

Galen and the Greek Poets

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GALEN OF PERGAMUM, the famous physician, lived from about A.D. 130 to about 200. His birth thus falls in the time of Hadrian; his education and early experience as a physician belong to the reign of Antoninus Pius, and he reached the height of his fame under Marcus Aurelius. As with many of the other giants of the ancient world, his activities and accomplishments are scarcely credible. He practiced medicine, engaged in research and teaching, and still found time to write hundreds of works. Many of his writings are lost, but the Greek texts that have survived are enough to fill more than twenty volumes, and there are, besides, a number of works preserved only in Arabic or Latin translations.

Galen's interests were broad. He was well educated in literature and philosophy, as well as in medicine; and his writings reflect these wider interests. He even has some claim to philological competence, as his commentaries on the Hippocratic writings contain many discussions of textual problems, precise meanings of rare or ambiguous words, questions of authenticity, and the like. Thus he is a major source not only for medicine but also for philosophical and literary studies of the second century.

My immediate concern has been with Galen's treatise *Περὶ τῶν Ἱπποκράτους καὶ Πλάτωνος δογμάτων*. One feature of this work is its use of the poets, especially Homer, Hesiod and Euripides. One of my duties, therefore, as editor of the *De Placitis* (as it is commonly called), has been to examine the allusions to poetry that occur in it and to see what can be made of them.

First we must look at the fortunes of poetry in the mid-second century. Now it is immediately clear that the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, whatever their other glories, were not noted for their poets. Not only does one look in vain for a great poem written under these emperors; it is uncommonly difficult to mention any poem at all, Greek or Latin, that can be assigned with certainty to their reigns. For Hadrian there is little enough, but of course Juvenal

was still writing in the early part of his reign, and the Emperor himself wrote poems, some of which have survived. Thereafter, it seems, poetry was reduced to the anonymity of dedications, tombstones, and scraps of papyrus.

Why this period produced no great poets is a question beyond our power to answer. On the Greek side, however, we can point to some attitudes toward poetry that appear to have had some currency during the period and that would surely have been discouraging to anyone aspiring to write a great poem.

First, there is the attitude of Plutarch, who was at the height of his fame in the early years of the second century, and whose writings exerted a continuing influence on later Greek thought. One of Plutarch's essays in the *Moralia* is entitled *Πῶς δεῖ τὸν νέον ποιημάτων ἀκούειν*, *How a Young Man Should Study Poetry*. It is addressed to a Roman friend of Plutarch, Marcus Sedatius, who, like Plutarch himself, had a young son engaged in literary studies. The purpose of the essay is to point out the dangers of the study of poetry and to recommend safeguards against its corrupting influence.

Poems, Plutarch says, contain, like most other things, a mixture of good and evil. What is particularly evil about poems is their disregard of truth; as the proverb says, "The poets tell many lies" (16A). The sources of falsehood in poetry are two, one intentional, the other unintentional. Poets deliberately introduce falsehoods, or fictions, into their poems, because their aim is to please; and the truth is often painful, whereas nothing is so pleasant as a well-contrived fable (16B). But on the other hand, Plutarch points out, poems contain unintended falsehoods, simply because poets have mistaken beliefs. Homer and Aeschylus, for example, believe that Zeus, the supreme deity, can be the cause of evil for mankind, and they express this notion in their poems (17A-B).

What makes the study of poetry especially dangerous, in Plutarch's opinion, is that the falsehoods it contains are presented in attractive and persuasive language; and young, uncritical minds are easily misled. Now it would not be feasible to exclude the poets from the curriculum; the teacher, therefore, must be constantly on the alert to combat the falsehoods in a poem by calling attention to the good and true passages in it, or in other poems, and by refuting or otherwise explaining away the falsehoods.

This essay of Plutarch does not do justice to his view of poetry. His

writings as a whole clearly show that he greatly admired the poets and quoted them on every possible occasion. But it does indicate his commitment to a theory of education which regarded pleasure and imagination as obstacles to the pursuit of virtue and truth. Plutarch considered himself a Platonist, and clearly his essay on studying poetry owes much to Plato's remarks on poetry in the *Republic*. The second century saw a revival of Platonism, and Galen too was an admirer of Plato. The appeal to such an impressive authority to the disparagement of poetry may well have served as a deterrent to potential poets.

But the other main intellectual force in the second century was, if anything, even less sympathetic to poetry. The greatest Stoic teacher of the century was Epictetus, whose school at Nicopolis in the time of Trajan and Hadrian attracted Romans as well as Greeks. Later in the century the emperor Marcus Aurelius expressed great admiration for Epictetus, though he had never seen the man himself. Epictetus, as an orthodox Stoic, finds the source of the world's evils in the false opinions of men and their mistaken judgements; the remedy is to learn to think and reason correctly; and this means, more specifically, to form the correct judgement and make the proper response to everything that comes our way—every appearance or impression that we receive from the world around us. The “right use of appearances” is wisdom, the wrong use is ignorance, folly and madness.

Sometimes Epictetus cites Greek epic or tragedy to illustrate his doctrine. The point he makes about tragedy is simple enough. Tragedy occurs when persons make mistaken judgements about the value of things and as a result act in the wrong way toward them. It follows, then, that the great heroes of tragedy and epic were ignorant, foolish and mad. They followed their impressions blindly, unable to evaluate properly the things that confronted them. “See how tragedy occurs,” Epictetus says in one of the *Discourses* (*Dissertationes* 2.16.31), “when fools meet up with chance events.” The great hero, Priam or Oedipus, cries, “Woe is me,” “Wretch that I am,” “Alas, poor me, an old man, have I preserved my gray hair for this?” But the philosopher, sitting in prison under sentence of death, says, “Dear Crito, if so it pleases the gods, so be it” (*Dissertationes* 1.4.23–25; adapted in part from Oldfather's translation).

Medea, the heroine of Euripides' famous tragedy, also suffers from mistaken judgements. She kills her children because she thinks that punishing her husband is more to her advantage than saving her

children. Show her that she is mistaken and she will not kill them; but if you do not instruct her, she can only follow what appears to her as the more advantageous course. Therefore you should not be angry at her for changing herself into a viper; you should rather pity her, as you pity the blind and the crippled—for she is blind and crippled in her mind (*Dissertationes* 1.28.7–9).

It is pretty clear that if men acted wisely there would be very little left for the poets to write about. Shortly after the passage on Medea, Epictetus says, “The *Iliad* is nothing but appearance and the use of appearances. It appeared good to Paris to carry off the wife of Menelaus. It appeared good to Helen to go with him. Now if it had appeared a gain to Menelaus to be rid of such a wife, what would have happened? The *Iliad* would have been lost, and the *Odyssey* too” (*Dissertationes* 1.28.12–13).

Epictetus would not go so far as to say that all the heroes are fools. He admires Heracles and he rather likes Odysseus. In fact, he suggests that when Homer ascribes some human weakness to Odysseus, Homer is lying (*Dissertationes* 3.24.13–20). But for the most part he finds in the poets, especially in Homer and the Greek tragedians, horrible examples of how not to act. Clearly, he was not moved by the tragic emotion, however we may define it.

Galen thus lived at a time when both the writing and the appreciation of poetry were at a low level; and his own comments on the poets, as they are expressed in his work *De Placitis*, reflect this atmosphere. Galen’s chief concern in this treatise is to prove that men’s souls have three parts and that each part is localized in a different bodily organ. Our rational faculty, or reason, is in the brain; our spirited part, by which we feel anger, fear, and the like, is in the heart; and the third part of the soul, which controls nutrition and growth and accounts for our appetites and desires, is centered in the liver. Galen undertakes not only to prove “scientifically” (that is, by methodical reasoning based on observation and experiment) the correctness of this scheme; he also argues that Plato and Hippocrates, the greatest men in their respective fields of philosophy and medicine, both agreed with him, whereas Aristotle, the Stoics, and a good many lesser physicians held mistaken views about the parts of the soul and the bodily organs by means of which these parts perform their functions.

All this is most unpoetical subject matter; and perhaps we should be a little surprised that an unpoetical author, writing in an unpoetical

age on an unpoetical theme, should mention the poets at all. But he does, and not only does he mention them; in some eighty places he even quotes a line or more of verse. The longest continuous quotation amounts to nineteen hexameters.

When we look more closely at his treatment of the poets, we are not surprised to discover that his chief concern is to show how worthless their testimony is about the soul and its parts. That is what we would expect. But the situation is not quite so simple as that. The very magnitude of his efforts to discredit them indicates that they could not simply be ignored; and occasionally they seem to be of some positive use. Our conclusion must be that even in this most prosaic age the poets still exerted an influence on men's minds.

Let us look first at Galen's negative estimate of poetry. In the second book of the *De Placitis* he explains how far poetry is removed from science. In the investigation of any question, he says, there are four possible starting-points, one of them scientific, the other three non-scientific. Let us take as an example the central question of the whole treatise: in what part of the body does the ruling power of the soul reside? The scientific procedure is to find some initial premise that is both true and relevant: such a proposition is that the ruling power of the soul resides in that organ which controls sensation and voluntary motion. With this statement as our starting point, our inquiry proceeds in a systematic and convincing way. Sensation and motion are controlled by means of the nerves: this we may prove by cutting or pressing a nerve and observing the effects; the nerves all lead to the brain, some directly, some through the spinal column: this we observe by dissection. Moreover, experiments on the brain, e.g. pressures applied to various parts of it, cause clearly observable alterations in sensation and voluntary motion. Thus it may be scientifically demonstrated that the ruling part of the soul resides in the brain.

Of the unscientific procedures, the one that comes closest to the scientific is that which proceeds from statements that are true but irrelevant. This procedure Galen calls dialectical. Suppose for instance that someone should argue that the heart is the seat of the soul's ruling power, since the heart is centrally located in the body. Such an argument was used by Aristotle. Now it is not quite correct, Galen points out (p.187 Müller), to say that the heart is in the center of the body; it is slightly above the center. (Aristotle, however, said that the heart's position above and in front of the center is a post of honor; cf. *De*

Partibus Animalium 3.4, 665b18–20). But fundamentally the reason why such an argument is unscientific, says Galen, is that it tries to infer function from position; and even a true statement about the position of an organ does not say anything about its function. The dialectical method of inquiry, therefore, is faulty because it proceeds from irrelevant premises.

Two steps removed from scientific method is the method that argues from the testimony of witnesses. This Galen calls the rhetorical method. The witness may be an authority of one kind or another, or ordinary men and women, or a writer. Here finally we come to the poets. To cite the opinion of a poet in support of a thesis is a complete waste of time—and Galen apologizes for wasting our time and his with such trifles. As proof of the worthlessness of the poet's evidence Galen refers us (p.256 Müller) to a work of Plutarch (now lost) entitled *Ὀμηρικὰ μελέται*, in which Plutarch had maintained that the poets are witnesses to all doctrines. Galen professes to be shocked at Chrysippus, the famous Stoic, who filled his works with passages from the poets; and most of Galen's own quotations from epic and tragedy are taken from Chrysippus, just to show how worthless they are. Of course Plato in the *Republic* had used examples from Homer to show that the soul has more than one part; but there the situation was different. Plato realized, as Chrysippus did not, that there are two occasions on which the poets may legitimately be quoted in support of a doctrine: one, when the doctrine has already been adequately demonstrated, and the other, when the doctrine is one that everyone accepts as true even without proof (p.487 Müller). We may conclude that Galen has aligned himself with Plutarch in measuring poets by the yardstick of truth and finding them deficient.

Before proceeding to the more positive side of Galen's approach to the poets, I must mention the fourth and last of the non-scientific methods of inquiry. Citing the poets is not the worst thing one can do. At the very bottom are sophistical arguments, which Galen describes as arguments from words, that is, arguments that use ambiguous words ambiguously, and the like. Here belong arguments from fanciful etymologies. One example is sufficient. Chrysippus, in the course of his argument that the heart is the seat of the ruling part of the soul, had found that the very name of the heart, *καρδία*, supports his view. There is an alternative form of the word in which the *alpha* and *rho* are transposed, as in the form found in Greek tragedy, *κραδία*. But now a

slight further change gives us *-κρατία*, which is identical with the second element in such words as *δημοκρατία*, 'rule of the demos', or *ἀριστοκρατία*, 'rule of the best citizens'. So the heart, *καρδία*, exercises rule, *-κρατία*, over the body (p.295 Müller).

To return to the poets: what indications are there that Galen attached some positive value to their writings? One bit of evidence is very surprising indeed. Galen says (*Περὶ τῶν ἰδίων βιβλίων*, chapter 17) that he wrote three books on the "ordinary" words in the comedies of Eupolis; five books on the ordinary words in Aristophanes; and two books on the ordinary words in Cratinus, another writer of Old Comedy. (By ordinary words he means words in current use at Athens in the fifth century B.C.) He also wrote one book on examples of peculiarly comic words, and one entitled *Εἰ χρήσιμον ἀνάγνωσμα τοῖς παιδευμένοις ἢ παλαιὰ κωμωδία*. Altogether he wrote at least twelve books on Old Comedy, all now lost. Like many of his contemporaries, Galen considered that the standard for literary Greek was set by the Athenian writers, and he went to a great deal of trouble to acquaint himself with their language. In addition to the writings just mentioned he composed a work entitled *Τὰ παρὰ τοῖς Ἀττικοῖς συγγραφεῦσιν ὀνόματα* in 48 books, and he wrote several more on related topics. Thus he had a profound respect for Greek literary tradition, whatever his opinion of poets as witnesses and however limited his appreciation of literary values.

A second indication of respect for the poets has already been hinted at: the validity of the poets' portrayal of human behavior. In one passage in the *De Placitis* (Book 5, p.473 Müller) Galen says, in seeming disparagement of the poets, that it is unpardonable to cite the words of comic and tragic poets as proof of a doctrine, as the poets do not try to prove anything, but merely give to each character in the drama the speeches that they believe appropriate and adorn these speeches with beauty of expression. Here Galen grants, implicitly at any rate, that the poets understand human speech and action. An example is the behavior of Odysseus on his return to Ithaca, when he found that the maid-servants were misbehaving with the suitors. Galen (p.269.16ff Müller) quotes from the *Odyssey* a passage of eighteen lines in which Odysseus' reaction is described. At first he was angry and his heart howled like a dog in indignation at their wickedness; but then he checked his anger and rebuked his heart with a reminder how it had been his wits, not his heart, that had delivered him from the Cyclops.

Galen remarks that if this is not a clear account of the struggle in a man of good sense between reason and passion, and the triumph of reason, then there is nothing at all to be learned from Homer; but it is a clear account, and any theory of human conduct that cannot explain it is false. Thus Galen finds in Homer a valid refutation of Stoicism.

As a final example we may take his comments on Medea (pp.283–4 Müller). Here again Galen finds the portrayal convincing. His medical interest is aroused by one of the terms that Euripides uses to describe Medea: the chorus says in line 109 of the play that her soul is *μεγαλόσπλαγχνος*. According to LSJ this term, as used by Euripides, means ‘high-spirited’; but Galen understands it literally as ‘having large internal organs’. Now you will recall that in Galen’s view there are three main internal organs: the brain, where thought is localized, the liver, where the desires are centered, and the heart, the seat of the passions. Accordingly, when Euripides says that Medea’s internal organs are large, he means that she is very intelligent, her desires are very strong, and her passions are intense. Galen finds this description entirely accurate. Medea’s love for Jason was a desire so strong that it caused her to betray and abandon her fatherland; her subsequent anger was so violent that it drove her to murder her own children; and her schemes were so cleverly contrived that she outwitted all her enemies.

Such, in brief, is the place of poetry in the treatise *Περὶ τῶν Ἱπποκράτους καὶ Πλάτωνος δογμάτων*, a work written by a man who was preeminent as a scientist, who knew and respected the Greek cultural heritage, and who lived in a period when poetry was as badly neglected as it has ever been in the history of the West.¹

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