

Reflections on translating passages on ‘empirical’ and ‘dogmatic’ medicine in Celsus’s *De medicina*. Part I

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It has been my principal care to convey the precise meaning of my author, and also to preserve the genius of his stile, where the English idiom would allow. I have likewise been careful not to wrest any expression of Celsus, in order to deceive the reader into a greater opinion of his knowledge, than he really deserves. His merit is sufficiently great without pretending to find in him any discoveries, the honour of which is due to the moderns. Every man of learning, who is acquainted with the state of physic among the antients, and knows how far it differs from the modern, must be sensible of the difficulty of translating an author so elegant and concise, with the strictness necessary in a work of this nature. Such judges, I hope, will censure the faults, which cannot escape their observation, with the candor inseparable from true criticism.

Quotation from what seems to be the first English translation of Celsus. Greive J 1756.¹ Preface xvii–xviii.

This article, which was originally written as a single piece for the James Lind Library, is presented here in two parts.

In this commentary, I reflect on questions that arose when translating passages about ‘empirical’ and ‘dogmatic’ medicine in Celsus’s *de Medicina* for the James Lind Library Celsus,² Donaldson,³ and in Howick’s⁴ preparation of an article about these.

All ancient texts pose problems for the translator; technical texts – including those on medicine – are particularly difficult because one is often uncertain of the precise meaning of the technical vocabulary. At first sight, we might expect Celsus to be easier than later Latin texts. Celsus wrote during what was still the golden age of classical Latin. His literary style attracted the praise of his contemporaries – it is in many ways Ciceronian – so we are not faced with the problems of mediaeval texts for which there is no single satisfactory

dictionary of the vocabulary, or of renaissance works for which we often have to rely on such bilingual dictionaries as are available (Estienne’s great *Dictionarium Latinogallicum* from the 16th century is probably still the most useful). For the vocabulary of Celsus, the incomparable Latin-English dictionary of Lewis and Short,⁵ now well into its second century without revision, should surely suffice – and it does.

But Celsus does present special problems. I shall come in a moment to the comment by Greive¹ cited above. But there is an anterior problem – one that is not unique to Celsus but is perhaps particularly relevant to him – the establishment of the Latin text. The text now generally used is due to Marx⁶ in 1915; it is a scholarly recension of the available manuscripts and is probably the best we are ever likely to have. Obviously, this was not the text used by Greive for his translation, though it is used by the Loeb edition.⁷ The establishment of a scholarly text which notes variants is, of course, a common step in the understanding of most ancient writings. Why should Celsus be any different from other authors? In the wide sense, perhaps he is not. But, because of the relatively late re-discovery of manuscripts of his text, we do have some knowledge of how the foundations of our current text were built. The first scholarly recensed text is fairly certainly that used for the *editio princeps*, the first printed edition produced in Florence in 1478.² It was constructed by Bartolomeo Fonzio (Bartolomaeus Fontius). Christies’ catalogue note for the sale of the Norman copy of *De medicina* in March 1998 summarises most of what we know of Fonzio’s sources:

Almost unknown in the Middle Ages, *De medicina* was rediscovered in the fifteenth century when several early manuscripts came to light. The first edition was prepared by the humanist Bartolomeo Fonzio using a codex copied by his brother Niccol from a now-lost source and incorporating corrections based on a

ninth-century copy of the text (now Florence, Laur. 73.1). This manuscript may have belonged to Francesco Sassetti, the wealthy Medici banker and collector, whom Fonzio thanked for helping him obtain access to manuscripts (A.C. de la Mare, 'The Library of Francesco Sassetti', in *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. C.H. Clough, Manchester 1976, p.170 and no.78).

What Christies' note does not tell us is what Fonzio himself said about his establishment of his text. Here he is addressing his patron, Francesco Sassetti, and referring to the use of material in Sassetti's collection:

.... *Ab his ego: ut multorum utilitati consulere; Cornelii Celsi scriptoris gravissimi atque eloquentissimi de medicina libros imprimendos curavi. In quibus tanta fide & diligentia usus sum ut manes Cornelianos nobis gratiam habituros: cunctos autem medicinae ac litterarum percupidos certe acturos existimem. Nam cum eius libris pluribus essent in locis temporum inuria mutilati atque inversi: uetustis exemplaribus tua opera e gallia conquistis in unum omnia saepius conferes inanti quum ferme statum redegi. Celsum igitur squallidum antea & deformem/renouatum nunc & iam prope in suam faciem restitutum ob eam maxime causam ad re mitto: ut cum particeps mecum in eo corrigendo laboris fueris: in eodem nunc meliore comptiore que hospite relegando partem etiam capias uoluptatis. Vale.*

From these, having considered how useful it would be to many, I have undertaken to have printed the important and elegantly written books of Cornelius Celsus about medicine. In doing this I have been so faithful and diligent that the shade of Cornelius will be grateful to us: I find their presentation altogether excellent both as medicine and as literature. For many of his books were in places damaged and perverted by the passage of time: from ancient examples brought from Gaul by your offices I have made one [text] in consultation with the wisest collaborators [replacing] lacunae with firm text. Therefore, Celsus, who was formerly squalid and deformed, is now renewed and almost restored in appearance by my strenuous efforts: since you also took part in my editorial work may you share in the pleasure of it now much more polished than it was. Farewell.

(Introduction/dedication, *Celsus*, 1478. Translation IMLD)

Modern commentators suggest that 'from Gaul' meant not from France but from Cisalpine

Gaul – northern Italy. For me 'e gallia conquistis' – 'looted from Gaul' – conjures up irresistible images of Julius Caesar's conquests – and I do wonder if such an analogy may have been in Fonzio's mind when he wrote it – but of that, no matter here.

The point is that the first printed text was a construction from diverse manuscripts, as is the now 'standard' text of Marx translated in the Loeb edition.⁷ I summarised a little more information about the *editio princeps* of 1478 in two short pieces in 2014.^{8,9}

But some of Fonzio's material was no longer extant for Marx. I don't mean to suggest that I think our text of Celsus is unreliable in any major way, but we should just be conscious that what we have is a reconstruction of reconstructions of many-times-copied-by-hand material long removed in time from the original author. And, on the accuracy of scribes, Petrarch, in the 14th century when all copying of books depended on scribes, was trenchant – for him, speaking from bitter experience, they were hopelessly inaccurate . . .

But, one may object, surely this is true of most classical texts? Indeed it is. So, why does Celsus present any particular difficulty?

The first reason is because Celsus is to some extent technical and the technical vocabulary of classical Latin is both limited in extent and not always easy to interpret in modern medical terms with any certainty. Remember that Celsus predates Galen and that the Latin interpretations of Galen's Greek texts came to colour medical thought and to influence its technical vocabulary greatly for nearly two millennia. Celsus had no such vocabulary. Greive, in his 18th-century translation, is very conscious of this. So one needs to be cautious and to avoid over-precise attempts at interpretation and, above all, to avoid wishing on Celsus interpretations that depend on knowledge we know he did not have.

The second difficulty arises, oddly, from one of Celsus's strengths; as Greive said, Celsus is 'an author so elegant and concise'. He was admired in his own time for the literary quality of his writing. Classical Latin of the golden age is admirable in its ability, in the right hands, to express a great deal in few words. Where an author speaks of non-technical matters – of human behaviour, of battles, of love, treason, honour, heroism – such concise prose is powerful, partly on account of what one may call the penumbra of meaning carried by many individual words. And, of course, by literary allusion. Mention Troy and which reader does not recall the Iliad? Can one hear of Nestor without thinking of dignified grandeur in old age? Of Odysseus without cunning? Of Hephaestus sweating over the armour for Achilles without recalling his lameness and its cause? Sadly,

many modern readers are quite deaf to these allusions. Nevertheless, even the modern reader can perhaps accept the existence and influence of the penumbra without needing to agonise over just what shade of meaning was intended. But, for technical material, the opposite is true; the translator is forced to choose between a number of possibilities and to try to force from the context of the text clues as to which choice to make. This process is obviously fallible and is coloured not only by the translator's technical knowledge but by his own reactions, prejudices and so on. Translation, as Bismark said famously of politics, is no exact science.

Fortunately, in the passages from what is now regarded as the Proemium to the Books on Medicine, but was, in the *editio princeps*, simply included as the beginning of Book I, this is less of a problem because the matter is rather general and not very technical. Even so, some choices do have to be made and, in addition, one must decide to what extent to amplify Celsus's terse words. Some examples appear in my comments below. Unless otherwise noted, the Latin text I quote is that of Marx as given by the Loeb edition.

Quotation 1

Etiam sapientiae studiosos maximos medicos esse, si ratiocinatio hoc faceret: nunc illis verba superesse, deesse medendi scientiam.

Spencer

... Even philosophers would have become the greatest of medical practitioners, if reasoning from theory could have made them so; as it is, they have words in plenty, and no knowledge of healing at all...

Greive

That even the philosophers must be allowed to be the greatest physicians, if reasoning could make them so; whereas it appears, that they have abundance of words, and very little skill in the art of healing.

IMLD

In addition, if this reasoning held, it would make doctors of those most steeped in wisdom: while they have a surfeit of words, they know nothing of medical treatment.

Or

... make the greatest doctors of those steeped in wisdom...

The adjective 'maximos' could qualify either 'studiosos' or 'medicos'. I think 'the greatest doctors' is perhaps the more likely.

Next, all the previous English translators take those '*studiosos sapientiae*' to be 'philosophers'.

I think this may reflect, first, that successive translators use phrases so similar to their predecessors that it sometimes seems that they have largely copied them rather than re-considering the Latin. In this particular case, translating *studiosos sapientiae* ('students of wisdom') as 'philosophers' would have been quite natural in the 18th century. After all, the Latin is almost a translation of the Greek 'lover of wisdom'.

But Latin did contain a specific word for philosopher – which was 'philosopher'! And Celsus did not use it in this passage.

I think Celsus was just referring to what one might call 'learned men' and not to those who practised the trade of philosophy. In 18th-century English, 'philosopher' was widely used as a general term for 'learned man' – often in distinction to a 'plain' or 'practical' man – but this usage has now largely died out in vulgar English. So, now, 'philosophers' is generally limited to those who practise that academic specialty. Thus, using it in a contemporary article might perhaps mislead the modern reader?

This is perhaps rather trivial. But, to me, 'philosophers' seems wrong – *for the modern reader* – because it seems to make Celsus single out what, nowadays, is a sub-class of the educated, and I do not believe that Celsus was doing that. Rather, his language suggests to me the sense that, if just having a 'rational' argument sufficed, any educated man – any Thomas, Ricardus or Henricus, if you will – would, simply by virtue of the force of that argument, be made a medical practitioner. That is why my translation says that the *reasoning would make* the wise men doctors.

Quotation 1 second part

The next part of the quotation is trickier...

Cum igitur illa incerta, inconprehensibilis sit, a certis potius et exploratis petendum esse praesidium, id est is, quae experientia in ipsis curationibus docuerit, sicut in ceteris omnibus artibus.

Spencer

Since, therefore, the cause is as uncertain as it is incomprehensible, protection is to be sought rather

from the ascertained and explored, as in all the rest of the Arts, that is, from what experience has taught in the actual course of treatment.

Greive

Seeing then this last is uncertain and incomprehensible, 'tis much better to seek relief from things certain and tried; that is, from such remedies as experience in the method of curing has taught us, as is done in all other arts.

IMLD – literal translation – first attempt

Therefore, since that is uncertain and incomprehensible, help should be sought preferably from the reliable and tested; that is, [from] that which experience has taught in these treatments, as is the case in all the other Arts.

All versions are defensible; all the shades of meaning – and some more (!) – are implicit in the Latin, but I think ‘protection is to be sought’ as Spencer has it, is not very helpful to the reader. I think Celsus means ‘trust that which has been proved by experience’. He goes on to talk about steersmen learning from experience.

Incidentally, in the 16th century, Jacques Dubois (Iacobus Sylvius), in his vituperative attack on Vesalius’s use of illustrations in his *Fabrica*, quotes Galen as making a rather similar remark (I have not succeeded in finding the original) about learning from practice and not from looking at pictures. The problem is the meaning of ‘praesidium’.

Lewis and Short begin their entry:

‘a presiding over; hence defence, protection, help, aid, assistance; esp. of soldiers who are to serve as a guard, garrison, escort or convoy.’ Then follow many examples, all military. But a more general use as: aid, help, assistance of any kind is also recorded and finally: ‘In particular a remedy against diseases.’

For this meaning, the authority is the *Naturalis historia* of Pliny the Elder – a contemporary of Celsus – and the examples quoted are: ‘aurium

morbis praesidium est’ [it is a remedy against disease of the ears] and ‘contra serpentes praesidio est’ [‘a remedy against [bites of] serpents’]. I have checked Pliny’s text; Lewis and Short’s interpretation seems to me the only one reasonably possible – that, here, ‘praesidium’ means remedy or cure.

So, perhaps Celsus was really not saying anything about seeking ‘help’ or ‘aid’ or ‘protection’ but, rather, simply that:

‘a remedy should be sought from the reliable and tested; that which experience has taught in these treatments.’

This led me to:

IMLD – second attempt

Therefore, since that is uncertain and incomprehensible, remedies should be sought preferably from the reliable and tested; that is, [from] that which experience has taught in these treatments, as is the case in all the other Arts.

This has the merit of being entirely clear and not raising any likely irrelevances about protection and aid; but is it what Celsus meant? I am happy to defend my version – but, really, I can’t be certain it is ‘right’.

Arrogantly, I prefer my second translation to all the others.

The references will appear at the end of Part 2 which will follow next month.

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