

## Narrative and Medical Ethics in Galen's *On Prognosis*

This paper investigates Galen's treatise *On Prognosis*, written in the late second century C.E., for its use of the resources of a narrative form particular to medicine—the case history—to frame and present Galen's experiences as a physician. Galen's case histories in *On Prognosis* have recently attracted scholarly attention (Mattern 2008), as have the experiences of patients in the Roman Empire (Petridou 2016).

I follow these lines of inquiry, shifting the emphasis to ask to what extent we might be able to consider Galen acting as a character in a narrative in *On Prognosis*, namely as a protagonist engaged in a quest to be a physician who works in the tradition of the revered Hippocrates (*On Prognosis* 1). Combining narrative analysis of the *On Prognosis* with insight into the professional world of Roman imperial physicians, I argue that Galen's narrative reveals him to be successful in his quest to be that heroic physician, but at a cost the reader—that is, to the prospective patient making a choice about his care. The reader of *On Prognosis* receives a selectively rosy picture of Galen's successful experiences treating patients, such as the malarial young man (*On Prognosis* 2-3), the lovesick woman (*On Prognosis* 6), or Boethus' wife (*On Prognosis* 8). For Galen, organizing knowledge and data does not mean creating open-ended questions or debate, but imposing strict order by removing case histories with negative outcomes (König 2007).

Ultimately, I argue, for Galen the resources of common narrative—and by this, I mean the way that Second Sophistic intellectuals typically presented their training, status, and connections to an audience—are insufficient to offer the "whole truth" about the physician-patient experience to Galen's readers who were making decisions about who

should provide their care. However, even as it may cast doubt on his ethics, for us to recognize the deficiency of narrative resources for Galen also puts us on the path toward having empathy for the difficult position of this physician. Often viewed as self-aggrandizing and overly harsh toward rivals, Galen was also largely an isolated figure, left to tell stories about his experience as a physician that would be thorough enough to persuade an audience but superficial enough not to provoke questions about his skills or concerns that he was a "sorcerer" (*On Prognosis*).

Without the benefit of support provided by institutional structures such as those of the modern medical profession, the physician in the intellectual world of the Second Sophistic relied on leading his audience, by whatever means, to view him favorably. To take the risk of telling the story that was the whole truth was to risk being moved to the margins, not earning the trust and confidence of patients, and not belonging to the community of intellectuals.

### Bibliography

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