

Medicine in the time of Carracci: the cases of Domenico Lanzoni and Giuseppe Rosaccio

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Abstract. – During the 16th century and at the beginning of the 17th century the age-old competition between scholarly doctors and folk healers became more and more serious, creating a division between the two categories entrusted with treating population diseases. On one side there were the representatives who practiced medicine in an official capacity, and on the other, the “others”, that is, the charlatans, the acrobats and female healers. Two representatives of these contrasting approaches of practicing medicine within the health profession during that historical period were two Italian doctors, Domenico Lanzoni and Giuseppe Rosaccio. Together, with their ties to the city of Bologna and the bolognese Carracci family of painters, they were able to describe in complete detail these two types of practices as medical sciences of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

Key Words:

Medicine in 16th century, Charlatans, Carracci painters.

Introduction

“Illnesses are a scourge, indeed the most terrible wound of humanity, against which there is the greatest need to find rest, nor is there any stronger desire felt by the sufferer than the idea of the possible cessation of his pain. Alas, who better to know how to exploit this lively desire, this need; the charlatan!”

These were the words written by the Italian historian Andrea Corsini¹ in one of his essays in 1922. Since the dawn of time, the tradition of healing has always been the objective for those

who practiced the art of medicine in either an official way or as practiced by so-called charlatans. The search for patients to heal by any means possible to alleviate their suffering, either by relying on the dictates of orthodox medicine or on certain individuals improvising as doctors promising miraculous cures, was widespread in the 16th century. The 16th century and beginning of the 17th century were precursors of great scientific revolutions: from the macrocosmic revolution brought on by Copernicus’s heliocentric theory of the world, to the microcosmic innovations implemented by Vesalio’s detailed anatomical description of man, to Paracelsus’ theory of “similia similibus” against the dogmas of ancient medicine². These transformative progresses inevitably created a struggle between medicine practiced by certified professionals, and that carried out by self-styled popular healers or swindlers, commonly known as “charlatans”³. In Europe, populations of the time were faced with great problems such as wars, famines and pestilences whose contagion was exacerbated by overcrowding due to migration from the countryside to the cities. Thus the ever-increasing proliferation of individuals belonging to lower classes looking to improve their livelihoods was met with the spread of diseases. Infant mortality among the lower classes and the low survival rate at a young age were very high due to the lack of sanitary standards, which led to poor lifestyles. This also gave rise to malnutrition, which caused a low level of immune defenses^{4,5}. Nevertheless, society of the time held the notion that all these calamities did not depend on environmental or social issues, rather they were caused by fate or astrological

conjunctions. While, for some, their circumstances were determined by divine providence; epidemic diseases were God's punishment for the sins of man⁶. To further aggravate the situation was the rise of a new disease that was considered to have been brought to Europe from the distant Americas. Known at the time as "mal de Naples, Malafranzos, Morbus Gallicus", the disease was syphilis⁷. This rampant disease was also contracted by illustrious personalities of the time, such as the sculptor Benedetto Cellini, whose team of doctors struggled to find a remedy². While the anatomists of the largest European universities continued their exploration and study of the human body through the dissection, enlightening the scientific world with their discoveries in texts printed increasingly accompanied by beautiful images used, created in the collaboration of established artists, the clinicians were faced with the serious calamities that afflicted the populations of the sixteenth century. On the one side, wealthier classes, which constituted a small minority, were able to resort to the care of experienced doctors who believed they could find all the answers in the writings of the ancient Latin and Greek classics, while on the other side, the less well-to-do classes, who were the majority, relied on charitable associations or charlatans, whose remedies were sold in the town squares or fairs of villages and cities⁷. With regards to the latter category of healers, they were comprised by male figures, specifically empiricists, alchemists, acrobats, astrologers, and herbalists who offered services which were, according to them, cheaper than those of conventional doctors. At the same time, women resorted to the care of midwives or female family members considered experts, "wise women", who assisted mothers during labour or practiced folk remedies to treat various medical conditions^{4, 8}. With the increase in pandemics in the 16th century, the age-old competition between scholarly doctors and folk healers became more and more serious, creating a division between the two categories entrusted with treating population diseases. On one side there were the representatives who practiced medicine in an official capacity, and on the other, the "others", that is, the charlatans, the acrobats and female healers⁸. The classically trained medical class had been educated at the Universities and had achieved degrees. In this case, knowledge was based on the study of the "authoritas", the works of Hippocrates and Galen, to which were

added the influences of Arab physicians and Aristotelian philosophy. The Galenic concept that prevailed at that time was based on the theory of Hippocrates who assigned the cause of all diseases to the imbalance of the humours^{2,4,9}.

On the other side of the spectrum where the "charlatans", who in most cases, were untrained individuals, lacking any official medical specialization, who performed on stages or benches set up in the markets and squares of urban areas to sell medicines, elixirs and ointments, often prepared by them, which they claimed had miraculous effects. With their eloquence and stage presence, they would attempt to butter up and persuade bystanders in order to sell their products by relying on the ignorance and superstitions of their potential customers¹⁰. In fact, it was common practice for charlatans to hand out leaflets or pamphlets, as they orated the contents in the squares to attract an ever-increasing audience that could confirm the efficacy of the medicines¹¹. Indeed, this type of "quack" figure had always existed, but it was not until the sixteenth century that the diatribe between the official medical class and these hacks, who sometimes sold substances that were also harmful, became more heated. It was necessary for the latter to obtain authorizations to practice this type of profession, which were issued by public-health official or local competent authorities in the cities where they would visit. For public safety, charlatans were thus forced to disclose in their leaflets both the composition of the preparation they were selling and the type of "pathology" the product treated^{8,9,11}.

Two representatives of these contrasting approaches of practicing medicine within the health profession during that historical period were two Italian doctors, Domenico Lanzoni and Giuseppe Rosaccio. Together, with their ties to the city of Bologna and the bolognese Carracci family of painters, they were able to describe in complete detail these two types of practices as medical sciences of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

Little is known about Domenico Lanzoni; however, the tangible testimonies that are available depict him as a typical academic of the field of medicine of his time, starting from his portrait, now preserved in the quadreria of the Vatican Museums. The portrait, attributed to Ludovico Carracci, depicts a man dressed in a dark gown edged with fur and a wide-brimmed hat, typical attire of the Doctors of the Universi-

ty of Bologna, the inscription bears the name *Domenicus Lanzonus Medicinae Doctor*^{12,13}. His commitment to the art of medicine is further exhibited by the plaque located at the Archiginasio of Bologna, one of the most important buildings in Bologna and the first sites of the distinguished University. In it, one can find written in Latin, the inscription that reads, “*In memory of Domenico Lanzoni, renowned Bolognese doctor who returned home from Ragusa, twice with very high stipend for his imminent and genius mind, offered outstanding evidence of the art of medicine, both in healing and teaching...until December 1611*”¹². The recent discovery of his *ex libris* on the text in the Putti Donation, a rich collection of ancient books purchased and stored in the private office of Vittorio Putti, Director of the Rizzoli Institute of Bologna from 1912 to 1940 and avid collector of ancient medical books, which he would donate to the hospital, confirmed Lanzoni’s scientific interests. On the title page of the aforementioned text, by Taddeo Alderotti¹⁴, one can admire the inscription “*Domenico Lanzoni amicorumque*” (Figure 1) flanked by the seal of the Lanzoni family representing a hand holding a tournament lance¹⁵. Taddeo Alderotti, a learned doctor from Bologna who lived in the 1200s, was working in Bologna, like Lanzoni, as a doctor and a lecturer. Famous for his expertise in science, he was also mentioned by Dante in the Divine Comedy. The precious collection of accounts entitled “*Thaddei Fiorentini Expositiones in arduum aphorismorum Hypocratis volumen*” is also features a noble coat of arms placed on the original binding and flanked by two letters: AA. The studies conducted on this additional *ex-libris* shows that the text not only belonged to Lanzoni, but also to Altobello Averoldi, a Brescian clergyman who was a papal deputy legate in Bologna and an important patron to the University. In fact, Averoldi, was the patron of the famous Averoldi Polyptych by Italian Renaissance painter Tiziano, which is, to this day, still located inside the church of Santi Nazaro e Celso in Brescia; a fundamental painting in the field of art history that, with its gleams of light and chiaroscuro effects, plays a key example for the Brescian school of Moretto and Savoldo which would have a profound impact on Caravaggio. Altobello displayed architectural and pictorial embellishments in every city he was sent to as papal emissary, including Carracci’s Bologna, and his home town of Brescia. He would engage the best artists of the time and, in

the meantime, enrich his library of works dedicated to him, such as Lanzoni’s sixteenth century collections. He also wanted to be remembered, and thus, upon his arrival in Bologna commissioned the painter du jour, Francesco Francia, to paint his portrait, which today can be found in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Although we know that Lanzoni was born in Bologna, the year of his birth is still not clear. Sources can confirm that he graduated on the 14th of October, 1593 and was appointed Chair of Theoretical Medicine by the University of Bologna in 1598 and Chair of Practical Medicine, which he held until 1601. From 1602 to 1607, Lanzoni was absent from Bologna, returning the end of each year to resume his practical medicine lessons. During that period he was called twice to Ragusa to lend his work as a licensed physician. The year of his death is still not known^{16,17}. With regards to Lanzoni’s relationship with the Carracci family, Malvasia provides considerable insight. In his work on the “*Lives of Bolognese painters*”, published in 1678, when speaking about the biography of the Bolognese painters, the author cites the “*Doctor Lanzoni Public Lecturer, good anatomist*”. In another part of the text, Malvasia explains that Lanzoni provided Augustine Carracci with stripped human parts taken from fresh cadavres for anatomical drawings¹⁸. In fact, Domenico Lanzoni often frequented the Carracci workshop, which, according to Malvasia, gave anatomy lessons that were fundamental for the correct artistic reproduction of the human body. Lanzoni was a member of the Accademia degli Incamminati which welcomed cultural figures of the period such as, Ulisse Aldrovandi¹⁹. It is easy to hypothesize that the doctor would have had among his list of patients, the Carracci family members such as Hannibal, Agostino and Ludovico Carracci, and that he practiced the profession following the dictates of official medicine¹². On the contrary to Domenico Lanzoni’s approach to the art of medicine, the approach to curing patients by Giuseppe Rosaccio is quite different. Rosaccio was a multifaceted character, a frequent visitor to squares and markets, historian and cosmographer, physician and philosopher, expert in speculative and judicial astrology as well as an editor. Easily recognizable by the “*divine gift of the thick swept beard that ennobled his face*” and which was “*an unequivocal symbol of his energetic and virile intelligence, of untiring activity*”²⁰, particularly fascinated by know-

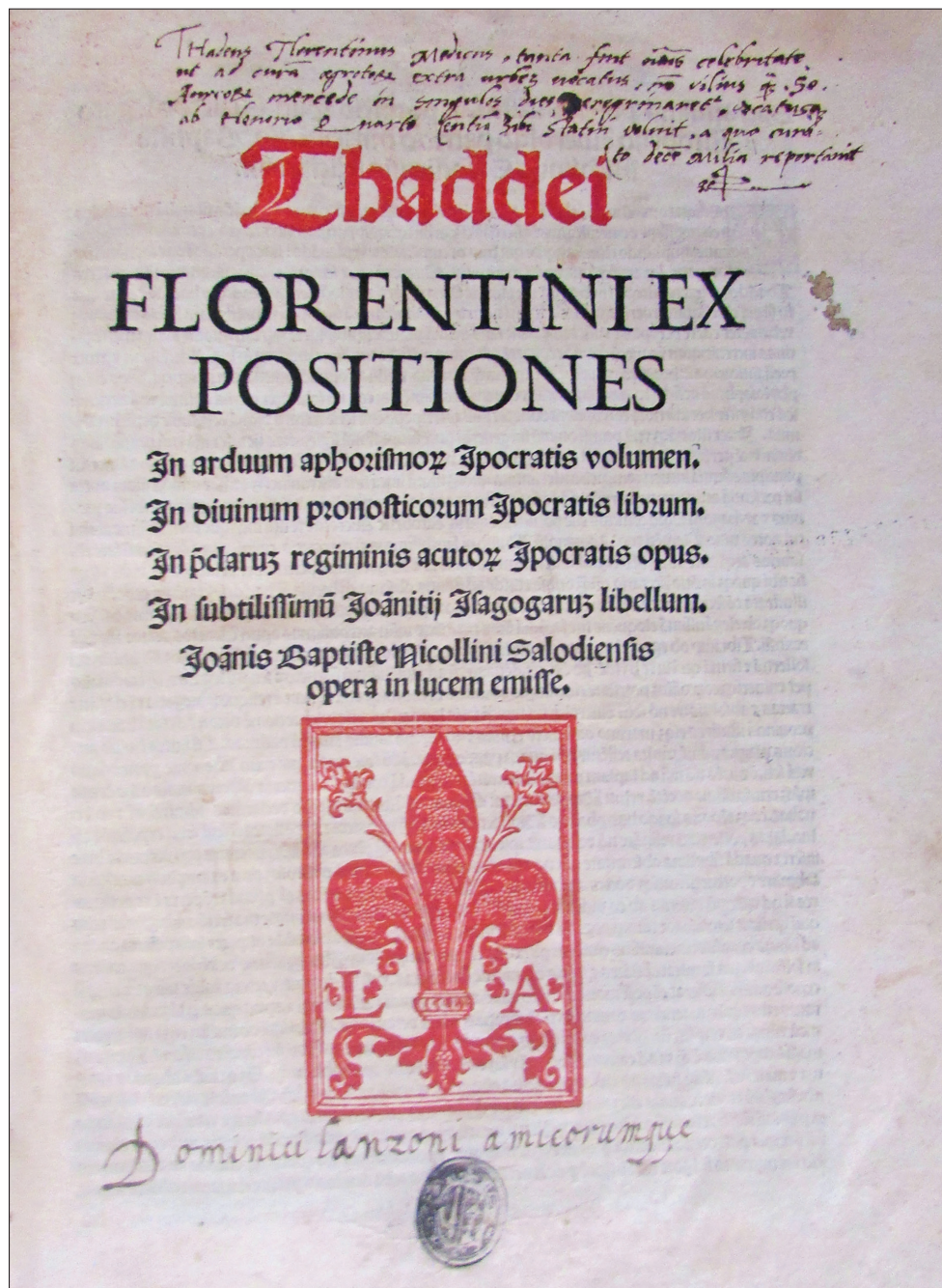


Figure 1. Thaddaeus Florentinus, *Expositiones in arduum aphorismorum Ipcratis*. Venezia, Lucantonio Giunta, 1527 (frontespizio). Bologna, Biblioteche Scientifiche Istituto Ortopedico Rizzoli.

ledge and from scientific knowledge, Rosaccio fully represents, through the breadth of his interests, the intellectual spirit of his time. Although Rosaccio is well known in the world of cartographers and geographers, (although today it is considered unoriginal, especially in his works inspired by the Ptolemaic tradition), and had considerable publishing success over the centu-

ries, he is almost completely unknown in the scientific world as a doctor^{21,22}. Among the various texts Rosaccio had printed out, most of which geographic works, there is one, currently in our possession, that was printed in 1621 in Venice, eloquently titled: “Giuseppe Rosaccio, Doctor of Philosophy & Medicine, and Observer of Celestial Mottos”. Here, after reviewing his

academic knowledge, Rosario conveys, according to him, what is the true and real way to treat an illness with its appropriate remedy and documented experiences²³. Giuseppe Rosaccio (Figure 2) was born in Pordenone presumably around 1530 (although some believe that his date

of birth is around 1550²⁴, and died there in circa 1621. An eclectic figure with vast knowledge and a connoisseur of many disciplines, Rosaccio graduated in medicine and philosophy in Padua, devoting himself, however, also to the study of geography, astronomy, cosmography, astrology,



Figure 2. Giuseppe Rosaccio's portrait. From *"Il Compendio della Nobilissima Città di Bologna"* written by Giuseppe Rosaccio, Livorno, Felici Edizioni, 2015.

history and jurisprudence. He practiced particularly as a doctor, however, in the city of Tricesimo (1552) he taught literature and was also the deputy of *Gastaldia* between 1561 and 1575. At the same time, he practiced as a “healer” in the squares of the main cities of the period including Ferrara, Venice, Bologna and Florence^{20,25}. Indeed if one person could be selected as the archetype of the “charlatan” of the time, it would be, without a doubt, Giuseppe Rosaccio. He was notorious for his theatrical demonstrations, showing off in public squares by placing large banners behind him displaying all his qualification and success stories of healings he performed over time, entertaining bystanders, with his magniloquence, the miraculous powers of his “concoctions”. To boot, Rosaccio was a peculiar healer in that he loved to dress in toga with the fur and the wide-brimmed hat, which distinguished the doctors of the time. He was a graduate after all^{12,26}. Moreover, Rosaccio was a tenacious individual. During one of his trips in 1607 to Bologna, when the Medical College of Bologna forbade him to appear in public dressed in toga, Rosaccio went straight to the Cardinal in the city to request permission to wear his toga, which was approved. This would happen in all the other cities he would visit^{20,25}.

Florence would ultimately become Giuseppe Rosaccio place of official residence for about 30 years, bringing an end to his city-hopping ways and where he continued to practice his profession as a “doctor”²⁰. Though he resided in Florence, Rosaccio maintained strong links to Bologna and would often visit, professing himself as a “healer” and selling his “miraculous” remedies that he would prepare himself. His attachment to the city of Bologna is shown in a 1603 printed guide entitled “Compendium of the noble city of Bologna: its origin and history of events”. It was a first printed guide for tourists, a sort of “pocket book”, rich with interesting ideas on places, works of art and some of the most remarkable and deserving things to see in Bologna. Similar to Lanzoni, Rosaccio would maintain relations with the Carracci family during his stays in Bologna, however, not as a doctor but as a publisher. As evidence of the aforementioned link, there is an engraving and a painting, now attributed to Agostino Carracci. In this Carracci work entitled “Quis evadet” (Who will be spared?), depicts a cupid making soap bubbles sitting astride a skull, an allegory of the passage of time. The engraving reads “Giuseppe Rosaccio formit” in which the multifaceted healer

from Pordenone is the owner, printer and seller of the plate. Given this indication, it could be presumed that there was a friendly relationship shared between Rosaccio and the Carracci family, at least with Agostino^{24,27}.

Conclusions

It can be said that the two Italian doctors, the educated Domenico Lanzoni, who practiced his profession in a traditional way, and the multifaceted Giuseppe Rosaccio, who made a mark for himself in the world of medicine as a charlatan, fully exemplify the intellectual spirit and practice of the medical profession of their time.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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