

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Prince of Medicine: Galen in the Roman Empire.* By Susan P. Mattern. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xx + 334. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-976767-0.

It has been a while since I have read a scholarly book from cover to cover in almost one shot. Yet, Susan Mattern's *The Prince of Medicine* engulfed me with its subject—which for a name like Galen's is a given—and its enviable merits. Mattern's talent weaves a historical biography of one of the most reputed and controversial intellectual minds of antiquity into a grabbing full-life story of the real Galen, uncensored and demystified.

Scholars for centuries have painstakingly slaved to disentangle the Renaissance-like profile of the man whose narcissistic and clashing personality, so truthfully portrayed in his own writings, tends to cast a long shadow over his genius as a physician, polymath, philosopher, an opinionated member of the *intelligentsia* of the late antique world, devoted citizen to his native Pergamum and avid follower of Asclepius and his art. Galen was a man of superlatives in his medical career and in his private life—more often disparaging than eulogistic—which he did not mind sharing with the public.

The same can be said about his writings the sheer number of which (appr. 150 titles) is as overwhelming as their thematic diversity. Oftentimes when introducing his prolific output, we remind ourselves that his corpus (22 vols. in C. G. Kühn, *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia* [Hildesheim: Olms, 1964-65] and counting, with the recent discovery of his *De indolentia*) represents one eighth of all extant ancient Greek literature.<sup>1</sup> Galen's works and Galen's life are an empire of their own as large as the Empire he lived and worked in.

In her summary on the front flip of the dustjacket, Mattern states that "*The Prince of Medicine* offers the first authoritative biography in English of this brilliant,

<sup>1</sup> V. Boudon-Millot, "Un traité perdu de Galien miraculeusement retrouvé, le *Sur l'inutilité de se chagriner*," in *La Science médicale antique: Nouveaux regards*, edited by V. Boudon-Millot, A. Guardasole, and C. Magdelaine (Paris: Beauchesne, 2007) 67-118; V. Boudon-Millot and J. Joanna, *Galien*, vol. 4, *Ne pas se chagriner* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010).

audacious, and profoundly influential figure.” Given its subject, this is, in its own turn, an audacious, or at least ambitious claim to make and the final product has met its tall order in two main respects: scholarly erudition and general public appeal. There is much ‘food for thought’ between the covers of the volume for everyone, from the seasoned expert, familiar with the latest research trends in Galen’s multifarious heritage, to the incidental browser of the bookstore shelves, curious to learn something new and unexpected just for the sake of learning.

The book consists of a prologue, eight chapters, and an epilogue, which diachronically follow the course of Galen’s life, without the monotony of an accomplished *curriculum vitae* but dynamically, with highlights on revealing episodes of this life. For economy of space, I will not list here the subjects of the individual chapters. They cover all expected topics: childhood and upbringing in Pergamum, medical studies in Alexandria, beginning career as a gladiatorial surgeon in Pergamum, his high medical career as a court physician to Marcus Aurelius in Rome, his enigmatic behavior during the Antonine Plague, the loss of his library and medical instruments in the fire of 192 CE.

The biggest achievement of the book is piecing together the myriad facts of Galen’s life and work in a consecutive storyline. The book does not expand our understanding of Galen beyond what we already know but it improves it by artfully stitching together historical facts and Galen’s loud autobiographical voice. Taking advantage of this unique opportunity, Mattern has made Galen an engaging narrator, in the role of a “live witness” to her academic narrative. (Just to give one example, Galen’s first-person account of tending to a severe case of *tonsillitis* begins chapter three, 81). But Mattern has not let Galen speak for himself without a judicious evaluation of the facts in their context. Her narrative is meticulously documented throughout with primary and secondary sources. Still, the reader will not find an argument in the book, but a story, told with academic aplomb.

The above observation is not a critique, considering Mattern’s goal to compose an “authoritative biography.” Although she does not identify what kind of readership she envisions for her account, it is obvious that she has also aimed at the general public who has seen *Dr. House* and *Gladiator*, but she has done so without ‘dumbing down’ the intellectual complexity of the material. Neither the academic specialist nor the connoisseur of the historical novel *à la* Marguerite Yourcenar or Mary Renault will be disappointed in this book.

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