

The cunning bookcase of Alexander Knips Macoppe

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To the Editor,

There is no doubt that COVID-19 pandemic has affected the spreading of scientific information. To this regard, not only people, but also a studied arrangement of furniture and ornaments could communicate in a hidden way.

For more than one year, in fact, every single day during the newscasts or the most popular talk shows, some experts on COVID-19 appeared from remote connection at their home, discussing what this pandemic has caused, distributing information and advice to the audience and sometimes arguing with the colleagues of the day before or even of the previous minute. Here we highlight a curious fact that allows us to even smile a little, despite this difficult situation.

In fact, behind these experts, almost always, a rich bookcase appeared, full of volumes in perfect order, well bound, a decidedly repetitive and certainly not extemporary background: what the viewer saw was the face of the COVID-19 expert, framed by a mountain of books.

We wondered why this steady furniture was so showy, and why we did not notice a window, a wall with paintings or prints, or other than the usual bookcase behind the speaker.

An ironic answer to this question comes to us from reading a booklet of a Paduan physician of Germanic origin, Alexander Knips Macoppe (1662–1744), entitled “*Aphorismi medico-politici centum*”, and published posthumously in 1795¹. These precepts, that were intended to be a code of conduct for a young doctor, aroused considerable interest at the

time, documented by some translations in several languages and by at least five versions in Italian in the XIX century². They are full of tips and tricks intended to inspire in the patient a deep trust and credibility towards the physician and other possible users of his scientific knowledge. As the Paduan pharmacologist Tito Berti (1924–1998) well expressed in a translation of these aphorisms³ “*as a whole, they constitute an interesting and, for the time, rare example of a complex mixture of wisdom, cunning, unscrupulousness leading to cynicism, and also above all of surprising modernity and actuality that clearly contrast with the pompous academic language prevailing at the time they were written*”.

In fact, in the aphorism LXXIV we read:

“Numerosam bibliothecam conde tum pro usu, tum pro pompa. Pleni multi nominis autographis multifariis libris curventur loculi. Tu paucos, sed meliores libros noctu diuque versa. Curiosus alii inserviant, admirantibus alii. Credet vulgus, credent posteris, te magnis cognitum viris. Alienae licet victurae in secula chartae, doctorumque virorum monumenta, tibi famam etiam non legenti conciliabunt”

which in translation says more or less as follows:

“Make sure that your house has a rich bookcase, both to be able to consult it (“pro usu”), and because the mere fact of owning it increases your prestige in front of others (“pro pompa”). The shelves must also appear curved due to the weight of foreign books or manuscripts of famous physicians. But you must limit yourself to consulting only a few of these texts, the others are only intended to arouse the admired curiosity of your guests. If you follow these rules, people and posterity will judge you as a man of extraordinary culture. Many of the things written in these books

A P H O R I S M I
M E D I C O - P O L I T I C I
C E N T U M
C E L E B E R R I M I
A L E X A N D R I K N I P S M A C O P P E .
E D I D I T N U N C P R I M U M
E T P R A E F A T U S E S T
F L O R I A N U S C A L D A N I U S .



V E N E T I I S .

M D C C X C V .

Fig 1. Title page of the *Aphorismi medico-politici centum* by Alexander Knips Macoppe (Venetiis, 1795)

may perhaps be better understood in the future, however the mere fact of owning books of the most distinguished authors, even if you have not read them, will be enough to gain you fame and respectful admiration."

Furthermore, on a closer inspection, the topic of intellectuals and bookcases has already been widely debated

even in the distant past. Cicero argued that when you have a bookcase and a garden in which to read you have everything: "*Si hortum in bibliotheca habes, deerit nihil*"⁴. Cicero is also credited saying "*a room without books is like a body without a soul*", with an attribution of uncertain origin, perhaps to further emphasize the importance of

the book culture. Moreover, Seneca advised Lucilius to read not many authors, but only those chosen⁵.

We can therefore infer that about three hundred years ago, Knips Macoppe had already foreseen everything. . . Let's just hope that COVID-19 experts who crowded TV programs all day long have at least read and studied the best scientific literature ("*meliores libros*") of their bookcases!

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