The physician advances by studying the old and the new.

If we read that, once upon a time, when men were not yet enclosed in towns or cities and spent their time wandering around the fields, all the arts, particularly those in which practice was most necessary, were highly honoured and their discoverers were said by their honest descendants to be in the assembly of the gods, then we, O noble listeners, are not at all surprised. In what manner, may I ask, would the human race differ from the way animals live if it were not for the discovery of the arts, thanks to which we can live in society, which is more enjoyable than anything else on earth? Furthermore, those who write about the degeneration of eloquence complain that some arts have become distanced from their original dignity and consideration, both because of the usual process of things and the laziness of men in using them, and usually even this is no cause for wonder. The fact that some noble and honest disciplines began to first be the object of neglect when they had almost reached their peak of perfection, a disgrace that medical science suffered more than others, is the one thing about which I am never sufficiently astonished, nor given to grieving little. The medicine of the past displayed much coarseness both in its practice and its theory, and proclaimed with more brashness than knowledge about the structure and use of the parts, about the nature and character of illnesses and about the effectiveness of remedies, both to the ill during visits and in the academies. And it obtained great prizes and honours, to the point that on meeting a physician, any man would doff his hat and make way for him. Now that she herself, having supported great exertions and made many glorious
discoveries, no longer proceeds by analogy but by demonstration, or rather indicates with a hidden faith the real regime of nature, of the brain, of the respiratory apparatus, the heart, the lowest bow­els and the true conformation and function of every smallest part, where the most serious pestilences are hidden, and has freely pro­claimed the point at which the powers of remedies have arrived, she is mocked, scorned and handed down as a servile art, which noble hands are no longer worthy of touching. But why ever has this happened? Must we perhaps blame the degenerate customs of the century and the uncouthness of our own time? Lord deliver us! Indeed, whenever was the world more educated? In what time have learned men striven to restore honour to the ancient letters with such unanimous consensus in every place on earth? I, who focused attention on such disgrace and on the much overthrown respect of the medical art, as there seemed to be various, diverse reasons, thought that this because of the almost eternal quarrels between professors, and in particular the studies of the ancient and opposition to the new, to the point that physicians were al­most separated into two ranks as if to fight. One of these almost venerates the doctrine of the ancients and wants to hold onto it by the teeth, while scorning the new; the other, on the contrary, having escaped the yoke of authority, claims that one must heed only reason and autopsy. The result is that not only wise men, but also ordinary people, who understand and at times listen to these discussions, get annoyed and think that medicine differs little or not at all from the art of persuasion. So in this exhortatory talk to you, distinguished scholars, it is my duty to wash away, to cleanse this stain, if it has penetrated into your spirit, to show you that the physician advances by studying the old and the new.

Now, apart from experience itself, both ancient and recent his­tory speak sufficiently of what serious upsets have almost always been sparked off in a political regime by revolutions, when attempts have been made to abrogate old customs and laws and bring in new ones, regardless of whether intended to lead to greater advantages. It has therefore always been thought very important to maintain the state of a city, whatever it be, provided it is peaceful. So once in Rome the senate ordered the burning of the books on the origin of the sacred rites that had been found in the sepulchre of Numa Pompilio by a cowherd so that they would not upset the state
of the people, in case they were to fall into their hands, because they contained some strange things. It has already been sufficiently observed, to say nothing more, that in the century just ended the republic of physicians was overwhelmed by such internal upsets as soon as the famous phenomenon of blood circulation appeared for the first time from the English heavens, which drew no few physicians to admiration and fervour. Blinded by the overwhelming light and like madmen, otherwise learned men began to cry that it was a will o' the wisp, that it would soon be gone, and even that it was the fantasy of a restless genius, owing to which medicine would inevitably soon be completely upset. Both sides fought long and ferociously but, as was once said about the Roman civil wars "it was decided to fight wars that would not have led to any victory". So the defenders of ancient medicine were not in any way allowed to completely destroy such a distinguished and useful discovery and many others that from then on revealed the emulous virtue of researchers; nor were the latter allowed to overturn ancient medicine to the point that, although much of its grandeur had been reduced, it should nevertheless not retain much honour and dignity. Given that peace has not yet been sufficiently well reached and in some places there is still pleasure in conducting this series of arguments, so it will be precisely up to the wise and liberal physician, who is taken by the passion for seeking only the truth, to behave in such a way that without a study of the parts, without offence, he may run here and there over the length and breadth of both provinces, and get the things that not only benefit medical erudition, but that also lead to the suitable and praiseworthy exercise of medicine.

An enormous field will open up to this: indeed, how much good and genuine fruit may be gathered from Hippocrates alone! How many testimonies, or rather how many oracles for predicting illnesses and also for driving them away, may be acquired from his inexhaustible pantry! Nobody can draw near him without going away richer; there is nothing one wishes to learn that he cannot teach. This highly expert old man, who was well aware of how medicine differs according to the nature of places and regions, nevertheless rated his tests for predicting illnesses so highly that this otherwise extremely modest man did not fear entrusting to writing the things that were true in Libya, Delos and Scythia, in other words, in hot, temperate and cold regions. And with what doctrine then, with what
elegance did Celsus, who they call the Latin Hippocrates, teach the
physician, or rather, if it be allowed, create the expert surgeon! And
what may not be hoped for, not from the works of Galenus, but from
his library, if one only examines it carefully, although full of dust,
whether one chooses a rare and cursory erudition on the maxims
of philosophers and physicians, particular cases, medical histories
or distinguished documentations for re-establishing or safeguard­
ing health. Neither will it be vain to have savoured the wisdom of
the Arabs and other writers, who for many centuries handed down
their commentaries to posterity. I would nevertheless not want any­
one to think that I would want the ideal physician to know exactly,
like his own fingers and fingernails, everything that may be found
in authors of this type. Indeed, because of that ancient, obstinate
obsession with writing, which seems to have abated considerably
in our age, there is a large body of books that burdens the disciple
rather than instructs him. It would be too thankless a task to want
to discuss what of good is found in all, if it were not a case of at
times learning some incorrect and fairly useless principles that are
quickly forgotten. However, the physician educated by a good tutor
will easily know which books must be read attentively, which are to
be occasionally leafed through and which need only be known by
name so he does not seem a foreigner in the field of medicine.

In the same way, it is worthwhile and necessary that the good
physician be enthusiastic about the new. The sole knowledge of the
alignment of the magnet to the pole, thanks to which it is possible
to navigate the wide expanses of the ocean beyond the path of the
calendar and the sun, with the eyes turned not to the stars but to the
sail sheet ready to tack, has clearly shown the unhoped for benefits
and advantages that can usually be drawn from the study and de­
tailed observation of hidden things to perfect the arts. It is certainly
said that curiosity is the daughter of ignorance, but she then be­
comes the mother of knowledge. If many researchers of the highly
profitable past century had not revealed by means of very curious
studies how and by what laws the blood circulates, through which
channels the liquid of the chyle, the water and other fluids develop
their movements, what the configuration of the solid parts and their
use is, what in turn their agreement is, what force, imbued in all
the limbs, it is that rouses the mass of the body, then what great
darkness of knowledge of things would keep us spellbound? We
would still be wandering around among ancient dreams, between attractive and retentive faculties and many others, both friendly and servile; doctrine would still be constrained between the physiological and pathological barriers of primary qualities; the liver's task of colouring would still convert the clear form of the chyle into purple; the spleen would still pour its strange juice into the stomach to excite the appetite, like salad; the pancreas and the other glands would still toil in their humble task of reviving the veins; the lungs would still breathe only to cool the heart and to produce vapours; and, like the blind, we would together walk toward illness.

However, we have now penetrated so deep into the realm of nature, or rather nature herself, which was previously accustomed to play with us in many different ways, thanks to the industry of those who have made progress, armed the hands with the scalpel and the eyes with the microscope; not unlike Virgil's Proteus, who with torture and chains was forced to reveal the truth in the anatomy of living beings. We now finally proceed under the guide and protection of reason to conquer illness, and thus have a rational pharmacological science, a rational surgery and a rational diet. Along with other discoveries we now have, the circulation of the blood, I do not deny, no longer remains unknown. This was law to the ancients, but they simply knew in an obscure way and without practice those things that we at great cost observe under such a clear and manifest light, such that one may not foolishly proclaim the prophet's saying that "The old dream dreams, the young see visions". From this it is right to learn, highly decorated scholars, the importance not only of simple knowledge, but also of suitably observing the new experiments that can be rerun on anything found written beyond any possible controversy, like the law of Polyclitus. And so it will not be sufficient to have drawn medicine from the ancient sources, but will also be necessary to have tasted the pure and safe waters that new sources have circulated in such broad courses. So the good and true physician develops from experience of new and old things, he knows about the origin of medicine and its progress, what its current state is and, if it is possible to guess, what its future will be. This is to genuinely profess the medical art, and not at all to have solely sworn by the judgements of the ancients, and, with various interpretations of the texts, do the same thing that shoemakers used to do when they mended old shoes - produce antique leath-
ers with their teeth – or to court only the new, after having rejected the doctrines of Galenus and the others.

Moreover, if we evaluate the thing closely, these usual words of old and new are not rarely imposed on us, while we impose the names of new things on very ancient things about which we had previously not known. We thus call that part of the world that Columbus first revealed by making a voyage never before attempted, despite being part of the whole, the new world; we thus call those heavenly bodies that since the origin of the world were invisible to the gaze of mortals, but which Galileo, a man with the sight of a lynx, made visible with the eyes of the telescope, new planets; and, to make them even more splendid, bestowed on them the royal name of the Medici family. Thus, with a word hardly pertinent to the thing, we call the early ages of the world ancient times, when in truth our own times deserve to be defined ancient and the age of the world is destined to be greater day by day, the start having been certainly deduced, as is right, from the construction of the world. So the names of the old and the new should not be so praised, such as to lead you, distinguished gentlemen, far from the passion for truth, which must be singular, and to impel you, after having diverted you, toward fights and rivalry: indeed, that which is said by us to be new, if it is true, is old: what is there that is older than truth?

Turn your efforts and spirits to summoning the most select works as much from old medicine as from new. Examples are provided by scholars of other disciplines: must those who find pleasure in devoting themselves to poetry perhaps honour and carefully read only Virgil, Horace, Ovid and the others from those times (to stay within the confines of Italy, leaving the Greek Lydians untouched)? Should they not perhaps also read poets of a certain fame in later centuries, such as Pontanus, Azio Sincero and also those of our own age? It is well known that the most important poet honoured the poets both of his own time and of earlier times, and that he took pleasure first of all in the lines of Ennius, and when he was asked what he found in a poet so dated, said: “Gold, I gather gold from Ennius's left-overs”.

What kind of philosopher would never want to test the doctrines of the philosophers of our age after having sufficiently practised the works of Aristotle (if he were wise and wanted to be truly defined a philosopher, or lover of wisdom)? Whoever would
profess to be a mathematician and say he was content only with
the elements of Euclid, without also thinking it worth savouring the
knowledge of Galileo and Borel? Or who is the scholar of geog­
raphy who has studied only Tolomeus's plates, where the ancient
world is described, and has never analysed the highly precise, el­
egant maps we now have, where both the ancient and new worlds
are seen, with great gratification to mind and eyes?

But why search for external examples, when our own sphere
offers them in such abundance? The great Hippocrates, founder
and conserver of the medical art, recommended not only the study
of the new, when he met Democritus, who dissected animals' bod­
ies in order to locate the seat of madness, but also did not reject
ancient medicine. Indeed, he wrote a book on ancient medicine,
small certainly, but delightfully aureate, which the students of Her­
meticism made their own. Galenus, too, in the journeys he made,
showed no little inclination to studying the new. This very diligent
man, conceiving the art of distillation, wished to know how the
purer, lighter part of wine could be distinguished from the richer
part, like the way butter is separated from milk; or rather, he said
that he would have been very grateful to anyone who would show
him such a mechanical tool.

The learned Mercuriale (to also bring new writers onto the
scene) wrote many books certainly worthy of immortality; but how
much dignity and fame was attributed to his name solely with the
book on the art of gymnastics, where he revealed the way and the
laws by which the ancients exercised their bodies, not only for
public shows but also to aid health and dignity! Our forebearers so
valued this art, almost obsolete in our age, that their youth were
instructed by teachers of gymnastics, among whom Hippocrates' fa­
mous tutor, Herodicus, was renowned. According to Plato he lived
to a very old age thanks to the art of gymnastics, despite his health
always being frail. Thomas Bartholin, illustrious luminary of the
academy of Copenhagen, impassioned scholar of the new, among
much else, after having won great fame for the discovery of the
lymphatic vessels, such as to be able to sit at the fourteenth place
in the theatre of anatomy among the discoverers of new things, had
almost completed a distinguished work on the parts of the ancients
after having focused his attention on explaining antiquity. But his
glory was envied by Vulcan, who, having burnt his notable library,
certainly assured himself that a very valid work would not remain to posterity, but not that his memory and zeal would be forgotten.

So it is fairly obvious that those who distance themselves from the footsteps of the masters of the medical art are those whose palate is gratified only by things that smack of the new and to whom things with the taste of the old seem vain, and those who, after having assimilated the essence of the ancients, cannot be bothered with all the rest. Every time I hear someone make a speech in favour of restoring the dignity of ancient medicine, I think I am hearing the words of Symmacus, the prefect of Rome. On seeing the worship of the gods being abandoned and everyone moving to the Christian religion, he sought with eloquent and flattering words to persuade that the ancient altar of the goddess Victory be returned to the curia, and to whom Saint Ambrose subsequently replied with a speech no less elegant than it was learned and forceful.

Likewise, those who wanted every doctrine of the ancients banned from the schools as if built on false theories, as if everything that new writers have entrusted to their writings rests on such sturdy bases as to never be able to fall because of its dignity, should not be listened to without indignation. To touch on a particular point, a few years ago the schools were all in ferment, such that the departments resounded with nothing but the ferment, through which they showed the natural economy of the parts; now, almost all the ferment having been relegated to the bakers, the natural functions are explained through a simple weft, configuration and mechanism. So new medicine also suffers at its own hands, and no few of its dogmas, which are heard to much acclaim, will perhaps leave the halls once and for all and those that were exiled return in grace. But both the indolence of those who learn medicine and would like an art that is by nature long to become short – which is one of the reasons they stop midway – and a varied and diverse education in the schools of the young have ensured that students of the medical art love their teachers too much and do not depart at all from their precepts. But perhaps time, the father of truth and real physician of lasting illnesses, will bring some remedy to this ill.

So it is good that the professor of the faculty of medicine be an expert in both medical statutes, the old and the new, and that he not give preference to any faction: “The healthy man, who is well and is his own master, should not commit himself to any rule. It is
good that he has a varied kind of life, that he is at times in the coun-
try, at times in the city, that he does not avoid any kind of food”.

This is what Celsus once said of the healthy and free man. May it be permissible to cite this same concept with regard to the free physician, who has a good head on his shoulders, undoubtedly, in that he keeps his ability to understand whole and does not avoid any kind of doctrine, provided it is in keeping with reason and experience. Indeed, just as one does not look for elegance in money, nor whether it has been coined recently or a long time ago, but for its goodness and weight, so there is this same judgement on books: “Those who drink an old wine are connoisseurs”, said a comic poet, and rightly, at least provided the wine has not gone off or become acidic; nor should those who drink new wine, if it has been purified, be regarded as less wise: indeed this kind of wine nourishes more and one takes much more spirit from it. It will be no small pleasure for you, young scholars, to move from the old lessons to the new, from the wild, after a long hunt, to the fields being cultivated for the first time, from which plentiful meals may be taken. So, every time you are sated at the tables of the ancients, where at times fairly heavy dishes are served up, you can turn to the symposia of the writers of our age, where a more elegant, tastier banquet is ready, one that is more suited to the stomach and easier to digest.

And may none of you, illustrious gentlemen, be ashamed to proclaim the rejection of opinions that have long been favoured, if they should not sufficiently respond to the Lydian stone of truth: quite often some hold too closely to what they have learnt, either because they fear being defined as fickle or fugitive, “or because they think it shameful to agree with the younger and admit that when older one must throw out what was learnt in youth”.

There is no lack of examples of very learned men who have not only said goodbye to some of their ideas, which they realised were wrong, but have also published books of retractions. These include, among the religious writers, Saint Augustine, and among our own, F. Plemp, who strived to give foundation with solid boosts of reason to that doctrine of blood circulation, which he had previously tried to oppose. It is thus true that many times, as that old character of Terence used to say, “That that which you think you know, you do not know, and that which you would have thought correct, in testing you will reject”.

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The exemplary things, both old and new, should be “leafed through day and night” and all that is there of use, gathered up and kept without one-sided study. It is right to admire the wisdom of the ancients, but not in such a way as to scorn the brilliance of our own times; finally, the hatred and quarrels for which both parties are condemned must cease; no one is absolved. May you retain honour and veneration for new writers, who have advanced the confines of medicine in such a broad and profitable way; may honour and favour also be given to the ancient authors, from whose shoulders we have managed to see so far. Although they at times suffered something human, handing down some erroneous principles, this does not mean their works are to be rejected, as if they were entirely useless. Indeed, one must admit that in the great obscurity of their times, their findings were intelligent, to which if not praise at least not scorn is owed. It pleases us here to relate the words of Pliny the Younger in advising a friend of his departing for Greece to justly administer the province he had been assigned to. He said “Honour antiquity, for its great facts and also for its fables”.