

BOOK REVIEWS

Epifanio Ferdinando, “One hundred stories. Observations and clinical cases”, edition edited by Amedeo Elio Distante, Albano Laziale (RM), SAM Edizioni, 2020, pag. 526 (+ XXXVIII +10)

The volume that is a modern re-edition, edited by Amedeo Elio Distante, of one of the most important works of the Salento “physician-philosopher” Epifanio Ferdinando (1569-1638) has been published a few months ago. As the reader can learn in the biographical notes placed at the beginning of the volume, Epifanio Ferdinando spent most of his existential and professional career in Mesagne (currently in the province of Brindisi), a town located in that part of the Kingdom of Naples, which was then called “Terra d’Otranto”. Ferdinando, after graduating in Naples in 1594 in “Medicine and Philosophy”, began to practice medicine in his hometown, where he also carried out functions of the public administrator (he was elected mayor twice). In addition to medical practice, the Mesagnese scholar also devoted himself to medical-philosophical treatises, producing some volumes that had a certain resonance even outside the Land of Otranto and beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Naples. Among his other publications are the volumes “Theoremata Medica ed Philosophica” (1611) and “De vita proroganda, seu iuventute conservanda et senectute retardanda” (1612).

The volume “Centum historiae seu observationes et casus medici”, dedicated to the noblewoman Giulia Farnese under whose dominion Mesagne and the surrounding area fell, was published for the first time in Venice in 1621. This publication, as the author declared in the subtitle, << *it contains almost all the parts of medicine and unites the diseases of the human body that no less for theory and practice than for the various culture and precious digressions will be particularly useful and necessary to philosophers, doctors and other scholars of the good arts and pleasant and very worthy of being read* >>. The text is preceded by a “gratulatory epistle” that the Tarantino doctor Cataldantonio Mannarino had sent to the author. At the end of this preface, the following can be read.

He, therefore, uses this method, that of stories, to teach readers at the same time so that the experience benefits them: in fact, nothing else is history but a narration of the event of a thing and of time which, in its own way, benefits public affairs. Cases are then added, since in many stories, but in almost all, magnificent, new things seem to be reported, which rarely happen; things that beyond the cause, and from the order of nature, appear to have happened at first sight: the author investigates the profound truth of all these; he reports the cause of all things, omits nothing and finally leaves nothing in doubt.

The preface is followed by some indexes: that of the authors cited, that of the clinical histories narrated and finally, that of the topics covered.

The “hundred stories or medical observations and cases” include an extensive variety of diseases affecting multiple organs and systems of the human body. We pass from hydrocephalus to stroke cerebri, from epilepsy to peripheral paralysis of the limbs, from syphilis to gonorrhoea, from volvulus to ascites, from haemorrhoids to prolapse of the uterus, from complications of pregnancy to abortion, from tertian fever to pleurisy, from cystitis to kidney stones, from tonsillitis to bronchial asthma, from diffuse tremor to hiccups, from diabetes to gout. Neoplastic forms, heart disease, fracture injuries, suppuration of wounds, disorders of otology and ophthalmology, children’s diseases such as measles and chickenpox, mushroom poisoning, contact infection with animals suffering from anthrax. Particular emphasis is given to the pathology of psychiatric interest to which six clinical histories are dedicated. These cases can be compared to the story of a patient bitten by a tarantula, a story that allows the author to make a long discussion on the symptoms and behavioural manifestations attributed in Salento to the bite of the tarantula, also including its treatment based on music and about dance. Some stories then constitute as many scientific treatises on specific topics: on how to prevent the development of epidemics, on how to fight infertility, on how to prevent obesity.

Ferdinando reports the cases that came to his observation and were treated from January 1596 to Octo-

ber 1613. They are all clinical stories that start from the examination carried out on the patient and the consequent anamnestic collection (only story no. 52 which deals with in general of pestilences without dwelling on any patient). The clinical histories also constitute an interesting anthropological cross-section of a relatively small community in Southern Italy between the XXVI and the XXVII centuries. Ferdinand's patients belong to various social classes: from peasants to artisans, from men of arms to men of the church, from the small to the great nobility. In the various stories, the lives of people whom the author knew well as residents of Mesagne or its surroundings flow, but also of characters from more distant areas attracted by the fame of the doctor. In some cases, the course of illnesses that have occurred to the doctor's family members is also described, starting with the wife who is the protagonist of story n. 75 or from a daughter who is the protagonist of story n. 77.

The clinical histories all have the same compositional structure that is repeated slavishly from the beginning to the end of the work. The author, after having exposed a brief account of the disease, goes on to list the "res naturales" (that is, belonging to the patient's body), the "res non naturales" (contrasting that is the patient's body) and the "res praeter naturam" (Ie constituting the morbid form in question). The author then discusses the possible "causae" of the disease, describes its various "signa" and formulates the probable "prognos" of the disease. Finally, the author sets out in detail the "indicaciones" (ie therapeutic prescriptions) divided into: "diaeta" (rules of life and nutrition), "chirurgia" (especially bloodletting) and "pharmacia" (mainly herbal preparations). In many stories the author inserts the voice "nomen" which allows him to make an etymological dissertation on the name of the disease treated, the voice "essentia" where he tries to identify the exact nature of the disease and the voice "differentiae" where he underlines the symptomatic diversity compared to other diseases. In some stories, the treatment takes place through the enumeration of statements which are then meticulously corroborated or refuted by the author's arguments.

The ideological structure at the base of the work is still the Hippocratic-Galenic doctrine with its "humoral" interpretation of the state of health or disease and with its conception of biological processes carried

out in the human body thanks to a "pneuma" present in its variants "natural", "vital" or "animal". In dealing with individual cases, Ferdinand abounds with quotations from authors of classical antiquity among which Hippocrates and Galen are remembered in an almost obsessive way, but to a lesser extent also Aristotle, Alessandro di Tralles, Paolo d'Egina, Cornelio Celsus, Pliny the Elder, etc. The Arab authors who continued the Hippocratic-Galenic doctrine in medieval times are also often mentioned: such as Avicenna, Razes, Albucasis, Avenzoar, Averroè, etc. Less frequent, but still present are the citations of more modern authors such as: Andrea Vesalio, Gabriele Falloppio, Pietro Andrea Mattioli, Gerolamo Mercuriale, Prospero Alpino, etc. On the other hand, the suggestions deriving from doctrinal positions in line with the nascent iatrochemical and iatromechanical schools that will characterize the medical-biological culture of the mid-seventeenth century appear substantially absent from Ferdinando's treatment. As regards the etiopathogenesis of diseases, astral influences, magical operations and diabolical interferences are still present in the discussion. Moreover, Ferdinand often supports his affirmations, not only on the prestige of classical authors but also on the authority of the Church and the Holy Scriptures. As for the treatment of diseases, our author, in addition to basing himself on the precepts of the Hippocratic-Galenic school (regime of life and leakage of the « materia peccans »), relies largely on therapeutic paraphernalia of medieval origin where the suggestive and the imaginative they still find a fair amount of space.

As a whole, the volume by Epifanio Ferdinando «Centum Historiae seu observatione et casus medici» can be judged the work of a practical doctor who, despite some frequentations with important university centres, remained the expression of a rather peripheral cultural environment and anchored to pathogenetic and therapeutic conceptions of the Renaissance style, then still prevalent (but in any case rather distant from the conceptual positions that would soon have contributed to the rise of modern science).

However, the recently edited volume remains a meritorious and important cultural operation, due to the enthusiasm and competence of Amedeo Elio Distante, who also oversaw the translation from Latin together with Maria Luisa Portulano. After all, Distante is

a practicing doctor and a southern intellectual (cultured and erudite as only the doctors of Southern Italy can be) who follows in the footsteps of Ferdinand carrying out his professional activity in Mesagne. Distanto already edited another work by Ferdinand a few years ago by the Mesagnese physician-philosopher: the «De vita proro-ganda» always with the translation from Latin in four hands together with Maria Luisa Portulano.

In the preface, the two translators introduce the reader to the work now edited by providing useful in-

formation and information to better understand and appreciate Ferdinand's text. Furthermore, at the beginning of the volume, there is a learned and exhaustive presentation of the work and its author by Giuseppe Armocida, for many years full professor of History of Medicine at the University of Insubria and current honorary president of the Italian Society of History of medicine.

Massimo Aliverti