

Galen on bad commentators

Markus Asper

Galen on bad commentators (περὶ τῶν μοχθηρῶς ἐξηγουμένων)

Galen's commentary on Epidemics III features an unusual passage: seventeen CMG pages or almost 4300 words on 'bad commentators' (or perhaps, more precisely, 'on those who do commentary badly').¹ Galen says himself that the text is meant to prevent us from falsely admiring commentators just because they do something unusual (ξένον, p. 10.15 W.). He intends to teach us the 'ways' (τρόποι, p. 10.22 W.) of bad commentaries so that we can always discern them by diagnosing their text (εἰς ... διάγνωσιν, p. 10.25 W., see Appendix, #1), almost as a disease. Obviously, this goes beyond the usual polemical treatment of competing commentators.² Hoping that here Galen will perhaps reveal something substantial about the art of commentary-writing itself, I will look at this passage in some detail. While these pages have been mentioned repeatedly by modern scholars interested in Galen's practices of commentary writing,³ I believe that there has not been an overall assessment of this text yet.

1. What is the status of this text

There has been a certain degree of uncertainty about the genre of this text among the few scholars who have looked a little closer at it. Manetti and Roselli, for example, call it 'monografia', directed against Sabinus.⁴ Some have referred to this text as an essay, although 'essay' is an anachronistic idea of a literary genre. The real question is, I suppose, whether this is an autonomous unit of text or, rather, a kind of digression,⁵ a huge footnote (anachronistic, too), or a prolonged annotation, never meant to be standing on its own (this book features some similarly isolated, but shorter, passages on the critical letters (*kharaktēres*) to be found in some copies of the Epidemics).⁶

¹ Galen uses a participle of ἐξηγεῖσθαι instead of a noun (ἐξηγητής) which is qualified by the slightly unexpected adverb μοχθηρῶς. However, in his preceding sentence, Galen uses κακῶς and ἐξηγητής (p. 10.6 f. Wenkebach). Initial doubts whether ἐξηγουμένων is to be taken as neuter (content or result of exegesis, so perhaps Coughlin (2024), 113) or masculine (commentators), are removed already a few lines later (p. 10.12 Wenkebach: εἰς τοὺς κακῶς ἐξηγησαμένους).

² Cf. Holmes (2012), 50 n. 7 on unevenly distributed polemics over the Epidemics commentary. The one on *Epid. III* is, according to Holmes, less polemical.

³ Manetti & Roselli (1994), Flemming (2008), Staden (2009), and Mansfeld (1994).

⁴ Manetti & Roselli (1994), 1608, discussion 1607–11.

⁵ How do we recognize a digression? In *Hipp. Progn.* p. 205.1 ff. Heeg., for example, Galen says, after a long passage on how Herophilus and his followers distinguished *prognōsis* from *prorrhēsis* "perhaps I was wrong to begin by mentioning it is better to indicate the truth as quickly as possible". Quite clearly, it seems, this was a digression.

⁶ I 5, pp. 27 f. W.; I 18, pp. 46–48 W.; II 5, pp. 81–83; II 8–9, pp. 86–95 W. See Flemming (2008), 338 with n. 60. At the end there's a text on 'what is written at the end of this book' (p. 158.5–160 ff. W.).

What we read as a subtitle in Wenkebach's edition (Περὶ τῶν μοχθηρῶς ἐξηγουμένων) may or may not be a Galenic intervention indicating a separate unit (it is missing in a group of manuscripts).⁷ However, Galen introduces the topic of bad interpretation (Appendix, #2, p. 10.6 κακῶς ἐξηγοῦνται) and its extensive treatment in the preceding sentence (p. 10.7 f. "... about which I wish to discuss here once"). The text begins with a formal, almost proemial, introduction of the first person (p. 10.10 ἐγὼ μὲν ὥμην ἄμεινον εἶναι ...); it ends with concluding remarks (#3, p. 26.27 ff.: 'I will stop now treating seriously what does not deserve seriousness and no longer discuss bad exegesis on the case of Pythion.').⁸ Therefore, Galen has carefully motivated this excursus, first, as being abstract, that is, as going beyond polemics against certain individuals (unlike, e.g., πρὸς Λύκον); second, he tells us that this sub-treatise will save up time and space, since he will have to discuss erroneous interpretation only once (ἄπαξ, p. 10.7; 17 Wenkebach) and thus help us readers to discern good from bad interpretation in the future. (That is why I hope that we can learn something general about Galen's ideas on commentary-writing from this text.). We can assert that Galen has marked off this text as a self-contained unit of his commentary.

2. What does μοχθηρῶς mean?

How and in what respects, according to Galen, are commentators 'bad'? μοχθηρός exhibits the same span of meanings from quality to morals as does κακός, perhaps with an additional aspect when applied to describe logical argument (it means 'fallacious, erroneous', e.g., in Sextus Empiricus); accordingly, in our text φαῦλος and κακός are used interchangeably and even more frequently than μοχθηρός.

As I said, Galen begins by promising a tool that will help the reader diagnose bad commentaries.⁹ Instead of individual polemics, we thus expect general statements, some abstract overview of the ways in which interpreters can be bad. Accordingly, Galen begins in a way that leads us to expect him to give a list of ways in which commentators can go wrong. "One *eidos* of them", he says, is ..." – we now hope for a classification of such commentators, but all we get is a long quote from an anonymous text (p. 11.3-14 Wenkebach who thinks of Sabinus or Metrodorus),¹⁰ in which the author explains Pythion's case by quoting a case from the first book of the Epidemics (Melidia, 2.716 Littré) and one of the sixth (wife of Pytheas, 5.356 Littré). Both cases illustrate, to the author, the impact of sexual abstinence on health issues. The anonymous argues with parallels from the corpus, and yet, Galen declares that this exegesis refutes itself (p. 11.14 'the exegete throws down himself'), because the phrase in question serves mainly as identification. Galen goes on to support this view by quoting ten cases from the first and third Epidemics in which the identification does obviously not contain any hint at any medical etiology. At the end of the argument, Galen gives us a neat summary: Since many patients are identified this way, one would need to assume that either all such identifications carry an etiological meaning or none (p. 12.13 f. Wenkebach). Galen thus pits a notion of coherence against the one of the author whom he criticizes, but who had argued

⁷ It is, however, part of the text in a fifth-century papyrus from Oxyrrhynchus (thanks to David Leith for this information).

⁸ And a short addition (p. 26.31–33 Wenkebach) announcing the discussion of 'characters' which runs through much of this commentary. On the *kharaktēres* and Mnemon as anti-exegete, see Roby (2023), 176.

⁹ Reminds us of Plato, Phaedr. 275 D 5–E 5.

¹⁰ Verbatim, but anonymous quotation is, at first sight, a strange and paradoxical way of authority-making through reference – unless we understand withholding the name as part, index or sanction of criticism.

with coherence, too, at least, with parallel cases. Oddly, however, Galen does not try to arrive at a generalized argument. The whole discussion, thus, remains somewhat fuzzy.

While we are waiting for the second *eidos* of bad commentators, Galen gives us instead an anecdote on bad exegesis (p. 12.15–23 W.), which he has witnessed in his student years in Alexandria. In a didactic performance (a group of *mathētai* is mentioned) an, again, anonymous exegete comments upon a case history that reports the illness and death of a Silenos (Epid. I, p. 203.11–204.19 Kühlewein). The exegete quotes Hippocrates as saying that in the first night, the patient did not sleep and quotes λόγοι πολλοί, γέλως, ᾠδή ('much talking, laughter, singing'),¹¹ which he then comments upon with the clever bon mot: '(No wonder,) since he was (a) Silen.' Galen reports the students to have jumped up and roared in amazement and admiration for the exegete's cleverness. Galen, however, presents this event as a glaring instance of 'bad exegesis'. Unfortunately, he leaves us guessing about the exact reasons of why. Obviously, the exegete's strategy is a more extreme form of the mistake Galen had criticized before, namely attributing etiological content to the patient's identification. Here, however, the exegete attributes such meaning to the patient's name, which is clearly overdoing the principle of coherence. Besides questions of methodology, for Galen there is an ethical dimension at stake, too. His odd phrase which introduces the anecdote (p. 12.15 f. ἔνιοι ... κατεγνώκασιν εἰς τοσοῦτον τῶν ἀκροατῶν 'some have had such a low esteem for their audiences') apparently means that the exegete in question has preferred a cheap joke to a more serious way of looking at the text, that is, that he catered to the taste of his audience. At the end of the anecdote, Galen criticizes the students' reaction, too (ἀναπηδήσαντες ἐκεκράγεσαν ὑπερθानυμάζοντες — ὑπερ- containing the criticism), probably not only as hermeneutically misguided, but also as being too emotional: Galen describes his fellow students falling prey to the cheap thrills of their teacher's exegetical rhetoric.

While we are still trying to make sense of this anecdote, Galen has already moved on: another group of *exēgētēs*, or perhaps a sub-group of the former, (ἔνιοι δε, p. 12.23 W.) is prone to *periergia* ('excessive pedantry', even 'over-interpretation') and wastes their efforts on minute textual problems (πλαταμῶνος vs. πλατανῶνος, p. 12.26 W.; θέατρον vs. θέρετρον p. 13.2 W.), that have nothing to do with medical questions and merely waste time. In a way, we arrive at the conclusion (but Galen himself does not tell us) that all these *exēgētēs* constitute one *eidos*, because they all attribute medical meaning to bits and pieces of casual information about patients that was not supposed to carry any such medical meaning, thus constituting the fault of *periergia* leading to 'bad' exegesis. Galen could maintain (#4) that

- (1) it constitutes bad exegesis to attribute medical meaning to details that are not meant to have such meaning, and
- (2) that intra-Hippocratic comparison is the method and intra-Hippocratic coherence the principle to decide such questions.¹²

We are still on the look-out for the second *eidos* of bad commentators, but Galen keeps us waiting. Meanwhile, he launches into a quick polemic against people who admire the Prorrhetic and its *exēgētēs*, despite his own commentaries that have demonstrated the errors of that work. Four times Galen uses ἐδείχθη (p. 13.7, 11, 13, and 15 W.), mostly in the beginning of sentences, to underline the factual 'badness' (μοχθηρία) of these exegeses. Perhaps, Galen criticizes the Prorrhetic and its *exēgētēs* in such a harsh way, because Quintus's group took it

¹¹ Not in Kühlewein's text; just in mss. HL according to Wenkebach in app. ad loc.

¹² See Coughlin (2024), 108 f.

to be genuine.¹³ If Galen was aiming at a certain group, Quintus and his people, this would certainly constitute a second *eidos* of bad commentators; curiously, however, Galen does nothing to further qualify this group with respect to the first. And the transition from the preceding anecdote might be the notion of ‘misplaced admiration’: as the exegete performing in Alexandria was wrongly admired by his students, so do ‘many’ admire the Prorrhetic (p. 13.7 W.), but wrongly. Thus, their admiration was mis-placed.

- (3) It is bad to judge spurious works as genuine, especially when I have proved them to be inadequate.

The bad *exēgētēs* had, so far, remained anonymous. In the next paragraph, however, Galen zeroes in on Lycus who apparently has quoted three *rhēseis* (aphorisms?) from the Prorrhetic in his commentary on Epidemics III. The preceding verdict on readers of the Prorrhetic has certainly prepared the discussion of Lycus, and perhaps Lycus has already been implied as a member of the above-mentioned πολλοί. Again, Galen illustrates ‘bad exegesis’ strictly with respect to Pythion’s case: Lycus quotes these *rhēseis*, because he sees some explanative connection to the symptoms of Pythion. Apparently, already Quintus had done the same (p. 14.13 f.). Again, they explain one Hippocratic text with another one. Galen objects that Lycus has overlooked important differences. Thus, Lycus has failed to solve the problem, and he has not really looked into the different kinds of *tromoi*. It is remarkable that the normative background that carries Galen’s criticism, remains implicit, so far.

This changes, however, when Galen criticizes Lycus for not ever having mentioned the four-humor system in his exegesis and insists that without paying attention to the four elements, Hippocratic exegesis is impossible. Such was the method, Galen says, even of the empiricists before Lycus and Quintus who thus would deliver as dramatic actors do through a mask (p. 17.2 f. W. – the metaphor is not entirely clear).¹⁴ I wonder whether the comparison of *exēgētēs* with dramatic actors has implications for the performative context (see above: in the Alexandrian anecdote discussed above the students in Alexandria behave as a theatrical audience). In any case, Lycus and Quintus are shown not only to go wrong methodically but also to break with their own school’s traditions. Therefore, this kind of

- (4) badness means not to use the four-humor system when explaining Hippocrates.

Put in a more abstract way we could say that Galen demands that

- (4a) exegesis must proceed from the classical author’s own assumptions.

After some further jibes at Lycus, Galen concludes with a positive and normative view on exegesis: It has to pursue two major aims (σκοποί), the opinion (γνώμη) of the author interpreted (Galen calls him συγγραφεύς) and the truth.

¹³ Roselli (2015), 544-547; Mansfeld (1994), 121. On criticism of Quintus on Epid. see Eijk (2012), 37 f., esp. 47: “[...] Galen uses the writing of the commentary on the Epidemics as an opportunity to criticise the Empiricist appropriation of the Hippocratic text as a statement of their methodological principles”.

¹⁴ I take Galen to say that the empiricists kept their own, empirical ‘voice’, that is, their theories, through the mask of Hippocratic four-humor theory. Possibly, the opposite interpretation would work, too: just as dramatic actors keep to the authorial voice despite their mask, empiricist *exēgētēs* kept the original four-humor theory despite their empiricist reading.

- (5) Exegesis has two aims: the author's γνώμη and the truth.

(I wonder how this systematization of what a commentary should do, fits in with philosophical commentary).¹⁵ Whoever realizes only one major aim, fails in fifty percent of his task. Some, however, are failing on both accounts; certainly Lycus is among them.

After Lycus and, probably, Quintus, the next step leads us to Sabinus and his disciple Metrodorus. The transition is marked out with οἱ τοίνυν (p. 17.22 W.), as if we would be waiting for them to be mentioned. Galen does not seem to follow any taxonomy, but simply presents groups of competing commentators who all turn out to be 'bad'. They bring Aph. VI 39 (on spasmos) to bear on the Pythion passage and thus fail to deal adequately with Pythion's tromos. Galen has written himself about tromos as observed with weight-lifters or in a state of psychic distress (ref. VII 586 Kühn); he proceeds by giving us an excerpt of his Περὶ τρόμου that contains a systematic distinction of the several phenomena concerned with shivering and twitching.

It seems that Galen has now covered all groups and individuals he wanted to, because now finally he turns to positively normative considerations: The physician-exegete has to

- (6) elucidate Hippocratic books ἰδίᾳ (see below) and should only sum up demonstrations.

Except for himself, the *exēgētēs* of Hippocratic writings had not done that, Galen says. Therefore they are all bad. It is not the aim of exegetic texts to find or present facts (p. 22.13 W.), but to determine the classic's *doxa* and its status.

- (7) The *doxa* of the author is the exegesis's aim; then, whether it is correct.

It is remarkable that by using παλαιός (l. 14) or σύγγραμμα (l. 16), Galen seems to aim beyond Hippocratic philology at a general norm for commentaries, not just for medical ones, but at least philosophical ones, too. Galen demands that the exegete only determine the correctness of the *doxai*, but not the reasons for that; hence he thinks only *sumperasmata* appropriate for commentary and apodeixeis for full-blown *pragmateiai*.¹⁶ It seems that a serious commentator must provide those *pragmateiai* brimming with proofs, since

- (8) He who can't bring proof, steals away the author's *doxa* from the audience.

Surprisingly, then, Galen's commentaries are complements of his *pragmateiai* (or the other way round). Again, a 'bad' commentator, in this logic, would be the one who does not write *pragmateiai* to present proofs in and either leaves them out or overburdens his commentary with them. His discussion of Pythion's tromos and his separate coverage of *tromos* and similar phenomena serves as an example (p. 23.25-28 W.). Sabinus and his circle (p. 23.28 W.) violate these principles on several accounts.

After these general remarks, there follow two such *sumperasmata*, the first (p. 24.2 ff. W.) refuting that the *tromos* of Pythion's hands has anything to do with his stomach, since there isn't any *koinōnia* between stomach and hands, and the second (p. 24.25 ff.) that his hands

¹⁵ At least, the term σκοπός is omnipresent in philosophical commentary; see Mansfeld (1994), index s.v.

¹⁶ Coughlin (2024), 110 on Galen's two aspects of writing commentaries; p. 112 f. on demonstration. However, the fact that he explains this twofold method in so many writings hints at its being somehow un-canonic or not-yet-established.

are trembling due to some pressure upon his brain. After sufficient discussion there follows a brief conclusion (see #3), and Galen is off to the next case history.

I had to paraphrase this text in such detail in order to make my point clear: the text's structure is neither a string of mere associations the reader cannot really follow, nor does it proceed according to any discernible theoretical principle. It is certainly not systematic in the usual dihaeretic way adopted by Galen elsewhere and which is the one we expect when Galen begins with one *eidos*. But do we know now who is a bad commentator? Well, yes and no. First, we have the list (Appendix, #4), but most certainly bad commentators are Lycus, Quintus, Sabinus and Metrodorus. While Galen presents the names merely as examples, the kind of presentation rather suggests that targeting the individuals is at least as important as are the general judgments. Lycus, Quintus and Sabinus are standard targets in Galen's works elsewhere; however, only here we find an attempt at coming up with a poetics of commentary, that is a general set of rules, that goes beyond personal attack. Second, the discourse is restricted to Epidemics and to commentaries on Hippocrates. When Galen talks about 'bad commentators' in the broadest sense (note the intentionally broad range of the terms used for 'bad': *μοχθηρῶς*, *κακῶς* and *φᾰῦλος*)¹⁷ and, at least occasionally, has in view commentary-writing per se, he probably wants to say that commenting upon Hippocrates is the paradigmatic situation for any commentator writing about a classic. This is bold, but he has a point.

We can, at least, say that Galen has not chosen to mark out his text as decidedly systematic;¹⁸ that is, he has neglected or even downplayed its systematicity. We may conclude that here the text from Galen's perspective does not merit such systematicity. In turn, this speaks in favor of an improvised text, that is, not an essay. With that paradoxical result, I'll have to leave it at that.

Before I turn to possible parallels, I'd like to look more closely at one feature which I found remarkable: that is the way in which Galen handles names and withholds naming.

3. Names and Anonymity

We know of the lively discussions among Hippocratic commentators of that time mainly from Galen. I think it is fair to assume that Galen, through the bulk of his oeuvre and by his stratagems of corpus-building,¹⁹ intended to control medical discourse of that kind. Nonetheless, in his constant attempts to position himself vis-à-vis his competitors, he often decided to attribute certain positions to certain names and groups, and sometimes he did not. Here, among commentators, Quintus and Lycus, Sabinus and Metrodorus show up repeatedly as named examples of 'bad' commentators, as elsewhere in Galen. We have, however, two conspicuous acts of withholding names, too: At the beginning of his exposition, Galen exemplifies the worst kind of bad commentators with a verbatim quotation of an unnamed commentator (p. 11.3-14 W., who thinks of Sabinus or potius Metrodorus). Similarly, the most lively scene of the whole text, the one about the exegetic mistreatment of Silenus at Alexandria, features an anonymous protagonist (p. 12.16-23 W.). We must conclude that he withholds these two names on purpose. Since in both cases he could easily have instrumentalized the quotation and the anecdote against this person or these people, as he does later so often with Lycus and others, his motives in keeping them anonymous are difficult to guess. To me it seems almost

¹⁷ Similarly broad is the notion of 'good commentators': *ἀγαθῶν ἔργων*, p. 206.6 f. Heeg.

¹⁸ A term meaning the rhetorical-epistemic function of a systematically arranged text: Asper 2016.

¹⁹ E.g., internal cross-references and auto-bibliographic texts

as if he tries to expel these fellow Hippocratists from the community of *exēgētēs*, a notion, which occasionally plays a certain role in his exposition, for example in his commentary on Aph. I.²⁰ A contemporary reader must have asked himself who these *exēgētēs* actually were; and his only conclusion could have been that Galen did not want him to know. For the medical tradition, Galen's silence could have easily meant that the memory of the person in question would disappear in due course. This is a substantial point: Were it not for Galen, we would not know of Metrodorus, for example, at all and of Quintus only as author of a very short recipe preserved in Oribasius, mentioned once.²¹ On the other hand, the names come with distinctly polemical concepts, for example Lycus, the bastard Hippocratean, or Sabinus and Metrodorus who thought they were more accurate than anybody else (p. 17 22-25).²² So, perhaps, as a self-styled evaluator, Galen wields a double-edged sword: he dispels into anonymity or singles out for individualized attack whom he sees fit. Apparently, this happens more often and more intensely the closer these individuals are to him in time and even place (Lycus had been active in Rome, too).²³ Close as they are, Galen needs to forcefully distance them from his own achievement. Names, naming and withholding them, are a certain part of the poetics of commentaries²⁴ and even of Galen's "scholarly game" over-all, as Peter Singer has aptly called the sum of his practices.²⁵

It is odd that, besides the Alexandrian anecdote around Silenus, the only other passage of this text that has enjoyed some attention is the theatrical metaphor that Galen applies to Quintus and Lycus and that plays upon the topic of giving up and preserving one's identities as commentator (#5, Peter and Sean have already touched upon it). Galen, I take him to say, advises commentators to explain medical texts by pushing aside their own scientific assumptions and, just as an actor recites with and through a mask, write about, e.g., Hippocrates as if they were Hippocrateans, that is, proceeding from Hippocratic ground and explaining Hippocrates mainly from Hippocrates.²⁶ We understand that the theater is a place of intense competition,²⁷ and that Galen uses the image of mask-wearing as a middle ground between anonymity and having a name – the image shows clearly how alert Galen was when the staging of personae and personal authority was concerned.

But now back to the status of our text: What do we as classicists usually do when we cannot figure out something? We search for parallels. In this case, that is, a polemical essay-like text proclaiming to complement commentary, there are not too many that come to mind. Let me briefly discuss three possible ones.

²⁰ On which see my stance-taking paper (Oct. 2025, <https://zenodo.org/records/18595973>).

²¹ Syn. III 192, CMG VI 3, 115 ed. Raeder. For now, I have to base my assessment on Keyser & Georgia L. Irby-Massie (2008), s.v.

²² See Coughlin (2024), 116; 117 (mention of closeness and anonymity); 127. See Galen, *On my own books* 3.6 (quoted in Coughlin (2024), p. 124 from P. Singer's translation) who presents a good view of Hippocratists (Pelops/Numisianus, Sabinus Rufus, Quintus, Lycus).

²³ I can only quote Boudon-Millot (2024), 25 f. who assumes that some of the names mentioned have perhaps been Galen's teachers.

²⁴ See my 2019.

²⁵ Singer (1996), 75 n. 3.

²⁶ See Coughlin (2024), 111 f., 118 on the metaphor; and Staden (2009), 134 f.

²⁷ Cf., e.g., MM I 2, p. 13 K. 'In what kind of theater would you defeat Hippocrates?'

4. Looking for Possible Parallels

(a) Let's first look at Galen himself: To a certain extent, our text is doxographic, because it concerns a closed group of commentators making mistakes in exegetical method. When we compare doxographic passages in Galen which are at the same time polemical — without being able to present any precise data, I would guess that there are many — perhaps we find a suitable place for our text. For example, when at the beginning of his *Methodus medendi* Galen discusses the definitions of *nosos* and *hugieia*, resp. (MM I 5, 10.53 f. Kühn) he quickly launches first into a criticism of his favorite target Thessalos, accompanied by two series of Methodists, first seven, then another four names, containing Soranus and ending with his contemporary Julian, almost presenting a prosopography of this group. Galen maintains that although Julian has been writing introductions for twenty years now (p. 53.12 ff.), he never bothered to define *nosos*. The same holds for Menemachus, Galen says. When Galen once asked him directly about it, Menemachus would simply shower him with meaningless chatter, leaving to Galen to point out how Menemachus differed from Olympicus, an older Methodist, implying that the school was internally divided. Remarkable here is the chronological plot that arranges the doxographical business on a timeline, ending in Galen's present.

This short passage shows, by contrast, in what respect our text is different: Both share the polemical and, partly, even the anecdotic register. In both cases, Galen's contemporaries take more heat than their predecessors. But while the doxographic passage is short, thematically rooted and therefore provides a contrast to Galen's specific project in that context, ours has a more ambitious character. Whatever we think of its structure, we can be sure that it is not chronological. The main difference between the two texts is functional, I think: Our essay is meant to take away bulk from the main commentary by outsourcing discussion, whereas the passage in MM serves Galen to position himself in a specific medical-theoretical question. I'll have to leave it at that.

(b) Now, how about contemporaries who are not medical writers? Since it is by now common to see Galen as part of what we call the Second Sophistic,²⁸ we should perhaps search among these rhetoricians. For example, Aelius Aristides, the master of Atticist style and great admirer of Asclepius, whom Galen knew and met with at least once,²⁹ has authored three polemical texts arguing against Plato's negative judgment of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*.

These texts were not to be delivered orally, and accordingly a recent editor has labeled them 'essays'.³⁰ The sheer bulk of them (they would sum up to about 210 pages in CMG format) prevents me from going into any detail here. However, we can discern some parallels, for example long verbatim quotations which are then discussed critically.³¹ In the first of Aristides' text (or. 2) this sometimes makes it come close to commentary, but a paradoxical one which does not agree with the text commented upon. Proof plays an important role in Aristides, too, e.g., that oratory is a *tekhnē* (135 ff.), that it is not flattery (178 ff., p. 452 Trapp), and that it is of central importance to society (204 ff, p. 468 ff. Tr.). While Aristides' and Galen's texts share the polemical register, the differences between them are remarkable (because they tell us something about Galen's text): Aristides calls attention to the careful structure of his text: there are many announcements of what's coming (e.g., 299, p. 533 Tr.), there are recaps (e.g., 244, p. 492 Tr.); attack and defense are marked as such (261 ff., p. 506 ff. Tr.), and the end,

²⁸ Since Bowersock (1969); Kollesch (1981).

²⁹ *In Tim.* (CMG Suppl. I, ed. Schröder, Berlin 1934, p. 33, 83).

³⁰ Aristides (2017), p. 326.

³¹ E.g., from *Gorgias* 22 (pp. 348-356 Trapp); *Phdr.* 52, .374 Tr., and the Seventh letter (285, pp. 522 ff. Tr.).

in the form of a peroration, is clearly announced (319, p. 550; 462, p. 656 Tr.).

Perhaps closer to Galen's text is or. 4 which takes the form of a letter addressing a Platonist, perhaps Capito from Pergamum,³² combining defense against the charge of having attacked Plato too aggressively and counter-attack. The epistolary character shows in its restricted length, the simple form and a relatively informal style. Again, the text is, just as Galen's, rich in textual references to texts authored by Aristides himself (from or. 2, 12; p. 579 Tr.; 18 ff., p. 585 ff. Tr.), Plato, and others.

Two features, however, emphasize the clear difference of Aristides' texts to Galen's: First, the deep respect for his main target Plato (e.g., 73, p. 386 Tr. *sungnōmē*). Even the addressee of the polemical letter Aristides never treats in a way similar to how Galen writes about Lycus or Sabinus. For Aristides, *philoneikia* is something to avoid (cf. 13, p. 344 Tr.). Supposedly, Aristides's rhetoric dwells in high Atticist ideas of how such attacks should be phrased. Second, Aristides's line of thought is clear. This is because he follows rhetorical concepts of which we get an impression when we look at a rhetorician of the 5th cent. AD, Nicolaus of Myra (not identical with the Christian saint, I think), in whose *Progymnasmata* we read detailed advice on *antirrhēsis* and *anaskeuē* (he even quotes Aristides).³³ For Nicolaus, *taxis* and rhetorical emphasis on it is extremely important – we have seen that in our Galenic text, *taxis* is precisely what puzzles us. Similarly, Nicolaus recommends criticism focusing on self-contradiction, which accordingly plays a large role in Aristides, but not really in Galen.

I think, however, that in this case it is safe to say that Galen does not follow these or similar rhetorical concepts. The parallel between Aristides and Galen is not one of Atticist rhetoric, but rather one of stance: Both Aristides and Galen seem to be engaged in gate-keeping activities that are staged for readers: Aristides presents himself as a true defender of the great orators of the past, and perhaps somehow claims to be of their class, and Galen presents himself as the only 'good' commentator of Hippocrates, which also boils down to some kind of closeness between himself and Hippocrates.

(c) The last corpus I will compare *On Bad Commentators* with, but again in a very cursory mode, is the vast collection *Πρὸς τοὺς μαθηματικούς*, in eleven books, of Sextus Empiricus, a second-century AD skeptic, who probably wrote at Rome and who was about one generation younger than Galen. (He was probably a medical writer and practitioner, too, and of the empirical school.)³⁴ These books are actually an encyclopedia of skeptical attack of established positions that claim secure knowledge. They target grammarians, mathematicians, astrologers, logicians, philosophers more generally, and physicists, quoting a vast array of authors and texts.

The work is carefully structured, following 'fields' (arithmeticians, musicologists, physicists, etc.)³⁵ and then major topics (e.g. *Math. VIII = Against the Logicians II 2* 'let us first look into whether there is anything true'), major positions, then major positions of individual authors, then arguments and counter-arguments. The many doxographic passages and even the many refutations are completely free from polemics or sarcasm: Sextus names them, sometimes with an identifier, briefly sketches out their position, and then refutes them, usually

³² Behr (1968), 59 n. 60.

³³ Ch. 6, *Rhet. Gr. Vol. 11* ed. Felten, p. 29.7 ff.

³⁴ See Empiricus (2012), ix (first-person references to himself as physician: *Pyrrh. Hypot. II* 238; *Math. I* 260, XI 47).

³⁵ Although the collection has probably been put together from two different works, but both had similar objectives.

using the same words.³⁶

In his dismantling of their positions, Sextus refrains from overly polemical style, as far as I can see. Instead, he always underlines the logical structure of his argument. The text is full of clearly marked conclusions, for example in Math. VII (Log. I) 439 (#6):

πλὴν τό γε κεφάλαιον, εἰ μήτε πᾶσαι αἱ φαντασίαι εἰσὶ πισταὶ μήτε πᾶσαι ἄπιστοι, μήτε τινὲς μὲν πισταὶ τινὲς δὲ ἄπιστοι, οὐκ ἂν εἴη κριτήριον τῆς ἀληθείας ἡ φαντασία. ὥ ἀκόλουθον τὸ μηδὲν εἶναι κριτήριον ... διὰ τὸ μήτε τὸ ὑφ' οὗ μήτε τὸ δι' οὗ μήτε τὸ καθ' ὃ βεβαίαν ἔχειν τὴν γνώσιν.

But the main point: if it is not the case either that all appearances are trustworthy, or that they are all untrustworthy, or that some are trustworthy and some untrustworthy, then appearance is probably not the criterion of the truth. From which it follows that nothing is the criterion ... (transl. Bett, with changes).

When it comes to engaging with stances that are attributed to individuals, Sextus exhibits a certain cool, that is: impersonal, fairness towards the philosophers whose doxai he then proves wrong. See, for example, the succinct way in which he refutes a certain position of Demetrius the Laconian, an Epicurean, on the co-existence of generic and specific demonstration (Math. VIII = Log. II 349, #7):

τοῦτο δὲ δοκεῖ μὲν εἶναι πιθανόν, ἔστι δ' ἀδύνατον.

This, however, seems to be persuasive, but is impossible.

When in the preceding paragraph (348) Sextus introduces this Demetrius as 'among those prominent in the Epicurean sect' (τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἐπικούρειον αἵρεσιν ἐπιφανῶν) there is no trace of irony or polemics. A little later, Sextus introduces Stoics as being fond of vivid metaphors (the gym teacher or drill sergeant teaching a boy boxing used as analogon to how demonstration creates imprints in our mind, 409 f.). All Sextus says is the following (#8, 410):

οἱ δὲ τοῦτο λέγοντες πιθανῶ μὲν χρῶνται παραδείγματι, οὐ συνάγουσι δὲ τὸ προκείμενον.

Those who say this do use a persuasive example, but they do not prove their claim.

Even when Sextus paraphrases arguments against his own positions, he uses the same register he uses for his own refutation of the positions of others.

In sum, Sextus' text follows a strictly impersonal style of pure argument. That way, proofs and refutations have even more impact, almost as in Euclid or in some passages of MXG. I don't recall having seen any single first-person singular form in Sextus. It's difficult to imagine a greater contrast with Galen's style of personal, highly inventive, and ever-varying polemical compositions.

³⁶ Math. IX (= Phys. I) 337–347, on Aenesidemus and Heraclitus on the void.

5. Conclusion

I have begun with the question of what kind of text *On Bad Commentators* could possibly be. Is it a digression, an excursus, a systematic inquiry into what makes bad commentators, a theatrically staged fit of rage-in-writing, just polemical commentary, or what? The parallels I have just looked into can show that it is specific to commentary. Galen himself says that it is meant to be a tool for further reading, telling us whom to avoid among commentators. Therefore, I think it is a kind of paratextual discourse, outsourcing certain functions, meaning to direct and enhance our reading, a kind of dual-track discussion, not entirely unlike a gargantuan footnote in modern scholarly works (although I don't know anything of comparable dimensions).³⁷ Viewed from a diachronic perspective, this is a typical phenomenon of differentiation:³⁸ Where textual communication becomes unmanageable because its complexities grow too much, secondary genres emerge that in turn become stable themselves. Therefore, this text is a sign for a certain tendency in the development of medical theory, moving towards disciplinary autonomy. A synchronic assessment, however, would tell us something about Galen's desire to enrich explanation to the point of risking manageability.³⁹ However—and that's the fun part—it does not work: Proceeding just from one case in the rich tradition of Hippocratic commentary does not give us an apt tool to diagnose bad commentary once and for all. Neither can we discern bad commentators with these pages in hand beyond the list of names Galen simply presses upon us,⁴⁰ nor does Galen himself stick to the principle of outsourcing: he comes back to these bad commentators more than once (e.g. p. 48, 59, 154 W.) and thus precisely does what his text attempts to prevent.

Appendix

#1 Galen, Hipp. Epid. III, I 4, p. 10.20–23 W. ὅπως οὖν προειδότες οἱ τοῖς ἡμετέροις ὑπομνήμασιν ἐντυγχάνοντες, ὅποιοι γοῦν τινες οἱ τρόποι τῶν μοχθηρῶν ἐξηγήσεων εἰσιν, γνωρίζειν αὐτοὺς δύνωνται, μακρότερον ἐνταῦθα περὶ πασῶν αὐτῶν ἔγνω γράψαι. Καί μοι μηδεὶς ἀχθεσθῇ τῷ μήκει τοῦ λόγου, μέλλων ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἀεὶ βοηθὸν εἰς τὴν τῶν φαύλων ἐξηγήσεων διάγνωσιν.

With the intention that those who happen upon our writings may know in advance, which are the ways of the bad exegeses and can discern them, I decided to write here about all of them a little longer. And no one should protest against the length of my discussion, because he can always use it as a helpful tool in order to diagnose these bad commentaries.

#2 *ibid.* p. 10.5–12 W. ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν τοιαῦτα [...] ἢ παρατρέχουσιν ἢ κακῶς ἐξηγοῦνται πολλοὶ τῶν ἐξηγητῶν, χρονίζουσι δ' οὐκ ἀναγκαίως, ὑπὲρ ὧν ἅπαξ ἐνταῦθα διαλεχθῆναι βούλομαι.

³⁷ If I remember correctly, Grafton (1999) does not discuss dimensions.

³⁸ See my attempt in 2007 of understanding the development of knowledge literature as a 'story of differentiation'. Cf. Roby (2023), 183 on my concept of "enriched explanation" (Asper (2013), 46 f.).

³⁹ This is, I take it, the point of his repeatedly mentioning bulk: e.g., p. 10.24; 12.11 f. W.

⁴⁰ There is a certain design at play here: If, as Manetti & Roselli (1994), 1611 believe, Galen's commentary builds upon Sabinus's step by step and if *On Bad Commentators* is directed mainly against Sabinus, this is another case of Galen's anxiety of influence (see my Asper (2007), 356 ff.).

ΠΕΡΙ ΤΩΝ ΜΟΧΘΗΡΩΣ ΕΞΗΓΟΥΜΕΝΩΝ

Ἐγὼ μὲν ὥμην ἄμεινον εἶναι τὰ πολλὰ χρόνῳ ζητηθέντα μοι καὶ μετὰ κρίσεως ἀσφαλοῦς εὐρεθέντα μόνᾳ γράφειν, ἄνευ τῶν εἰς τοὺς κακῶς ἐξηγησαμένους ἐλέγχων.

Many of the commentators, however, either pass over such things or interpret them badly and spend time upon it without need, which I would like to discuss here once.

On the Bad Commentators

I always believed it to be better to write down only those things that I had found out in a long time and with unerring judgment, without refutations of those who do commentary badly.

#3 *ibid.*, p. 26.26–31 W. ἀλλ’ ὅπερ ἔφην ἀρτίως, ἐλέγχειν σπουδῇ τὰ μὴ σπουδῆς ἄξια τῶν ἀτόπων ἐστίν. καὶ τοίνυν ἤδη παυσάμενος τῶν εἰς Πυθίωνα κακῶς εἰρημένων τοῖς ἐξηγηταῖς ἐπὶ τὸν ἐξῆς ἄρρωστον, μεταβάς κατὰ τὸ συνηθέστερον ἑμαυτῷ τὰς ἐξηγήσεις ποιήσομαι, μὴ πάνυ φροντίζων ὧν ἔνιοι γεγράφασιν οὐκ ὀρθῶς, εἰ μὴ μεγάλη τις ἀνάγκη γένοιτο.

But (let me repeat) what I have said above: to refute seriously what is not worth any seriousness, is absurd. And therefore, I now stop (discussing) what has been said badly about Pythion by the commentators and proceed to the next patient, Hermocrates. I will make my exegeses following my typical format, and will not at all pay attention to what some have written incorrectly, unless I really have to.

#4 On bad (and good) commentary

- (1) it constitutes bad exegesis to attribute medical meaning to details that are not meant to have such meaning, and
- (2) that intra-Hippocratic comparison is the method and intra-Hippocratic coherence the principle to decide such questions.
- (3) It is bad to judge spurious works as genuine, especially when I have proved them to be inadequate.
- (4) Badness means not to use the four-humor system when explaining Hippocrates. (4a) Exegesis must proceed from the classical author’s own assumptions.
- (5) Exegesis has two aims: the author’s γνώμη and the truth.
- (6) Exegesis elucidate Hippocratic books ἰδίᾳ and gives demonstrations.
- (7) The doxa of the author is the exegesis’s aim; then, whether it is correct.
- (8) He who cannot bring proof steals away the author’s doxa from the audience.

#5 Galen, Hipp. Epid. III, I 4, p. 17.3–16 W. ὥσπερ γὰρ Ἐρασίστρατον ἐξηγούμενός τις ὀρθῶς ἂν ἀπέχοιτο τοῦ περὶ χυμῶν λέγειν ἢ κράσεων, οὕτως ὁ λέγειν ἐπιχειρῶν ὁτιοῦν εἰς Ἱπποκράτειον σύγγραμμα τὴν ἐκείνου γνώμην ὀρθῶς ἂν ποιοῖτο σκοπὸν τῆς ἐξηγήσεως. ἴσως οὖν ἄμεινόν ἐστι Λύκῳ μὲν συγγινώσκειν ὡς νόθῳ τῆς Ἱπποκράτους αἰρέσεως ἐν οἷς ἂν ἀμαρτάνων φαίνηται, πλὴν εἴ τις αὐτῷ τοῦτο μέμφοιτο τὸ γράφειν ἐξηγήσεις μὴ δυνάμενον ὑποκρίνασθαι τὸ δρᾶμα. παραπλήσιον γὰρ τοῦτο τῷ κωμῳδίᾳ ἢ τραγῳδίᾳ ἐπιχειρεῖν ὑποκρίνεσθαι μὴ δυνάμενον.

For as someone who explains Erasistratus, should restrain himself from talking about humors and mixtures, he who tries to say anything on a Hippocratic treatise, would do right to make his (i.e., Hippocrates’) intention the aim of his commentary. Perhaps it is, then, better to forgive Lycus as a bastard Hippocratean in those points where he goes wrong, with the exception that

one could criticize him for writing commentary without being able to recite drama. Because this is similar to reciting comedy or tragedy without being able to.

#6 Sextus Empiricus, Math. VII (Log. I) 439: πλὴν τό γε κεφάλαιον, εἰ μήτε πᾶσαι αἱ φαντασίαι εἰσὶ πισταὶ μήτε πᾶσαι ἄπιστοι, μήτε τινὲς μὲν πισταὶ τινὲς δὲ ἄπιστοι, οὐκ ἂν εἴη κριτήριον τῆς ἀληθείας ἢ φαντασία. ὧς ἀκόλουθον τὸ μηδὲν εἶναι κριτήριον ... διὰ τὸ μήτε τὸ ὑφ' οὗ μήτε τὸ δι' οὗ μήτε τὸ καθ' ὃ βεβαίαν ἔχειν τὴν γνώσιν.

But the main point: if it is not the case either that all appearances are trustworthy, or that they are all untrustworthy, or that some are trustworthy and some untrustworthy, then appearance is probably not the criterion of the truth. From which it follows that nothing is the criterion ... (transl. Bett, with changes).

#7 id., Math. VIII (Log. II) 349: τοῦτο δὲ δοκεῖ μὲν εἶναι πιθανόν, ἔστι δ' ἀδύνατον.

This, however, seems to be persuasive, but is impossible.

#8 id., Math. VIII (Log. II) 410: οἱ δὲ τοῦτο λέγοντες πιθανῶ μὲν χρώνται παραδείγματι, οὐ συνάγουσι δὲ τὸ προκειμένον.

Those who say this do use a persuasive example, but they do not prove their claim.

References

- Aristides, Aelius (2017): *Orations, Volume i* (Loeb Classical Library 533). (Ed.) Michael Trapp. (Trans.) Michael Trapp Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Asper, Markus (2007): *Griechische Wissenschaftstexte. Formen Funktionen Differenzierungsgeschichten*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Asper, Markus (2013): Explanation Between Nature and Text. *Ancient Greek Commentators on Science. Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part A* 44(1). 43–50.
- Behr, Charles A. (1968): *Aelius Aristides and the sacred tales*. Amsterdam.
- Boudon-Millot, Véronique (2024): Galen: Life and Works. In Peter N. Singer & Ralph M. Rosen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Galen*, 23–42. Oxford.
- Bowersock, Glen W. (1969): *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*. Oxford.
- Coughlin, Sean (2024): Galen's Hippocratism. In Peter N. Singer & Ralph M. Rosen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Galen*, 100–144. Oxford.
- Eijk, Philip v. d. (2012): Exegesis, Explanation and Epistemology in Galen's Commentaries on Epidemics, Books One and Two. In Peter E. Pormann (ed.), *Epidemics in Context. Greek Commentaries on Hippocrates in the Arabic Tradition*, 25–47. Berlin.
- Empiricus, Sextus (2012): *Against the Physicists*. (Ed.) Richard Bett. (Trans.) Richard Bett Cambridge University Press.
- Flemming, Rebecca (2008): Commentary. In Robert J. Hankinson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Galen*, 323–354. Cambridge.
- Grafton, Anthony (1999): *The Footnote: A Curious History*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Holmes, Brooke (2012): Sympathy between Hippocrates and Galen: The Case of Galen's Commentary on Hippocrates' 'Epidemics', Book Two. In Peter E. Pormann (ed.), *Epidemics in Context. Greek Commentaries on Hippocrates in the Arabic Tradition*, 49–70. Berlin.

- Keyser, Paul T. & Georgia L. Irby-Massie (ed.) (2008): *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Natural Scientists. The Greek tradition and Its Many Heirs*. London.
- Kollesch, Jutta (1981): Galen und die Zweite Sophistik. In Vivian Nutton (ed.), *Galen: Problems and Prospects*, 1–11. London.
- Manetti, Daniela & Amneris Roselli (1994): Galeno commentatore di Ippocrate. In Hildegard Temporini & Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt vol. II, 37.2*, 1529–1635, 2071–80. Berlin.
- Mansfeld, Jaap (1994): *Prolegomena. Questions To Be Settled Before the Study of an Author, or a Text*. Leiden.
- Roby, Courtney Ann (2023): *The Mechanical Tradition of Hero of Alexandria. Strategies of Reading from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*. Cambridge.
- Roselli, Amneris (2015): Galeno sull'autenticità del Proretrico I. In Brooke Holmes & Klaus-Dietrich Fischer (eds.), *The Frontiers of Ancient Science*, 533–559. Berlin.
- Singer, Peter N. (1996): Notes on Galen's Hippocrates. In M. Vegetti & S. Gastaldi (eds.), *Studi di storia della medicina antica e medievale in memoria di paola manuli* (Pubblicazioni Della Facoltà Di Lettere e Filosofia Dell'università Di Pavia, Dipartimento Di Scienze Dell'antichità), vol. 79, 66–76. La Nuova Italia.
- Staden, Heinrich von (2009): Staging the Past, Staging Oneself: Galen on Hellenistic Exegetical Traditions. In Christopher Gill et al. (eds.), *Galen and the World of Knowledge*, 132–156. Cambridge.