, IV, 259 (= *Allen*, II, 486, ep. 540: “si mihi contingat Linacrus aut Tonstallus praeceptor (nam de te nihil dicam), non desiderarim Italianam”). Erasmus is just supporting the argument that “anyone is an Italian to me, who is a genuine scholar, even if he was born in Ireland. Anyone is a Greek who has worked hard and successfully at Greek literature, though he may not wear a beard” (“mihi Italus est quisquis probe doctus est, etiam si sit apud Iuvenos natus. Mihi Graecus est quisquis in Graecis autoribus diligenter ac feliciter versatus est, etiamsi barbam non habeat”). See again the letter to Fisher (CWE I, 236-237), where, about to England, Erasmus says: “I have never found

England “as a pedagogue, not a physician”¹, because his immediate task was to tutor Prince Arthur, whereas in order to see him as court physician of the young king Henry VIII we will have to wait until 1509, until 1517 to see him produce his first translation of Galen, and until 1518 to see him stimulate the birth of the College of Physicians of London. However, it is difficult to think that the program of a medicine purified from Arabic-Latin interpolations and grafted again on Greek sources remained totally outside of the discussions that Erasmus and Linacre entertained during that their first encounter. I suppose indeed that the example offered by Linacre had a significant role in encouraging the young Erasmus to embark on a similar path on the still virgin ground of biblical studies (the discovery of Valla’s *Adnotationes* would have come, by chance, only a few years later, when Erasmus had already started his project²). It is often said that Linacre was part of the group of ‘English Erasmians’. What if, on the contrary Erasmus was a ‘Linacrian’?

After all, the friendship with Linacre does not remain an isolated incident, and not only because Erasmus continued to maintain close relations with the English physician, sometimes even resorting to his professional performances³. Returned to Paris, the sickly Erasmus fell ill again. But this time he had at his disposal a resource in addition to the invocations to St. Genevieve, in order to avoid to be “laid in the grave”, as it had happened two years before: this is the aid that he is aware he can find in Guillaume Cop, who Erasmus de-

a place I like so much. I find here a climate at once agreeable and extremely healthy, and such a quantity of intellectual refinement and scholarship, not of the usual pedantic and trivial kind either, but profound and learned and truly classical, in both Latin and Greek, that I have little longing left for Italy, except for the sake of visiting it” (= *Allen*, I, 273: “Coelum tum amoenissimum tum saluberrimum hic offendi; tantum autem humanitatis atque eruditionis, non illius protritae ac trivialis, sed reconditae, exactae, antiquae, Latinae Graecaeque, ut iam Italiam nisi visendi gratia haud multum desyderem”). For this reason, Renaudet 1954, 24-31, speaks about an “Angleterre italienne”.

¹ Nutton 1999, 277.

² The Erasmian edition of Valla’s *Adnotationes* issued only in 1505, and in his prefatory letter, Erasmus himself explains he had found the manuscript in the previous summer, that is in 1504. cf. *CWE*, II, 89-97 (= *Allen*, I, 406-412, ep. 182, to Christopher Fisher). About Erasmus and Valla, see also Bentley 1977.

³ See, for example, a letter dated June 1516, in which Erasmus asks Linacre to send him a certain prescription because he had lost that his friend had prepared for you when Erasmus was in England; cf. *CWE*, III, 297 (= *Allen*, II, 247, ep. 415).

scribes as “a physician who is not merely highly skilled in his profession but friendly and loyal and, a most uncommon thing, devoted to the Muses”¹. A native of Basel (his German name was Wilhelm Köpp), Cop had studied medicine in Paris, where he lived around from early 1490. Here he graduated in 1496 (for a case, the same year of Linacre), and gradually became regent of the University, professor of surgery and doctor of the German nation; then, he would have continued his career until to gain the position of royal physician to Louis XII and Francis I. The most important thing for us is that, at this time, even Cop was taking his first steps in the study of Greek and he would have made the most of it at the beginning of the next decade, with a series of translations from Paul of Aegina, Galen and Hippocrates². The relationship between Eras-

¹ CWE, I, 250-251: “From the day I returned to Paris I have been in quite a frail and delicate state, because the severe hardships which in my winter journey I met with on land and sea were not followed by any rest-cure, but by endless work at night; thus I have not rid myself on hardship, merely altered its nature. Then there is the season, inclement in itself, but particularly unkind to my state of health, for I do not remember that since I have lived in France a single Lent has ever gone by without bringing me a bout of sickness, and when I recently changed my abode I was so badly put out by my new surroundings that I clearly felt the symptoms of the nocturnal fever which two years since all but laid me in te grave. I am combating it with all the proper precautions and with the aid of physicians, but am hardly out of danger, for my health is still in a very unreliable condition. If this fever attacks me once again, then, my dear Batt, it will all be over with your friend. Nevertheless I do not altogether despair, for I trust in Ste Geneviève, whose ready help I have more than once enjoyed; particularly since I have obtained the services of Wilhelm Cop, a physician who is not merely highly skilled in his profession, but friendly and loyal and, a most uncommon thing, devoted to the Muses” (= *Allen*, I, 285-86, ep. 124: “Ex quo Parisios redii, tenera omnino et delicate valetudine fuimus; tantos enim hyberni itineris labores, quos terra marique obivimus, non cura sed assidua lucubratio exceperit, ut laborem non posuerimus sed mutaverimus. Accessit hoc tempus tum per se difficile, tum meae valetudini mirum in modum inimicum. Memini enim, posteaquam in Galliam sum profectus, nullam adhuc praeterisse quadragesimam quae mihi morbum non attulerit. Nuper autem mutato domicilio ita sum ea novitate offensus, ut nocturnae illius febris, quae nos ante biennium Orco fere demiserat, manifesta vestigia senserim: nos contra omni cura medicorumque opibus pugnamus, vixque effugimus. Dubia enim adhuc plane valetudine sumus. Quod si denuo ea febris me arripuerit, actum de tuo, mi Batte, fuerit Erasmo. Non pessima tamen in spe sumus, diva Genovefa freti, cuius praesentem opem iam semel atque iterum sumus experti; maxime medicum nacti Guilhelmum Copum non modo peritissimum, verumetiam amicum, fidum et Musarum, quod rarissimum est, cultorem”). Erasmus and Cop will continue to write to each other until 1526 (ep. 1735). About Cop, see *CoE*, I, 336-337; *Krivatsy* 1973, 127-129; *Freeman* 1975.

² *Huzinga* affirms that Cop has learned greek just by Erasmus (*Huzinga* 1957, 49). In *CoE*, I, 337 we read instead that his teacher was *Giano Lascaris*, who between 1501 and 1502 frequented the French court and the humanist circles gathered around *Guillaume Budé* (cf. *DBI*, 63, 786-787).

mus and Cop was undoubtedly very tight. Erasmus would dedicate to Cop his *Carmen alpestre*, composed during the passage of the Alps when he finally had the chance to make the journey into Italy, in 1506¹. Meanwhile, it was because of their intimacy that Francis I commissioned Cop to test the availability of Erasmus for a possible office as professor at the Royal College of Paris in 1517². In the praise of Cop as a physician and friend we see a concrete response to an invocation contained in the *Encomium medicinae*. Here, after emphasizing that “even among wild and barbarous peoples the word ‘friendship’ was always held in awe and respect”, because the true friend does not disappear when the adversities come, like swallows in winter, Erasmus exclaims: “but how much more genuine a friend is the physician”. He is the only one who stays near in the darkest hour, when we are abandoned even by wife and sons, “such as in cases of phthiriasis, consumption, or pestilence (...) and he is present, unlike many others, not out of mere sense of duty, ineffective as that is, but is there to give practical help, is there to contend with the disease for the life of the critically ill, and thereby frequently puts his own life at risk”³.

Probably Erasmus had a particular sensibility for this topic, because the fear of contagion pushed him to act in the way that he stigmatizes here at east in one occasion: perhaps one of the less noble episodes of his youth. In the fall of 1500 Erasmus momentarily abandoned Paris because of the spread of a plague epidemic and he moved to Orléans with his friend Caminadus and the two boys the latter tutored, with whom he shared accommodations⁴. Here, however, one of the students got sick. Fearing that it be the plague, Erasmus decided to get away from them, asking for hospitality from another friend. The two would eventually return to live together in Paris, for reasons of convenience, but after this incident their relationships would never become again serene: Erasmus

¹ See ASD, I-7, 72-97; Margolin 1965.

² cf. CWE, IV, 210-211 (= Allen, II, 449, ep. 523).

³ CWE, XXIX, 45-46 (= ASD, I-4, 180: “at quanto syncerior amicus medicus (...) in periculis, in his casibus in quibus uxor ac liberi saepe deserunt hominem, velut in phrenesi, in phthiriasis, in peste, solus medicus constanter adest, et adest non inutili officio quemadmodum plerique caeterorum, sed adest opitulaturus, adest pro capite perclitantis cum morbo dimicans, nonnunquam suo quoque periculo”).

⁴ About Caminadus and his relationship with Erasmus, see CoE, I, 250-251; Bierlaire 1968; Krivatsy 1973, 131. The letters 131-133 (CWE, I, 276-284; Allen, I, 305-308) allude to this episode.

tells us that Caminadus was envious of him and explicitly accuses him of theft. However, their friendship did not deteriorate immediately. When his pupil was healed, Caminadus asked Erasmus to give back the copy of Homer which he had previously lent him, in order to give it to the doctor who had taken care of the young man. In response, since the boy was fine, Erasmus not only suggested to make it up with each other, but he also wrote a letter addressed to the same doctor, in which he incorporated most succinctly the themes already adopted in the *Encomium*: “God gives us our lives; our physician, as it were, gives us those lives again. If from the Supreme Creator of the universe we have received the gift of life, yet it is by a physician’s care that it is preserved so that it be not lost, and again it saved when otherwise it would have perished. Wherefore I would not reckon a man of medicine as ‘one worth many’, in Homer’s words, but rather would deem him to deserve to be regarded by mankind as a sort of god upon earth”¹. Even this is an extemporary writing, composed for other people. However, if the assumption is true, that the recipient was that Pierre d’Angleberme to whom Erasmus would send an original letter some time later, the impression of a genuine opening of credit by Erasmus at least to a certain kind of doctors seems to appear further strengthened. At the end of his stay in Orléans, Erasmus wrote to Pierre in order to thank him for the gift of a bottle of spiced wine (*vinum hippocraticum*) and promised him that, when he would have returned to Paris, he would have taken care of the studies of his son². The message contains some Greek and a quote taken from that same Homer that Pierre had read in a copy that had passed through the hands of Erasmus. Although Erasmus presents himself as a *homo poeticus* that addresses an *homo medicus*, this distinction does not envisage a tension; indeed, the exchange of gifts that is established between them—a terse letter in exchange for wine, both the products of their respective arts—something appears that is like the possibility of a meeting between these two worlds.

¹ CWE, I, 279 (=Allen, I, 307, ep. 132): “a deo vitam accepimus, a medico tanquam recipimus; a summo illo rerum satore vivendi munus accepimus, id medici cura tum servatur ne pereat, tum restituitur alioqui periturum. Quare equidem virum medicum non unum pro multis numerarim, ut scripsit Homerus, sed pro terrestri quodam numine inter mortales habendum censuerim”). Here Erasmus quotes from *Iliad* IX, 116-17.

² About Pierre and Jean Pyrrhus d’Angleberme, see CoE, I, 57-58; Krivatsy 1973, 130-31. For the letter from Erasmus to Angleberme, see CWE, I, 306-07 (= Allen, I, 329-31, ep. 140).

If it is true that the history of humanistic culture begins with Petrarch's polemic against the physicians of his time—that he commanded to remain in their own field and not to mingle with things they did not know—now we can observe an important development.¹ Even Petrarch had physicians as friends, with whom he used more conciliatory tones than those used in his polemical works: but he did not feel to be sharing with them any common horizon. His point of view looks very different from that of Erasmus, and the latter's journey to Italy would emphasize this².



4. Erasmus, Italy and the convergence of medicine and theology

On October 28 1507, from Bologna, Erasmus writes for the first time to Aldus Manutius. It is another decisive moment in his life: by that letter he would create a relationship that would lead him to live in the working group of Aldus for six months, during which the Venetian edition of the *Adagia* would be completed. Since this first message Erasmus shows an interest, which at first glance may seem strange, when he asks to Aldus: “I am desirous to know what medical writers you have printed; I wish you would present us with Paul of Aegina”. Paul, a Byzantine physician, would be actually printed by Aldus, but many years later. The same thing happened to Galen, that Manutius wanted to publish right away, but would have a long gestation. It is interesting to note that Erasmus steps seamlessly from medicine to Scripture: “I very much wonder

¹ About the criticism of Petrarca against medicine, see Dotti 1978; Struever 1993; Dell’Anna 1997; Mammola 2012, 43-60.

² About the journey in Italy by Erasmus, see Nolhac 1898; Renaudet 1954, 41-59; Kristeller 1970; Garin 1971.

what has prevented the publication, long before now, of your New Testament, a work which, unless my guess is mistaken, will please even the general public and especially those of my own sort, that is, the theologians”¹. Without twisting the text too much, here Erasmus’ self-consciousness of the importance of his work of recovery of Greek sources comes to light, both in a field which he mastered better—biblical texts—and in a field about which he had learned much through his contacts with Cop (who would later translate Paul of Aegina) and Linacre (who would later translate Galen). Only Linacre, along with other British friends, is mentioned in the same letter as a referent that can open him the door of the printing house of Aldus. In some way, the *Iter Italicum* of Erasmus repeats that of his English friend in the previous decade.

In the entourage of Aldus, Erasmus came in close contact with important figures, such as Girolamo Aleandro, who would embrace the ecclesiastical career to become eventually the papal legate in the Diet of Worms which ratified the breach with Luther. But for the argument that we are dealing with, it is necessary to mention in particular two other characters not equally well known. The first one is Marco Musuro, a Cretan scholar who came to Italy as a result of one of the Eastern missions conducted by Janus Lascaris on behalf of the Magnificent, then tutor and librarian of Prince Alberto Pio of Carpi, and later professor of Greek in Padua (1503-1509) and Venice (1509-1516), a city which he had started to frequent in the last years of the previous century by offering its collaboration with Aldus for some editions of Sophocles and Plutarch². The other is Ambrogio Leoni of Nola, a physician who was beginning the study of Greek precisely under Musuro’s direction, in addition to the practice of the art (although he produced only one medical translation, that of Actuarius’ *De urinis*)³. Erasmus would always keep nice memories of Leoni. Two large digressions in the text of the *Adagia* highlight his pleasantness and his extensive

¹ CWE, II, 131 (= *Allen*, I, 437-438, ep. 207: “quos autores medicinae impresseris cupio cognoscere. Atque utinam Paulum Aeginitam nobis dones. Demiror quid obstiterit quo minus Novum Testamentum iampridem vulgaris, opus (ni me fallit coniectura) etiam vulgo placiturum, maxime nostro, id est Theologorum, ordini”). The plan of Aldus to publish the Bible in Greek, Latin and Hebrew begins in 1501 but will never see the end. In 1518 Manutius will publish a Greek Bible, which will incorporate the revised text by Erasmus (see CWE, II, 131, n. 19). About Aldus, see Lowry 1979.

² About Musuro, see DBI, 77, 250-252; CoE, II, 472-473.

³ About Leoni, see DBI, 64, 560-562; CoE, II, 322-323; Krivatsy 1973, 132-133.

doctrine about physics and music, and give us back the image of an assiduous relationship during the Venetian stay of Erasmus, made of quotes and cultured suggestions, immediately recasted in the work to which the great Dutch was devoting¹.

Leoni, finally, is none other than the mysterious correspondent recalled at the beginning of this essay for comparing Erasmus to Proteus. This simile appears in a brilliant exchange of letters which took place in 1518, the first act of which consists of an epistle sent by Leoni—that looks to be yet another attempt to test the availability of Erasmus for a chair of Greek in Venice, just one year after a similar attempt made by Cop on behalf of Francis I: with nonchalance, almost talking about something else, Leoni informs Erasmus that the Venetian Senate has decided to find a successor to Musuro, who died a few months before, after having abandoned Venice in order to go to Rome to teach in the new Greek Gymnasium founded by Pope Leo X. “Should there be anyone therefore under thos skies of yours who has a reputation and some knowledge of Greek, pray inform him personally of this decision, so that if it appeals to him to be a competitor and to expound Greek texts, he may arrive here within the space of two months...”². Although less gifted than Cop and Linacre, Leoni belonged to the same network of physicians versed in the study of letters with whom in these years Erasmus had begun to weave a relationship.

From this point of view, however, the most suggestive encounter is perhaps that with Leoniceno himself, which took place in Ferrara, when Erasmus had left Venice, already surrounded by the troops of the League of Cambrai, in order to go to Rome³. Erasmus’ stay at Ferrara did not last more than a few weeks, but

¹ Cf. ASD, II-1, 278-282 (ad. 163: *dis dia pason*); ASD, II-4, 270 (ad. 1250: *tamquam in speculo tamquam in tabula*); ASD, II-6, 460-461 (ad. 2666: *prius quam Gallus iterum cecinerit*).

² CWE, VI, 59 (= *Allen*, III, 354, ep. 854: “siquis ergo forte fuerit qui per ista climata nomine et scientia Graecarum literarum claresceret, huic ipsi significato memoratum decretum, ut si animo ei sederit competere aperireque Graecanicos libros, huc intra duorum mensium curriculum se conferat”). Erasmus had been informed about this vacancy already one year before by Andrea Asolano, who had been more explicit: “Now I hear from everyone capable of forming any judgement of a man’s abilities, that no one could fill this post or perform its duties better than you” (CWE, IV, 387; = *Allen*, II, 590, ep. 589: “nemo est melius quam tuiipse qui possit vel hanc dignitatem sustinere vel hoc munus implere”).

³ About Leoniceno and medical humanism, see DBI, 65, 180-183; CoE, II, 323; Krivatsy 1973, 133; Edwards 1976; Mugnai Carrara 1991; Nutton 1993; Nutton 1997; Fortuna 2007; Mammola 2012, 69-

this time was enough to arrange a meeting and at least broach a conversation, of which it would be nice to have a stenographic report. All that remains is instead only a sentence of Leonicensis, that several years later Erasmus would recall and insert in his *Apophthegmata*¹. However, the meeting had to be cordial and fruitful, especially because it came at a time of great creativity for both. Erasmus had just released the second version of the *Adagia*. Leonicensis was about to give to the press, in 1509, his most laborious work, i.e. the new, greatly expanded edition of *De Plinii et plurium aliorum medicorum in medicina erroribus*, as well as the translation of Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* and Galen's *Ars parva*, the latter being accompanied by a fundamental commentary on the prologue, entitled *De tribus doctrinis ordinatis*. To confirm the cordiality of their relationship there is also the testimony of Ulrich von Hutten, who told to Erasmus a few years later that Leonicensis and other humanists of Ferrara had received him with great kindness just for being his friend and disciple: "you cannot think, dear Erasmus, how highly they value you"². Among these friends of Ferrara it is worth mention a student of Leonicensis, Celio Calcagnini, who started a correspondence with Erasmus itself, and in his defense composed a *Disputatio de libero arbitrio*³.

It was Celio Calcagnini who informed Erasmus, at his request, of the death of Leonicensis, in 1525, with a passionate and emotional obituary. However, the

76. In 1961 Kristeller published a letter sent to Erasmus by a pupil of Leonicensis's, Daniele Scevola, which provided further evidence of their encounter; see Kristeller 1961 (now also in CWE, II, 153-155, ep. n. 216 A).

¹ See Erasmus 1703, 156 B: "Interrogatus quam ob rem ipse non administraret Rempublicam quum administrandi rationem optime sciret, respondit, *Eum utiliore civitati, qui multos efficere idoneos gubernanda Reipublica, quam qui ipse recte gubernaret*. Idem mihi respondi *Nicolaus Leonicensis Ferrariae, demiranti cur artem medicandi, quem profitebatur, ipse non exerceat. Plus, inquit, ago docens omnes Medicos*".

² CWE, V, 40: "I therefore left for Ferrera where, when I spoke of you, those very good scholars Niccolò Leonicensis, Celio, and a secretary of the duke's who was with you on your journey from England approached me of their own accord; and you cannot think, dear Erasmus, how highly they value you. I myself, because I knew you and called you my teacher, had wonderful kindness from them. Besides them, Antimaco, the professor of Greek, never mentions your name without a complimentary introduction" (= Allen, III, 27, ep. 611: "quare Ferrariam inde profectus sum, ubi cum te predicarem, occurrerunt ultro doctissimi viri Nicolaus Leonicensis, Celius et quidam Principis scriba, qui naviganti ex Britannia tibi adfuit: qui nescis, Erasme, quanti te faciant. Mihi quidem, quod te nossem, quod praeceptorem appellarem, miris modis benigni fuerunt. Preter hos Antimachus in Graecis professor citra honoris praefationem nunquam te nominat").

³ About Calcagnini, see DBL, 16, 492-498; CoE, I, 242-243.

disappearance of the master had not left an unfillable void. In that same letter, indeed, Calcagnini remembered, as a partial consolation, that in Ferrara there was another physician versed in Greek and Latin, who intended to continue the work of Leonicensio and whose name was Giovanni Manardi. “The *Epistulae* which he published recently will give you some idea of his work”, Calcagnini wrote, “I imagine it has already reached you, but if not, just tell me and I shall see that a copy gets to you without delay. He wrote many others works which deserve an abiding fame, but, being a man of small ambition, he has not yet made them public. He is still with us, and that makes the loss of Leonicensio easier to bear”¹. Erasmus seems to have shared Calcagnini’s view. We have not his explicit opinion about Manardi’s *Epistolae medicinales*, but another of his friends physicians, Henricus Barlandus, editor of the Basilean print of this work (1529), in his prefatory epistle declared the decisive role played by Erasmus in the preparation of this volume: in fact, inspired by the frequent references about medical questions in their discussions, he had lent to Barlandus his own copy of the work (perhaps the same one received from Calcagnini). Barlandus, who had never heard of Manardi, found this work excellent and decided to reprint it, but acknowledged that “for any fruit or benefit that the most learned men will draw from from these newly edited *Epistles*, no small credit will have to be attributed to Erasmus, who gave them to us so that we could share them with the hopeful youth”².

¹ CWE, XI, 199 (= *Allen*, VI, 123-124, ep. 1587: “Una res mihi solatio fuit, quod Ioannes Manardus, vir Graece et Latine doctissimus, rem medicam et naturae arcana iisdem vestigiis prosequitur. Cuius rei specimen dare possunt Epistolae quas proximo edidit. Eas puto in manus tuas pervenisse; quod si nondum pervenisse significaveris, dabo operam ut quamprimum ad te perferantur. Scripsit ille quidem alia plurima digna immortalitate, sed vir minime ambitiosus ea nondum publicam materiam fecit. Hoc superstite minus Leonicenum desideramus”). About Manardus, see DBI, 68, 420-422; CoE II, 372; Krivatsy 1974, 144. 147; Nutton 1997; Mugnai Carrara 1999; Mugnai Carrara 2005. The first edition of Manardus’ *Epistolae medicinales* was appeared in 1521.

² cf. Manardi 1529, [3-4; 7-8]: “quo ubi nunc esset perventum, conieci me confestim in familiarium nostri Erasmi, hominis vita propria mihi charioris, peculiarique quodam amore, ab incunabulis semper adamati, ut cum ipso, saltem ad tempus, domesticam agerem consuetudinem, qua ut vita tota nihil obtigit gratius, ita nec insperatus quidque. Ubi igitur occasione hac varios iam (ut fieri adsolet) sermones inter nos fereremus, et post multa, incideret etiam de re medica frequens mentio, protulit ille suo e Museo, Medicinales quasdam Ioannis Manardi Epistolas, nunquam mihi antea visas, utque perlegerem hortatus est. Quod more meo, avidissimis feci, uti nunquam non alias, siquando offeratur novi quidpiam, rei praesertim Medicae, multo magis si melioris etiam eruditionis nonni-

Leonicensis and Manardi are the major exponents of that medical humanism which found in Ferrara its privileged site, that was the source to which, directly or indirectly, also Linacre and Cop had drawn. Erasmus, indeed, considers them as companions engaged, on several fronts, in the same effort to transform the *societas Christiana*. This belief is highlighted by a number of considerations conceptually similar that Erasmus spreads abundantly, especially in his letters, in what is perhaps his most successful and also the most visionary period. The image of medicine that emerges from these pages reflects precisely the depth of the matter undertaken since from the *Encomium*, finally published in those same years (1518), without alterations, but in an intellectual context that had radically changed. Erasmus was then the famous translator of the New Testament, and was finally released from the obligation to comply with the monastic vows, which gave him a certain spiritual serenity. Even the historical events seemed to announce a change of seasons, compared with the age of Italian wars: the peace of Noyon temporarily put an end to the fight between the European powers and seemed to certify the willingness of a new generation of young and diligent kings (from Charles V to Francis I and Henry VIII), with each of whom Erasmus had a more or less direct connection often mediated, as we have seen, precisely by their court physicians, to build a new Christian order.

The first example of this new thinking is found in a letter of 1516 addressed to Henry Bullock, in which Erasmus defends his version of the New Testament

hil polliceatur. Utrumque in hisce Manardi nostri Epistolis usu venit, quae mihi et novae (ut dixi) erant, et prima statim lecta epistola, singularem quandam aeruditionem prae se ferre videbantur. Quas ubi nunc existimarer versasse diu satis, rogat quae mea de iis esset sententia noster Erasmus, et an ne dignas existimarem, in quibus multum operae colloces. Respondi, meum non esse de tanti viri scriptis temere, ceu arrepta virgula quadam censoria (quod aiunt) iudicare, mirum tamen in modum arridere, idque multis de causis, et quod rem tractarent medicam pro recepto nostri saeculi Medicis more, et essent conscriptae non indocte. Ut vulgi doctorum seu commentariola, seu consili, sed meo quidem animo, latine. (...) Quicquid fructus ac commodi ex hisce aeditis rursum Epistolis ad studiosiores pervenerint non minima Erasmo nostro habenda erit gratia, qui hoc animo eas nobis donavit ut melioris spei Iuventuti communicarentur, si ex re ipsius esse iudicarem, sed maior Manardo ipsi, viro multis nominibus commendatissimo, sive etiam aeruditionem spectes facile huic inter nostrae aetatis Medicos primas tribuerim, sive modestiam, ad miraculum magnam in hoc comperies, qua plurimorum pudendos errores ita taxat, ut neminem unquam nigra labe aspergat, neminem virulentius dilaceret, tam pudendum Criniti in Manna errorem (...). In a letter dated 1534, moreover, Erasmus would define Manardi “huius aetatis facile doctissimus” (*Allen*, XI, 42, ep. 2968). About Barlandus, see CoE, I, 95-96

(almost a draft of what the *Apology* prefixed to the translation would have been). In the face of those who accuse him of doing something unheard-of, Erasmus points out that he was not the first to translate the Scriptures—and in this regard mentions the name of Lefevre d’Etaples. He then adds, “what have the Aristotelians lost by the appearance of the new translations by Argyropylos, Leonardo Aretino and Theodore of Gaza? Surely no one wants to suppress their versions, or do away with them, for fear it may look as though there were some things which the older generation of specialists in Aristotelian philosophy did not know? Does that reason deter Guillaume Cop from translating books by Galen and Hippocrates, for fear the world should perceive that earlier physicians mistranslated many passages?”¹ Of course someone could argue that what counts for the *humanae litterae* doesn’t count for the *divinae litterae*, and therefore Erasmus engages in an articulate defense that goes beyond the rhetorical questions quoted above. However, this reference is significant because it implicitly gives credit to others, including the physician Cop, of having opened a road on which he chose to walk, working in a field, the theological one, which seems particularly hostile to innovation. As he writes in the *Apology*, “the physicians like it, the jurists do not reject it, the philosophers receive it, if anything leads to renew their profession. It is only we theologians who oppose and reject our goods”².

These notes obtained an almost programmatic consistency in a beautiful letter sent in February 1517 to Capito³. Erasmus writes to his friend that, though he is not particularly eager to extend further his life, which he judges already long enough, he would not mind rejuvenating for a moment, “for this sole reason that I perceive we may shortly behold the rise of a new kind of golden

¹ CWE, IV, 48 (= *Allen*, II, 324-325, ep. 456: “quid decessit Aristotelicis, posteaquam Argyropylos, Leonardus Aretinus et Theodorus Gaza novam aeditionem prodixerunt? Num ideo suppressenda aut abolenda censebitur horum interpretatio, ne superiores illi Aristotelice philosophiae professores quaedam ignorasse videantur? Num ea res Gulielmum Copum a vertendis Galeni et Hypocratis voluminibus deterret, ne mundus intelligat superiores medicos multa perperam interpretatos?”). Here Linacre is not mentioned because in 1516 he had not yet made any translation.

² Erasmus 1516, [*Apologia*, p. 2]: “Amplectuntur medici, non aspernantur iureconsulti, recipiunt philosophi, si quid ad illorum professionem instaurandam conducit. Soli theologi pertinaciter reclamamus, et ipsi nostris invidemus bonis”.

³ CWE, IV, 261-268 (= *Allen*, II, 487-492, ep. 541). About Capito, see CoE, I, 261-264.

age”¹. The peace sanctioned by the major kings can finally smooth the way for cooperation between European scholars, in order to proceed in that *restitutio* of the letters which is the dream of an entire generation: “How else can one describe the way in which so many good scholars are attacking this splendid programme, dividing the task among themselves in different ways, not with zeal merely but with considerable success, so that we have the almost certain hope of seeing every subject come forth into the light of day reformed and purified?”². And when he thinks this work of renewal, once again his first thoughts go to the physicians involved in this process, here recalled with a sequence that he would repeat at other times almost like a mantra: Leonicensis, Leo, Cop, Du Ruel, Linacre. Analogous remarks can be made also for jurisprudence (the names are those of Budé and Zasius) and mathematics (about which he cites Heinrich Glareanus)³. Only the theologians have not yet understood the value of the letters and hindered Erasmus’ pioneering work: “But now that I have handed over this sphere of activity, much more accessible than it used to be and not a little less exposed now to unpopularity, gird up your loins, my excellent Faber, and seize the torch which I pass on to you!”⁴. Capito has in fact age, health, right spirit—in the opinion of Erasmus—to complete what he had just begun, pushing at last theology in the same direction already taken by the other disciplines.

The same train of thought returns in another letter, written almost at the same time and appearing as a preface to three *Quaestiones* published by Henricus Afinius, the Flemish physician who would be then the addressee of *En-*

¹ CWE, IV, 261 (= *Allen*, II, 487: “non ob aliud nisi quod videam futurum ut propediā aureum quoddam saeculum exoriatur”).

² CWE, IV, 263-264 (= *Allen*, II, 489: “Quid enim est aliud, quod tam multi eruditissimi viri, aliunde alius operas inter sese partiti, non acriter modo verum satis etiam feliciter pulcherrimum hoc negotium aggrediuntur, ut certa pene spes sit disciplinas omnes multo purgatiores ac synceriores in lucem prodituras?”).

³ cf. CWE, IV, 264 (= *Allen*, II, 489). In addition to the authors mentioned elsewhere, see *CoE* I, 212-17 (Budé); I, 415 (Du Ruel, 1474-1527, botanist and physician, translator of Dioscorides’ *De medicinali materia* in 1516); II, 105-8 (Henricus Glareanus).

⁴ CWE, IV, 265 (= *Allen*, II, 490: “Sed posteaquam nos provinciam tradidimus, ut multo quam ante faciliorem, ita non paulo minus obnoxiam iam invidiae, age accingere, Fabrici optime, et hanc lampadem a nobis traditam accipe”).

*comium medicinae*¹. With peace, “now gifted minds bestir themselves to take up interrupted tasks. One gives theology its life again, another physic; one restores to the light of day the authors who were like to perish from neglect, another clears up those beset with errors; each man has his task”². Erasmus reaffirms here his idea of a sort of ‘joint venture’ in which various scholars collaborate to same project, each one in his respective areas of expertise. Addressing to Afinius, he expresses therefore “the highest praise for your judgment and enterprise”, because “you have lately begun to add to your earlier studies in astronomy and medicine the study of Greek, which can contribute so much to every branch of learning, but particularly medicine”³. The Flemish doctor may also take advantage of the fact that he has begun to devote himself to Greek at a young age, while “the same objective has been attacked by the leading physicians of our time, Guillaume Cop, Ambrogio Leoni, Niccolò Leonicensino at a more advanced age, yet not without success; for Thomas Linacre and Du Ruel were fortunate enough to learn their Greek earlier”⁴. There is here the awareness that the generation to which Erasmus belongs had access to Greek only in adult age and now delivers this treasure to those who, younger, have their whole life ahead to reap its benefits. The recovery of the Greek authors is a substantial issue, not just an aesthetic one, because the Greeks developed a science that can determine, especially in the case of medicine, people’s life or death (as the principles of eternal salvation are preserved in the Holy Scripture, finally returned to its original text). “In no art is a mistake more perilous than in medicine. No wonder if the most intelligent of our physicians are adding Greek to their other fields of study; and soon, I believe, it will be thought impudent to call oneself a physician without it. It is at least far from negligible to be able

¹ CWE, IV, 268-270 (= *Allen*, II, 492-493, ep. 542). About Afinius, see *CoE*, I, 12; Krivatsy 1973, 137-139.

² CWE, IV, 269 (= *Allen*, II, 493: “Accingitur ad intermissas operas felicia ingenia. Hic rem theologicam restituit, ille rem medicam, alius situ perituros autores luci reddit, alius mendis obsitos repurgat, alius aliud molitur”).

³ CWE, IV, 269 (=cf. *Allen*, II, 493: “Ceterum quod tu pristinis astrologiae ac medicinae studiis nuper Grecae litteraturae studium adiungere coepisti, cum ad omne genus eruditionis, tum precipue ad medicinae scientiam conducibilis, iudicium animumque tuum summopere probo”).

⁴ CWE, IV, 269-270 (= *Allen*, II, 493: “Idem aggressi sunt eximii huius etatis medici Guiliemus Copus, Ambrosius Leo Nolanus, Nicolaus Leonicensino iam aetate grandiores, nec infeliciter tamen; nam Thomae Linacro et Ruellio maturius ista discere contigit”).

to listen to the founder of the art, Hippocrates, and next to him Galen, Paulus Aegineta, Dioscorides speaking in their own language. But as it is uncivil to deprive a man of his vote without due notice and to throw off the bridge, as it were, everyone who has not had the luck to learn Greek, so it is reasonable that such men should gladly put up with a warning from me”¹.

It is interesting to remark that the authors cited in these texts were actually engaged in translations from Greek. This activity was just starting then, and perhaps a reader would not have even noticed this fact without a close knowledge of their work, as it was available precisely to Erasmus. The best documented case is that of Linacre, who published in 1517, after a very long gestation, his first version of Galen, about which Erasmus constantly enquired, not only when he wrote to the Linacre himself, but also speaking with such mutual friends as Thomas More. Once the work was published, Erasmus would follow its circulation, for example giving news about his fortune in Leuven, and even promoting it through references, as in the letter to Leo, dated 1518, or through gifts, as the copy sent to Busleiden².

It seems as if Erasmus considered himself as a part of a network, of which medicine was just one of the branches. This interdisciplinary approach is particularly clear in the introduction to *Lucubrationes* of Ulderich Zasius, a book produced in 1518 by a jurist committed to recover the Roman law under the cover

¹ CWE, IV, 270 (= *Allen*, II, 493: “Haud alia in arte erratur periculosius. Quo fit ut cordatissimi quique medicorum hanc studii partem adiungant, brevique futurum arbitror ut impudens habeatur absque hac medicum profiteri. Certe nonnihil est principem huius artis Hippocratem et huic proximum Galenum, Paulum Aeginitam, Dioscoridem, audire suapte lingua sonantes. Sed quemadmodum civilitatis est non protinus suffragiorum ius adimere velutique de ponte deicere eos quibus non contigit Grece discere; ita par est ut hii sese libenter admoneri patiantur”).

² On December 15th, 1516 Moro tells Erasmus that Linacre is going to publish his first Galenic translation, *De sanitate tuenda* (CWE, IV, 171; = *Allen*, II, 420, ep. 502). In February 1517, Erasmus rejoices for this news with Budé (CWE, IV, 250; = *Allen*, II, 479, ep. 534) and Cop (CWE, IV, 255; = *Allen*, II, 483, ep. 537). To Leo, in October 1518, he speaks both about *De sanitate tuenda* and *Methodus medendi*, which Linacre will publish only in 1519, but which Erasmus maybe believes already printed (CWE, VI, 128-129; = *Allen*, III, 403, ep. 868). In this same month, he informs then Richard Pace that *De sanitate tuenda* begins to circulate at Leuven (CWE, VI, 163; = *Allen*, III, 425-426, ep. 887). In May 1519, he sends to Busleiden as a gift *De sanitate tuenda*, a work—he say—“now speaking better Latin with the aid of Thomas Linacre than ever it did Greek” (CWE, VI, 381; = *Allen*, III, 597, ep. 971: “Mitto dono libros Galeni opera Thomae Linacri melius Romane loquentes quam antea Graece loquebantur”).

of medieval glosses¹. Nearly drawing the balance of an entire world of studies, Erasmus writes that, only eighty years before, grammar and rhetoric were still ‘tongue-tied’, “and the arts which had in old days been so well equipped with languages then spoke Latin only, and bad Latin at that”. More or less at the time—approximately with the generation of Bruni and Valla—in Italy a new season opens. This innovation initially regards only the oratory art, “but now, in every nation in Christendom, all branches of study (under the favour of the Muses) marry useful learning with splendour of expression”. Once again, the first reference is for medicine, which “began to speak” in Italy thanks to Leonicensino, “an old man deserving of immortal fame”, in France thanks to Cop, in England thanks to Linacre. Similarly, thanks to its modern translators, today even Aristotle speaks an eloquent Latin. And the same happens in the legal sciences, thanks to Budé and Zasius². The only discipline that, once again, seems reluctant to undertake this path of renewal is theology, “although there may be some with a keen desire to write well. I hope however that we shall soon see this profession, like the others, shake off the dust and reassert its ancient brilliance. Hitherto, those who wrote with some attempt at polish were excluded from the ranks of the learned, nor would the professionals deign to admit to their order anyone who had not mumbled the shameful stuff they talk themselves, with-

¹ About Zasius, see CoE, III, 469-473; Rowan 1987.

² CWE, VI, 101 (= Allen, III, 384, ep. 862: “Ante annos plus minus octoginta non ii modo erant infantes atque elingues qui eas profitebatur artes quas suo quoque seculo (quo vel maxime floruit erudita facundia) mutas appellat Virgilius, verum etiam ipsa grammatica, recte loquendi magistra, et rhetorica, copiose splendideque dicendi dux, foede misereque balbutiebant: et quae quondam tot linguis instructae fuerant, tum unam Latinam pessime Latine sonabant. Sub haec paulatim subolescentibus literis melioribus Italia sola linguam habebat, nec apud hanc ullae disciplinae praeter oratoriam. Nunc nulla est natio sub Christiana ditione, in qua non omne disciplinarum genus (Mussis bene fortunantibus) eloquentiae maiestatem eruditionis utilitati adiungit. Medicina loqui coepit apud Italos opera Nicolai Leonicensini, senis immortalitate digni; apud Gallos, Gulielmi Copi Basiliensis. Apud Britannos studio Thomae Linacri sic nuper disertus coepit esse Galenus, ut in sua lingua parum disertus videri possit. Eiusdem opera sic, Latine loquitur Aristoteles ut, licet Atticus, vix in suo sermone parem habeat gratiam; licet ante hunc illud certe praestiterint apud Italos Argyropylos, Trapezontius, Theodorus Gaza, Marsilius, Picus, apud Gallos Faber Stapulensis, ne philosophia muta videri possit. Porro legibus Caesareis pristinum elegantiae nitorem atque etiam geminae literaturae gloriam feliciter restituit apud Gallos Gulielmus Budaeus, apud Germanos vir omnibus modi incomparabilis Udalricus Zasius, tanta Rhomani sermonis ubertate scatens ut Ulpianum quempiam loqui putes, non huius aetatis iureconsultum”).

out risking the infection of good literature at any point. It came so easy to say ‘He’s a grammarian, he’s no philosopher’ or ‘He’s a rhetorician, not a lawyer’ or ‘Style is his strong point and not theology’. But soon, if I am not mistaken, things will be very different: none will be admitted to the roll who do not reproduce these ancient fountain-heads of learning in language still more elegant than their own, nor will it be thought right for any man to lay claim to wisdom unless it is accompanied by eloquence, its handmaid whom St Augustine wishes never to leave her mistress’ side”¹. These are the same concepts expressed, concerning medicine, in the letter to Afinius mentioned above. I think that, in both cases, what Erasmus requires is not simple elegance of style, but rather the commitment to build a common language, alien to technicalities, a common ground on which the disciplines can encounter to carry out a renovation that invests the whole society.

However, this does not mean to invade the field of other specialists. Although he knows Greek, Erasmus does not contribute to this attempt of renovating medicine personally, if not to a very limited extent. He translates some small works by Galen, when the heirs of Aldus publish his whole Greek opus, but it is almost just a scholarly exercise (that edition of Galen was mainly used by Erasmus as the source for a new edition of the *Adagia*)². It seems plausi-

¹ CWE, VI, 103 (= *Allen*, III, 384-385: “At nescio quo pacto nondum ea res perinde succedit theologis; etiamsi non desinit qui dari gestiant. Spero tamen brevi futurum ut haec quoque professio situ detero pristinum suum nitorem asserat. Hactenus e doctorum centuriis excluderentur qui paulo politius loquerentur; nec dignabantur quoniam suo albo professores, nisi qui cum ipsis turpiter balbutisset neque quicquam omnino castioris literaturae attigisset. Atque illud protinus erat in promptu, Grammaticus est, non philosophus; rhetor est, non iureconsultus; orator est, non theologus. Sed brevi, ni fallor, rebus in diversum commutatis non recipiuntur in ordinem nisi qui priscos illos disciplinarum autores elegantioribus etiam literis referant; neque phas erit cuiquam sibi sapientiam vendicare, nisi simul adfuerit pedissequa eloquentia, quam divus Augustinus non vult usquam ab hera sua digredi”). Erasmus refers here to Augustin, *De doctrina christiana*, IV, 5, 7.

² See ASD, I-1, 629-669; CWE, XXIX, 219-248 (text and commentary). About Erasmus as translator of Galen, see Elaut 1958; Rummel 1985, 109-117. About Erasmus and Galen, see also Ebels-Hoving and Ebels 1988; McLean 2006. However, Erasmus kept on encouraging others physicians to translate medical Greek works. Very important among these scholars was Janus Cornarius, for whom Erasmus had words of great esteem (see *Allen*, VIII, 251, ep. 2204: “Utinam quod accurate, nec dubito quin aequo feliciter, orsus es in Hippocratem, medicinae principem, constanter prosequare! Adest ingenium, adest eruditio, adest corpus vegetum et animus vividus; denique nihil deest quod ad istam provinciam quamvis difficilem feliciter obeundam requirendum videatur. Huc igitur hortarer

ble that the coldness shown by Erasmus against the Greek Aldine Galen was due to the embitterment of his relationship with the Italian environment, a fact which is also shown by the well-known *colloquium* entitled *Opulentia sordida* like so by the *Ciceronianus*¹. Despite all his reservations about the state of text, that he judges defective, Erasmus recognizes the potential value of these writings, known as *Exhortatio ad bonas artes, praesertim medicinae, De optimo docendi genere e Quale oporteat esse medicum*. The translations are dedicated to the Hungarian physician Jan Antonin, who in 1524—fresh from his studies in Padua—had spent a few months in Basel, clutching an excellent relationship with local humanists, enough to get him a job at the expense of the city, that he eventually declined to return home as soon as possible. That short stay left a profound mark in the life of Erasmus, who found in Antonin—so he said—a physician who was able to soothe his pain better than anyone else, as well as a faithful disciple who became a promoter of humanistic ideals in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland². The gratitude and affection that Erasmus showed to Antonin, with whom he remained in a constant relation until his death, suggest that Erasmus had truthfully stated that his intention in publishing those translations had been to contribute to the spreading of medical studies among the youth. A similar concern emerges also from Barlandus's statements quoted above, and it is congruent with the diligence that Erasmus demonstrated in publicizing Linacre's translations. All this contributes to enhance the feeling that Erasmus really tried to contribute to the establishment and circulation of an image of medicine as a kind of knowledge that was fully compatible with the ideal of a comprehensive personal and religious education.

te, nisi iam dudum currentem viderem"). Cornarius (1500-1558) was one of the main humanist physicians and translators, after Leonicensio and Manardi. About him, see CoE, I, 339-340; Krivatsy 1974, 146-147; Mondrain 1997.

¹ cf. ASD, I-3, 676-685 (*Opulentia sordida*); ASD, I-2, 581-710 (*Ciceronianus*). See also Perilli 2012; Dazzi 1969; Lowry 1979, 76-77; Renaudet 1954, 225-237.

² About Antonin, see CoE, I, 63-64; Krivatsy 1973, 143-144. See moreover CWE, XI, 88 (= *Allen*, VI, 60, ep. 1564); CWE, XI, 103-104 (= *Allen*, VI, 71, ep. 1572).



5. The ideal of self-care and the modern autonomy of judgement

We have pointed out at the beginning, commenting Caduceator's letter, that Erasmus never presented himself openly as a physician. This does not mean, however, that in his writings we do not find medical instructions or hygienic recommendations. On the contrary, Erasmus incessantly shares reflections on his eating habits or the influence of a given climate on his health, sometimes even pushing at the prospect of technical measures to improve the living conditions in a country¹. From such scattered fragments it would even be possible to recreate an 'Erasmian diet' or an 'Erasmian lifestyle', but that does not interest us here. It seems more useful to focus on what is behind this attention to his own regimen of life. The ideal of an integral self-care, indeed, is fully integrated in humanistic ethics. Erasmus grants a solid authority to physicians: "what the priest is for our souls, the doctor is for our little bodies. Those who expect a remedy must not hide their diseases", he writes to John Francis². However, in this same letter he tells also he dismissed those two or three physicians he had consulted when he was struck down with the stone disease, because they

¹ See, for example CWE, X, 471-472: "I am often surprised and distressed by wondering how it can be that England has for so many years been beset by continual pestilence, and in particular by the sweating-sickness, which almost seems to be peculiar to it. We read somewhere of a city set free from a pestilence of long standing by modifying the buildings according to the advice of a philosopher. Unless I am much mistaken, a similar policy might set England free (...)" (= *Allen*, V, 613-614, ep. 1532, to John Francis: "Frequenter et admirari et dolere soleo, qui fiat ut Britannia tot iam annis assidua pestilentia vexetur, praesertim sudore letali, quod malum pene videtur habere peculiare. Legimus civitatem a diutina pestilentia liberatam, consilio philosophi mutatis aedificiis. Aut me fallit animus, aut simili ratione liberari possit Anglia (...)").

² *Allen*, VI, 422, ep. 1759: "Quod sacerdos est animis nostris, hoc medicus est corpusculis. Celare suum malum non debet qui remedium expectat".

prove uncertain, and “I took refuge in moderation of food”, in particular drinking his loved burgundy wine tempered with natural sweeteners¹. The reliance in a trusted physician does not remove the responsibility concerning his own way of life. In effect, long before the Galenic translations, Erasmus had already dealt with the version of a Greek medical text, the Plutarch’s *De tuenda bona valetudine*, published in 1513 with a dedication to John Yonge². Presenting the work, he wrote about Plutarch’s instruction, that it “is less medical than that of Galen or Paul of Aegina, still it is more philosophical”. This work, indeed, “explains how to preserve one’s good health even without the aid of medicines”, that is learning to adjust one’s own way of life according to one’s own physical and psychological characteristics, taking into account even the age and the environmental situation³.

Significantly, this booklet opens with a polemic directed towards those doctors who proudly claimed their specialized autonomy against philosophy: according to Plutarch, instead, it is a task of philosophy (considered, of course, in his moral aspect) to care for what concerns the life and health of man, without the need for mediators—thus integrating important directions concerning health with an ethical plea for moderation and temperance, in order to provide a really organic vision of the human person⁴. Already in Pliny is sketched the idea that the great and perhaps excessive success of the physicians must be attributed to the intemperance of men, who are for the most part unable to give themselves a rule and follow it, and are tempted by the possibility of

¹ *Allen*, VI, 423, ep. 1759: “Accivi medicum, unum post alterum, ac tertium, quales hic quidem habemus. Ambigebant. Metuebam ne ea materia concrederet in vesica. Nam dolor aliquot diebus durabat. Tandem coepit mitescere, non ut discederet, sed ut esset tolerabilis. Itaque dimissis medicis ad victus moderationem confugi; bibens vina Burgundiaca, sed parce et vetera, quorum senium tempero multo saccaro et glycyrrhiza decocta”. Huizinga’s remarks about this subject are very interesting (*Huizinga* 1957, 117-119; 183-184).

² cf. *ASD*, IV-2, 185-213.

³ *CWE*, II, 241 (= *Allen*, I, 521, ep. 268: “Docet quo pacto vel absque pharmacis bonam tueare valetudinem; (...) docet autem hoc minus quidem medice quam Galenus aut Palusu Aegineta, sed magis philosophice”).

⁴ See especially *ASD*, IV-2, 190: “Proinde non oportet in ius vocare philosophos, quasi terminos praeterierint, si de iis, quae ad bonam valetudinem conducunt, disputent, verum ita magis accusandos ducere, nisi prorsus sublatis finibus existimarint communiter velut in eadem regione sese rerum, quaecumque sint honestae, studiosos versari oportere sectantes pariter et quod in disputando delectet et quod ad usum vitae sit necessarium”.

entrust themselves to someone that decides in their place¹. In mid-century, finally, Pedro Meija, a Spanish humanist who still had the opportunity to correspond with the old Erasmus, dedicated to this subject a significant portion of one of his dialogues². Certainly Erasmus was not Montaigne, who will claim much more strongly his freedom of judgment, even in choices about one's own health. Montaigne remembered in connection with this the opinion of the Emperor Tiberius, according to which every man, at the age of thirty, must consider himself competent and intelligent enough to figure out for himself what is helpful or harmful for him³. However, already in Erasmus' very personal meditation on his health, as well as in his overall attitude towards medicine, an ideal of self-care begins to appear, that can be classed among the roots of modern ethical autonomy, and that would deserve in turn a special interdisciplinary study.

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¹ Plinius, *Historia Naturalis*, XXIX, 19.

² See Meija 1551, 4r-39r. About Meija, see CoE, II, 439-440; *Allen*, VIII, 405-410, ep. 2300.

³ See *Essais*, III, 13 (Montaigne 1962, 1056). Also Descartes knew this anecdote, and quoted and approved it (cf. his conversations with Newcastle and Burman, in Descartes 1991. 275-276, 354). Erasmus reports this same sentence in his *Apophthegmata* (Erasmus 1703, 431): maybe he recalled it precisely from his translation of *De sanitate tuenda* (ASD, IV-2, 211). Cf. Pender 2006.

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Abbreviations

- Allen = *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, 12 vols., ed. Percy Stafford Allen, Helen Mary Allen and Heathcote W. Garrod. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906-1958.
- ASD = *Erasmi Opera Omnia*, recognita ed adnotatione critica instructa notisque illustrata, Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing and Elsevier, 1969 f.
- CWE = *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1974 f.

CoE = *Contemporaries of Erasmus. A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher. 3 vols. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1985-1987.

DBI = *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma: Treccani, 1961 f.



Coloured photographic reproduction of a 16th-century tapestry: a man having his foot amputated in a garden, Wellcome Library, London, <http://wellcomeimages.org>.