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Galen's Agonistic Case Histories

Galen's corpus contains hundreds of "case-histories," first-person stories about his treatment of specific patients. Though these case histories have great value in illuminating the social and psychological world of the physician, they have received little scholarly attention. Galen's stories can be categorized into several types, but this paper will focus on the "agonistic" type, in which Galen triumphs over his medical rivals, humiliating them before an audience with a spectacular prognosis or therapy. Discussion will be limited to three prominent examples: the case of Pausanias the sophist, whom Galen cures of nerve damage affecting his fingers; the case of Theagenes the Cynic, who dies of liver disease after incompetent treatment by a rival; and the case of Eudemos the Peripatetic, whose bout with quartan fever Galen correctly predicts and cures. These stories emphasize the spectacular nature of healing in Galen's world, and the public competition for reputation upon which his career was based.

All three stories are not only about Galen's professional successes, but also about the failure of rival physicians. Each patient is being treated by other doctors besides Galen; he portrays them as ideological rivals of the detested Methodist school, and also as well-known physicians whose defeat will advance his own reputation at their expense. Galen also gives the impression of a crowded, almost public setting for each story, and the presence of witnesses is important. For example, in the Pausanias case, he writes that "it seemed amazing and unexpected to those who were watching, that the fingers were cured by applying medicine to the upper back" (8.58K).

Galen often encounters skepticism from his rivals before his ultimate vindication at their expense. When he attempts to give Attalus advice on the treatment of liver problems, Attalus laughs at him (10.912). The physician thus risks humiliation with every prognosis or cure.

Finally, the spectacular nature of all three cases is important: they all involve dramatic prognoses or therapies whose outcome is easily witnessed by the audience, which responds with astonishment. In the Eudemos case, Galen makes a dramatic prediction that the fever will return in four days; similarly, Attalus predicts the recovery of his patient in four days to Galen and to anyone else who will listen (10.912K). The specific nature of the predictions creates a dramatic effect when they come true (or fail).

All three of the cases discussed here were widely known, partly because of the fame of the patients. The reason for the publication of these stories was partly to continue and enhance their publicity and to increase their impact on Galen's reputation.