

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 9: Cross-Cultural Connections in the Early Modern Jewish World, Brown University, Providence, RI, February, 26-27, 2012

Medicine as a Cultural Connection Between Jews and Christians in Early Modern Italy

Andrew Berns, UCLA

Abstract

This presentation explores cultural connections between Jews and Christians in sixteenth-century Italy through the lens of medicine. I present and analyze two texts. The first (from 1587) is a letter from Girolamo Mercuriale, a Catholic, to Moses Alatino, a Jew. The second (from 1592) is an excerpt from a *consilium* sent by the Jewish physician David de' Pomi to Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino.

Introduction

The two texts presented below contain evidence of Jewish-Christian interaction in sixteenth-century Italy. The first is a medical consultation written by the Catholic physician Girolamo Mercuriale to the Jewish physician Moses Alatino regarding a young woman suffering from an assortment of gynecological and urinary ailments. Mercuriale's letter is a response to a query, unfortunately lost, from Alatino. Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606) was a distinguished doctor and prolific writer. His first *Book of Medical Responses and Consultations*, from which this text is taken, was published in Venice in 1587; one other volume followed in 1598, and two others in 1604. Mercuriale's reputation rests not only on his medical monographs but also on his antiquarian works. Perhaps his best-known book is *De arte gymnastica libri sex* [Six Books on the Gymnastic Art] (Venice 1579), an exploration of physical activity in the ancient world. Moses Alatino was Mercuriale's exact contemporary: he died in 1605. In addition to practicing medicine, Alatino achieved renown as a translator of classical Greek scientific texts into Latin, often executed via Hebrew manuscripts from the Middle Ages. The second text presented here is an excerpt from a medical prescription that the Jewish physician David de' Pomi wrote to Francesco Maria II, the Este Duke. It belongs to the *regimen*

vitae genre of medical advice literature, which originates in the Hippocratic Corpus. De' Pomi's work was one of several addressed to Francesco Maria, and was included with the others in a bound manuscript preserved in the Vatican Library. David de' Pomi (1525-93) was born in Spoleto, educated at Perugia, and spent most of his professional life in Venice. None of his strictly medical writings has survived, but we do have several apologetic, historical, and exegetical works, some of which remain in manuscript. De' Pomi is best known for his tri-lingual 1587 dictionary *Tsemah David*, which explains thousands of Hebrew and Aramaic terms in Hebrew, Latin and Italian. It elaborates upon several medieval lexicographical works, and features a variety of colorful essays on antiquarian and historical topics.

The medical profession constituted one of the only professional and cultural spheres in early modern Europe that encouraged fruitful relationships between Jews and Christians. Italy was very important in this regard. From the sixteenth century on, Jews matriculated at, and took degrees from Italian universities. We have hard evidence that, while there, they attended class with and disputed among their Christian fellow students. Data are lacking, but circumstantial evidence suggests that they also socialized more informally. A number of Jewish and Christian physicians conducted correspondence throughout their careers, and those epistolary relationships may have commenced at university. Medical letters were an important genre of epistolary literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. As Ian Maclean has pointed out, they sold well. And as Nancy Siraisi has shown, one feature of medical letters was they were often exchanged between members of different religious confessions. There is evidence in Mercuriale's correspondence that he wrote to, and received letters from, Jews. There is at least one other letter to Alatino, and Mercuriale also wrote to the Jewish physician Abraham Portaleone of Mantua, whom he addressed as his "faithful friend." Furthermore, Portaleone, who is best known as the author of an encyclopedia of biblical antiquities, *Shilte HaGibborim*, also wrote medical letters in Latin and Italian, which remain in manuscript. Those letters consist of correspondence with over forty gentile physicians, besides several Jewish ones. Among Portaleone's correspondents was Girolamo Mercuriale.

One conspicuous feature of both of the texts I present below is the absence of any discussion of religion, faith, Scripture, or cultural differences between Jews and Christians. I submit that de' Pomi, Mercuriale and Alatino shared a common culture: that of learned medicine. They were adherents of different faiths, but one would not know that from perusing their medical writings. Those writings discuss medical and scientific topics

exclusively. Neither of the sources I have translated contains any content that sheds direct light on cross-cultural interactions *per se*; rather, they present evidence of interaction between members of different religions but the same culture. The content of these letters is, in turns, routinely formal and rigorously technical. With regard to the former, Mercuriale's salutation to Alatino is worthy of note: "It remains to say that you love me, and you should know that I hold your learning, as well as your skill in practicing medicine, in high regard." Even if the love Mercuriale professed for Alatino was formalized rather than emotional it is still worthy of discussion and consideration. I also wish to underscore David de' Pomi's subsequious posturing before Duke Francesco Maria, whom he calls "the very wisest and most learned of all princes," and to whom he professes himself "your humble servant." We might consider whether de' Pomi's sycophantic stance was typical of writings sent to princes and kings, and or whether his status as a Jew colored his self-presentation. Finally, it remains to ponder how specifically early modern, and how Italian, this set of interactions was. The political, social, institutional, literary and scientific contexts are those of sixteenth-century Italy. So far as we know, the sorts of interactions that these Jewish and Christian physicians enjoyed did not occur in other contexts. In German-speaking Europe Jewish-Christian relations in medical circles were nearly unheard of; in the Ottoman Empire they were quite rare; and in Eastern Europe in this period we have no evidence of Jewish and Christian physicians conducting correspondence. The opportunity to attend university with Christians, to enter into a professional career with clear social advantages, to enjoy membership in organizations such as Colleges of Physicians, and to practice their craft upon, and alongside Christians were all advantages unique to the Jews of early modern Italy.

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Girolamo Mercuriale to Moses Alatino.

From: *Hieronymi Mercurialis Foroliviensis Responsorum, et Consultationum Medicinalium Tomus Primus* (Venice, 1587), fol. 43-44.

On a Uterine Tumor, Painful Urination, and Constipation, for a noble young Jewess, [sent] to the Jewish Physician Moses Alatino. Consultation #16

Although I have thus far given no response to your letter, in which you elegantly and fully discussed the health challenges of a most distinguished woman, the delayed return of it [my *responsum*] came about chiefly because I was thinking that you wished for nothing other than my diligence in responding to your *consilium*, and I believed I might satisfy your desires if these obligations were discharged either by the cure itself, or by my response. Regarding what is to be done about this matter— expressed by this woman and her own husband— what the situation is and what course of action the affected parties will request, you may easily guess my judgment. It is only relevant for me to add, in my view, that these troubles were not caused by a visit to the baths. It is not possible for me to say anything else about her condition other than what was related by her husband. But I might just briefly venture the following opinion: The uterus is affected by some tumor on the extreme left side, and when I first examined that place, I was indeed suspicious. Both those things that happened to her previously, and the notable diminution of her menses, greatly augmented that suspicion. And yet I doubt either that the prolapse of the uterus to the inferior parts is brought about on account of this one condition [diminution of the menses] or on account of an enlarged mola of the uterus so that the intestines compressed to the posterior part admit feces with difficulty. It may be the case that from the inner parts the mouth of the bladder will become compressed so that the urine (which, I have noticed, happens very often in cases like these) may be perceived as much more painful upon discharge. The following things occur to almost everyone: wakefulness, annoyance,

and perpetual discomfort. On account of these things the aggravated internal organs do not adequately supply nourishment to the whole body. It is no wonder, then, that more and more every day the patient is exhausted by the loss of nourishment. And so there is no one who would not deem it necessary for a most capable doctor to direct ceaseless study to this case, whence other serious defects are seen to arise, certainly to the uterus itself, by unnatural conditions that are to be addressed.

Apropos of this it is extremely difficult to judge if those things written most copiously by Hippocrates on diseases in the first book of his *On Women's Sicknesses* are correct. However, you should not desert her [the patient], or give up hope, but rather adhere to assiduous prescription for her and a suitable regimen of life—no great protection in this summer heat! If there is pain and swelling in that place it may please [the patient] to assiduously apply [to her] an emollient ointment. At the same time you may make use, though only at intervals, of a maturative made from pigeon's broth with a proper measure of smilax, wormwood, mint, endive, and borage flower. After the heat of summer has passed away, and a proper purgation of the whole body has been performed, I would recommend for that reason that carefully prepared iron with a mixture of uterine powders be administered to her, which will be more pleasantly and easily endured by her. In this manner the remedy will expel the internal hardness, and I do not doubt that you have often experimented with this, and had great success with it. After this [remedy] she should drink every month [with her menstrual cycle] two drachmas of old Theriac, and it is to be hoped that this will work. Since you write nothing about cautery (and nor would any woman propose it), I fear none was done, and therefore if in order to press the [blood] flow of the whole body towards the uterus two cauteries will be performed on the arms, I do not doubt that these things will be useful. And these are the matters most relevant to the case at hand which I thought worthy of writing to you. It remains to say that you love me,¹ and you should know that I hold your learning, as well as your skill in practicing medicine, in high regard.

Be well. [Written] from Padua.

¹ Cf Cicero, *Epistolae ad familiares*, 274, tu fac quod facis, ut me ames teque amari a me scias: "It is for you to see to it, and you do, that you love me, and are assured that I love you."

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De Uteri tumore, urinae acrimonia, aluique suppressione, pro Nobili iuvene Hebraea, ad Moysem Alatinum Medicum Hebraeum. Consultatio XVI [On a Uterine Tumor, Painful Urination, and Constipation, for a noble young Jewess, [sent] to the Jewish Physician Moses Alatino]

Quod litteris tuis, in quibus de honestissimae foeminae adversa valetudine, eleganter, & copiosè disputas, hactenus respo[n]sum nullu[m] dederim, redditus ipsius isthuc dilatus, hucusque in primis effecit; Putabam enim cum nihil aliud, quam diligentiam in expediendis consilijs vestris meam requireres, sat fore si his absolutis, aut re ipsa, aut sermone meo desiderijs vestris satisfacerem, & quod ad ipsum opus ex ore mulieris atque ipsius coniugis, quae acta sint, quae ipse iudicaverim, quid occasio, & patientis natura postulaverint, facilè intelliges: Ita ut ad me solummodo pertineat illud addere, mihi ipsam post thermarum usum videre non contigisse, ac propterea quidquam aliud de ipsius statu me dicere non posse, quam quod ab ipsius coniuge relatum, atque etiam breviter, audiui: Uterum namque illius in extima sinistri lateris parte tumore aliquo affectum esse, cum primum locum contrectavi, valdè sum suspicatus; Quam suspicionem maxime etiam auget, tum quae sibi antea evenerunt, tum mensium illa insignis imminutio, nec non uteri ad inferiora prolapsus, ob quem unum affectum, nec non ob auctam uteri molem, dubito fieri, ut à parte posteriore compressa intestina difficulter faeces admittant; Ab interiore vero os vessicae angustius redditu[m] in causa sit, ut urina (quod plerumque fieri in his casibus animadverti) inter exeundum multo acrior percipiatur. Quasi verò ab omnibus his deinceps, & vigiliae, & molestiae, & inquietudines perpetuae oria[n]tur, ob quas violata viscera, cum alimentum toti corpori idoneum non suppedite[n]t, mirum minimè est, si illud debito nutrimento privatum, in dies magis consumitur. Quapropter nemo est, qui non videat oportere Medicu[m] eo potissimu[m]

studia cuncta dirigere, unde caetera vitia potissimu[m] oriri videntur, nempe ad uterum ipsum, ab affectibus praeternaturalibus vindicandum,

Quod tamen consequi perarduum iudicandum est, si quae ab Hippocrate his de affectibus copiosè scripta sunt in Primo de morbis mulieb. Libro, vera sunt. Attamen minimè eam deferere, ac penitus spem abijcere debetis, sed praescripta ipsi assidua, & accommodata vivendi ratione sub hisce aestibus nullum generosum praesidium adhibere, praeterquam si loco illi dolenti, & tume[n]ti ceratum aliquod emollitorium assiduò applicare libeat, simulque ius aliquod domestici Columbi cum modico Chyne, artemisiae, menthae, cichorei, borraginis, saltem per intervalla praebere. Postquam autem calore perfuncta erit aestas, facta iterum accommodata totius corporis purgatione, chalybem diligenter praeparatum, necnon uterinis aliquibus pulveribus commixtum, ea ratione sibi exhibendum laudarem, quae ab ipsa iucundius & facilius sustineri poterit. Huiusmodi enim remedium ad expugnandas durities quaslibet internas, magnam vim possidere te quoque saepius expertum esse non dubito. Post quem usum si deinceps singulo mense bis Theriacae veteris drachmam devorabit, collaturam esse sperandum est. De cauterijs cùm nihil scribas, neque etiam mulier quidquam retulerit, nulla esse facta vereor, & idcirco si ad comprimendum totius corporis ad uterum confluxum, duo in brachijs excitarentur, utilia fore non dubitarem. Et haec sunt, quae in proposito casu ad te scribenda putavi. Reliquum est, ut me ames, ac tuam doctrinam, & in medendo peritiam à me plurimum aestimari putes. Bene vale. Patavij.

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David de' Pomi to Francesco Maria II, Duke of Urbino

(Included in) Physicians' Consilia regarding the Illness of Francesco Maria II, Duke of Urbino

Although I have judged you, most serene Duke, to be the very wisest and most learned of all princes, and have perceived you to be very skilled in all of philosophy and the mathematical disciplines, it is nevertheless very easy to err in one's own regimen of health, and I have thought it a good idea, and one without any risk of being inappropriate, to prescribe to you, in brief, my ideas regarding how best to care for your health. Not that I think that very few doctors more learned than I am are to be found in your city; on the contrary, they are much more learned than I. I have decided to write this *consilium*, however unpolished it may be, since I am your most faithful servant, not doubting that you will receive it with a cheerful spirit, since in your beneficence you are accustomed to receive other gifts, however small. And since the [true] method of healing consists in knowledge of those things that exist in accordance with, and in contradiction to nature, the ultimate worth of this work is [your] peace of mind.

. . . It is customary for us to say a few words about these things [sleep and wakefulness]. We shall therefore say that the best sleep is nocturnal sleep, since the night, by means of natural humidity and quiet, leads the soul to sleep. A pure mixture is initiated, and after nocturnal sleep we are led to expel many parts of [our] excrement.

. . . These bits of advice, which I have written in haste, and without books to consult, will suffice for your course of treatment. [May this treatment] bring me the esteem of the wise and famous physicians who assist your grace.

To Your serene [grace]
[Your] most humble servant,
David de Pomis

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Vatican, cor. Urb. 1468, 119r-134r.

Serenis[*sim*]o Urbini Duci Franc[*esc*]o M.[*aria*]

Tametsi ser.[*enissime*] Dux, te omnium principum quos buccusque novi, sapientissimu[m], atque literatissimum iudicaverim, et multum omnis pilosophiae [sic: philosophiae] Disciplinarumque Mathematicarum peritia excellere perceperim; cum tum in propriis corporis regimine quisque aberrare perfacile valeat, haud rationi absonum aliqua proserere tuae valetudine tuenda ante meum discessum breviter perscribere putavi: non, quod me longe Doctiores Medici hac in tua civitate (119r-119v) minime reperiantur existimem; sed, ut meam q[*u*]a sere tuam fidelissimam servitutem, hoc sibi consilium etsi admodum rude, instituire decrevi: non dubitans, quin illud eo hylari sis animo excepturus, quo pro benignitate tua, caetera munera quantumcu[m]que parva, suspicere soles. Et quoniam medendi methodus in illis cognoscendis consistit, quae secundum, et quae praeter naturam existunt, opere precium est, serenita[s].

. . . Fas est ut de iis [somnus et vigilia] etiam sermonem faciamus. Dicimus igitur, quod optimus somnus est nocturnus; quoniam nox naturali humiditate, silentioque, animum in somnu[m] deducens, absolutam molitus concoctionem, item post somnum nocturnu[m] (130r-130v) plurima parte ad excretionem excrementor[um] instigamur.

. . . Haec currenti calamo, et sine libris, dieta sufficiant, in singulis me remittens iudicio sugacis[*sim*]o celeberrimor[um] medicorum qui tuae subli[mi] assistu[n]t.

Sereni. V.[*estra*]e

Infimus ser.[*vu*]s

David de Pomis