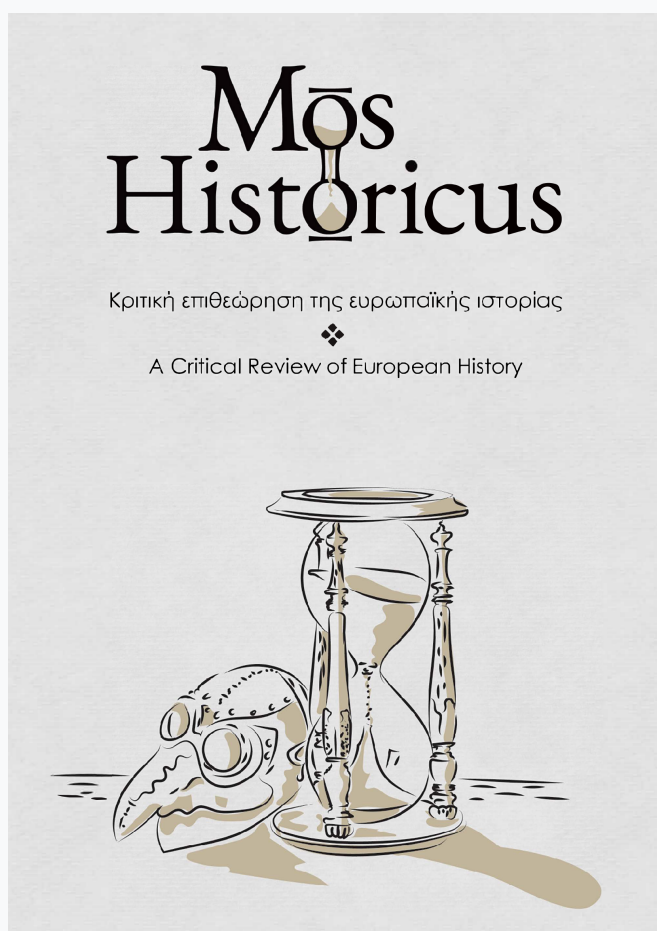


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The outbreak of new diseases in an era of religious and spiritual crisis:

Maria Kavvadia

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The outbreak of new diseases in an era of religious and spiritual crisis: medical humanism and the control of the body and soul as a method of medical treatment

Το ξέσπασμα των νέων ασθενειών σε μια εποχή θρησκευτικής και πνευματικής κρίσης: ιατρικός ουμανισμός και ο έλεγχος του σώματος και της ψυχής ως ιατρική θεραπεία

Dr. Maria Kavvadia*

Δρ. Μαρία Καββαδία

ABSTRACT: The paper examines how the humanist physician and later professor of medicine at the great Universities of Italy, Girolamo Mercuriale of Forlì (1530-1606), addressed the issue of new diseases in medical as well as religious-social terms in his medical book *De arte gymnastica* (Venice, 1569), while he served as the personal physician of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520-1589). Mercuriale's medical gymnastics, as a medical method for the treatment of new diseases, stands out as paradigmatic, on the one hand, of the scientific-medical culture of mid-sixteenth century Rome and, on the other hand, the political-religious strategies of the Catholic Church regarding the control of body culture in the context of the Counter-Reformation.

Keywords: New diseases, French Disease, Rome, Counter-Reformation, body culture, medical gymnastics

* Maria Kavvadia is a PhD holder from the Department of History and Civilisation of the European University Institute. Her research interests are mainly focused on the issues of the history of Science and Medicine. She is an independent researcher and some of her publications are: "Sources and Resources of Court Medicine in Mid-Sixteenth Rome: Erudition as epistemological and ethical claim", in Fabrizio Baldassarri and Fabio Zampieri (eds.), *Scientiae in the History of Medicine*, "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, Rome May 2021; "The moresca dance in Counter-Reformation Rome: Court medicine and the moderation of exceptional bodies", in Maja Bondestam (ed.), *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam November 2020. Maria.Kavvadia@EUI.eu; kavvadim@hotmail.com

Η Μαρία Καββαδία είναι κάτοχος διδακτορικού τίτλου από το τμήμα Ιστορίας και Πολιτισμού του Ευρωπαϊκού Πανεπιστημιακού Ινστιτούτου. Τα ερευνητικά της ενδιαφέροντα επικεντρώνονται στα θέματα της ιστορίας των Επιστημών και της Ιατρικής. Είναι ανεξάρτητη ερευνήτρια με δημοσιεύσεις όπως: «Sources and Resources of Court Medicine in Mid-Sixteenth Rome: Erudition as epistemological and ethical claim» στο Fabrizio Baldassarri και Fabio Zampieri (επιμ.), *Scientiae in the History of Medicine*, «L'Erma» di Bretschneider, Ρώμη Μάιος 2021 «The moresca dance in Counter-Reformation Rome: Court medicine and the moderation of exceptional bodies», στο Maja Bondestam (επιμ.), *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture*, Amsterdam University Press, Άμστερνταμ Νοέμβριος 2020. Maria.Kavvadia@EUI.eu; kavvadim@hotmail.com

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ: Το άρθρο εξετάζει πώς ο ουμανιστής ιατρός και μετέπειτα καθηγητής Ιατρικής στα μεγάλα Πανεπιστήμια της Ιταλίας, Girolamo Mercuriale του Φορλί (1530-1606), προσέγγισε το ζήτημα των νέων ασθενειών με ιατρικούς αλλά και θρησκευτικούς-κοινωνικούς όρους στο ιατρικό του βιβλίο *De arte gymnastica* (Βενετία, 1569), όντας προσωπικός ιατρός του Καρδινάλιου Alessandro Farnese (1520-1589). Η ιατρική γυμναστική του Mercuriale, ως ιατρική μέθοδος αντιμετώπισης των νέων ασθενειών, αναδεικνύεται ως παραδειγματική, αφενός, της επιστημονικής-ιατρικής κουλτούρας της Ρώμης των μέσων του 16^{ου} αι. και, αφετέρου, των πολιτικών-θρησκευτικών στρατηγικών της Καθολικής Εκκλησίας ως προς τον έλεγχο της κουλτούρας του σώματος στο πλαίσιο της Αντιμεταρρύθμισης.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Νέες ασθένειες, Γαλλική νόσος, Ρώμη, Αντιμεταρρύθμιση, σωματική κουλτούρα, ιατρική γυμναστική



Introduction

The outbreak of the French Disease (*morbus gallicus*, or *mal de Naples*, or *gallica lues*, etc.)¹ in the Italian ground in the late fifteenth century, bearing a significant social, political, and religious impact, triggered the issue of the “new diseases” that escalated into one of the most crucial scientific and medical issues of the early modern period. The “rational and learned”² physician trained in the University within the Galenic-Aristotelian scientific and conceptual framework diagnosed and treated diseases according to the principles of the humoral-complexional medical theory. One of the axioms of early modern university medicine was that all diseases were recorded by the ancient medical authorities and could be located in the authoritative medical texts; hence, there could not be new diseases.

Nonetheless, the apparently novel nature of the French Disease (i.e., its symptoms, its intractability, the way and the rate at which it spread as it reached epidemic proportions particularly in the first decades of its outbreak) raised debates in the medical circles that challenged the prevailing Galenic theory of disease and medical

¹ Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Greenwood Press, Westport 1972, p. 219.

² Roger French, *Medicine Before Science: The Rational and Learned Doctor from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 2.

treatment.³ Although the French Disease had features that differed from the diseases recorded in the ancient medical texts, initially there was a strong reluctance on behalf of the University physicians to admit that it was indeed new. Accepting its novelty could seriously undermine Galenic medicine; a disease that was new could not be found in the medical *apparatus*, implying thus the physicians' failure to apply the treatment that the Galenic theory invited.⁴ Consequently, this failure could undermine the physician's professional and social status, which rested on the premise that his medical *apparatus* allowed him to diagnose and cope with all diseases.

However, towards the mid-sixteenth century, the perception of the French Disease as a new disease was changing.⁵ The cumulative experience of the French Disease made the learned physicians more willing to accept that it did not fit the Galenic model of humoral-complexional disease and the Galenic genus-species relation. Physicians started to perceive the French Disease as an entity with a specific external cause, a "seed", or a poison-like virus, that made the disease contagious in a material way. This ontological perception added a new element in the traditional Aristotelian causal system and implied that the disease was a sort of natural species that had a vital cycle of birth, maturity, decline, and death.⁶ The French Disease was thought to have had a vigorous youth and was now growing old; it began to have a history.⁷

The humanist physician Girolamo Mercuriale of Forlì (1530-1606) was one of the Galenist university physicians that suggested that new diseases did exist, advocating the ontological perception of the French Disease in his medical book *De arte gymnastica* (Venice, 1569).⁸ In Book I, Chapter I, *De principiis medicinae* ("The origins of medicine"), Mercuriale marks that there is a "very large number of diseases that the ancients did not know and for which no treatment had been devised";⁹ he gives

³ Ian Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature in the Renaissance: the case of learned medicine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 259.

⁴ Jon Arrizabalaga, John Henderson, and Roger French, *The Great Pox: The French Disease in Renaissance Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1997, p. 263.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁸ *Artis gymnasticae apud antiquos celeberrimae, nostris temporibus ignoratae, Libri Sex. In quibus exercitationum omnium vetustarum, genera, loca, modi, facultates et quicquid denique ad corporis humani exercitationes pertinet, diligenter explicatur. Opus non modo medicis, verum etiam omnibus antiquarum rerum cognoscendarum, et valetudinis conservandae studiosis admodum utile*, Auctore Hieronymo Mercuriali Foroliviensi Medico, et Philosopho, Venetiis (Venezia), Apud Iuntas, In officina Iuntarum, MDLXIX (1569); Concetta Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale. De arte gymnastica*, trans. Vivian Nutton, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 2008.

⁹ Pennuto (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 15.

a historical account of the outbreaks of new diseases throughout time, ending with the outbreak of the French Disease, to which he refers as “gallica lues” (i.e., French plague). Mercuriale put together his *De arte gymnastica* during his residence in Rome (1562-1569), where he served as the personal physician of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520-1589), one of the most powerful churchmen and richest patrons at the time. In his medical treatise Mercuriale attempts to recover the Greco-Roman gymnastics in a medical context, as the “true” medical gymnastics and part of preventive medicine, promoting it as an ideal method of medical treatment for the new (and future diseases) with both a preventive and curative value.¹⁰

Mercuriale’s medical gymnastics as a treatment for the new diseases takes on a noteworthy medical and social significance in the Roman *milieu* of the Counter-Reformation era, due to the dual nature of Rome as a political and religious centre and the particularities of the Roman society at the time. As regards this *milieu*, it is crucial to consider two parameters. First, Rome in the sixteenth century was a city of numerous courts and palaces, churches, ancient monuments, and ruins, populated by scholars and artists, all in the service of some ecclesiastical patron. The Roman *milieu* was the focus of many *scientiae*, which it combined rather than divided. Recent scholarly research has demonstrated the idiosyncrasies and factors that lead the papal city to emerge as a centre of scientific and medical culture in its own right during the sixteenth century.¹¹ Second, it is crucial to consider that due to the Protestant Reformation and expansion the papacy was faced with a religious and spiritual crisis, which the Council of Trent tried to address through a series of decrees and measures aiming at the reform of the Roman Catholic Church. As this paper will demonstrate, in this historical context the physician’s role had broader social parameters, medicalizing aspects of the body culture, that was a significant part of the Roman elite’s (ecclesiastical and lay) court life, that were considered causes of the outbreak of new diseases.

¹⁰ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 23.

¹¹ Jean Boutier, Brigitte Marin, and Antonella Romano (eds.), *Naples, Rome, Florence: Une histoire comparée des milieux intellectuels italiens (XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècles)*, Collection de l’École Française de Rome -355, École Française de Rome, Rome 2005; Antonella Romano (ed.), *Rome et la Science Moderne: Entre Renaissance et Lumières, Études réunies*, École Française de Rome, Rome 2008.

The Roman *milieu* and the calls for order, moderation, and control

Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Mercuriale's patron and the dedicatee of the first edition of the *De arte gymnastica*, was one of the city's most outstanding collectors of antiquities and patrons of architecture and the arts, in touch with prominent active antiquarians and other scholars. Collecting antiquities was a key activity in the Cardinal's court, as it was for members of the broader Roman social elite at the time. Mercuriale himself was a member of the Roman "Accademia degli Sdegnati", which focused on antiquarian studies. In this respect, the *De arte gymnastica*, as Mercuriale's attempt to recover the exercises, games, and other physical activities and practices (e.g., hunting, dancing, etc.) of the Greco-Roman past in a medical context through historical and antiquarian sources, reflected the intellectual tastes and scholarly interests of the Roman *milieu* in the Greco-Roman body culture and antiquity in general.

During the sixteenth century, physical practices/activities (such as games, athletic contests, dancing, etc.) were part of both popular and elite culture. They were performed in the framework of the elite's public display, leisure, private and/or public festivities, etc. and they had a ritual significance as they were linked to specific dates on the calendar or places having a symbolic content and identity.¹² For a great part of the population, athletic activities, games, etc. were part of the cycle of everyday life. However, the *De arte gymnastica* was put together in an era of religious and spiritual crisis, when body activities/practices went under scrutiny by the religious authorities while the attitudes towards physical culture were being reshaped in the framework of the reform sought by the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent. Furthermore, in the same context, antiquity was criticized as immoral and unorthodox by the protagonists of the Catholic Reform.

Games and other body activities/practices as part of the court ceremonies, festivities, etc. had a strong presence in the court of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese too, as in other Roman courts. In fact, the Farnese court was renowned for its grandeur and splendour; the Cardinal's delegates mention the performance of festival court practices such as wrestling, dancing, and hunting.¹³ Addressing the particularities of sixteenth-century Roman society, scholars have noted the strong links (often kinship links)

¹² Peter Burke, "The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe", *Past & Present*, 146 (1995), pp. 136-150; Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Harper Torchbooks, London 1978.

¹³ Clare Robertson, *'Il Gran Cardinale': Alessandro Farnese, Patron of the Arts*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1992, pp. 75-76.

between the local lay aristocracy and the curial *milieu*, highlighting the “clericalization” of sixteenth-century Rome.¹⁴ Furthermore, in sixteenth-century Rome the elite lifestyle was shared (albeit to different degrees and with differing emphasis) by the Roman feudal baronage, the Roman merchant aristocracy, the Cardinals, and by the other rich clerks of the papal court alike. The clerical and the chivalrous orders tended to mix to such an extent that, as Peter Partner notes, it is hard to make a clear distinction between the clerical humanist ideal presented in Paolo Cortesi’s (1465-1510) *De Cardinalatu* (Rome, 1510) and the lay humanist ideal represented by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) in his *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (Venice, 1528): both schemes implied luxury, education, and order.¹⁵

This overlap between popular and elite culture was considered problematic for the reform sought by the Counter-Reformation Church; after the Council of Trent, there was a concerted effort to modify and purify aspects of popular culture, an effort that was led by the clergy and justified primarily on theological grounds.¹⁶ In parallel, there were efforts from governmental and religious authorities to monopolize the feast days during which athletic contests and games were held, while the religious orders that appeared after the Council of Trent concentrated on private play, paying particular attention to the educating role of play and exercise. The period under examination saw the endeavour for the “Christianization” of physical culture under the rules of moderation, order, control, and limitation; these principles served as the guidelines for the practice of a series of body activities/practices and shaped the attitudes towards physical culture during the sixteenth century.¹⁷ The Church recognized that the sedentary life of ecclesiastics and members of the lay elite had to be compensated by some form of exercise, but it could not have pleasure as its sole aim; it had to be morally justified and, most importantly, it ought to favour the maintenance of the Christian order.

In Mercuriale’s time, the enforcement of the decrees of the Council of Trent brought changes to the elite’s lifestyle at the Roman courts: the cheerful worldliness of the banquets, the hunting, the feasts, and other amusements that featured in the previous

¹⁴ Peter Partner, *Renaissance Rome, 1500-1559: A portrait of a society*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1979, p. 149; Boutier, Marin, and Romano (eds.), *ibid.*, p. 355.

¹⁵ Partner, *ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See John McClelland and Brian Merrilees (eds.), *Sport and Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto 2009.

Renaissance courts (e.g., the court of Pope Leo X) were to be replaced by attention to simplicity and morality. An ambassadorial report written in 1565 during the Pontificate of Pius IV (when the spirit of the Council of Trent found its full embodiment in the papacy) informs us about the climate at the papal court at the time: simplicity, distance from amusements, and morality were the princely examples that cardinals and courtiers were to follow at least in public.¹⁸ Peter Partner notes that early modern Romans were not indifferent to religious feelings, but “in a city where religion had been, so to speak, industrialised, it was easy to treat religious ceremony in a ‘carnal’ way, and to turn a coarse witticism in the midst of a pious observance”.¹⁹ Partner explains that it is not that the ascetic and unworldly strain did not exist in Rome; however, it was not typical of the court culture of the era in the sense that this was learned, obsessed with the antique, and rather cavalier in its approach to traditional theology.

Mercuriale’s *De arte gymnastica* responded to the aspirations of the Catholic Reform. In his medical discourse Mercuriale legitimizes antiquity and aspects of the elite court culture through medicine, by shaping the value and efficacy of his medical gymnastics around ideals of the classical antiquity that overlapped with the religious and moral values that defined the policies of the Roman Catholic Church in the framework of the Catholic Reform, while at the same time he manages to address the issue of the new diseases in both medical and religious terms. In order to understand the nature of the medical gymnastics as described above, we must first look into Mercuriale’s concept of causality of the new diseases, especially since the causality of a disease was part of its conceptual understanding that allowed the physician to suggest a suitable treatment.

The new diseases as a physiological event and a social phenomenon

In the opening pages of the *De arte gymnastica*, Book I, Chapter I, *De principiis medicinae* (“The origins of medicine”), Mercuriale notes that the outbreak of the new diseases was the result of “the endless seductive inducements of gluttony, and insatiable lust, voracious greed, from which as Seneca and after him, Plutarch wisely argued, new species of diseases were, and still are being generated every day”.²⁰ According to

¹⁸ Robertson, ‘*Il Gran Cardinale*’, *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Partner, *Renaissance Rome*, *ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁰ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 15.

Mercuriale, “as long as people were content with very little and had no knowledge of sophisticated dinners and sumptuous banquets [...] diseases did not make their appearance nor were their names known”. However, he continues, “when the abominable plague of intemperance, the refined arts of the cook, the exquisitely subtle spices used at feasts and the foreign ways of mixing wine invaded mankind, then multifarious kinds of diseases began at once to proliferate and necessitated the discovery of medicine”; “it would certainly have been possible to do without it for ever”, Mercuriale notes, “had not human -or rather bestial- gluttony, the offspring of all vices, rendered it the most necessary of all”.²¹

Here, Mercuriale identifies as the cause of the new diseases an imbalanced regimen, characterised by luxurious feasts and banquets, refined cooking, the use of spices, and foreign dietary customs,²² interpreting disease in terms of Galenic theory: an imbalanced regimen could lead to disease, which was defined as an imbalance of the four body humours, a dyscrasia (opposite to eucrasia, the balance of the four humours), which could also imply the presence of a peccant humour with distorted qualities. Thus, in the framework of Galenic medicine, the long-term aim of medical practice was to correct the deficiencies in the patient’s regimen by prescribing a moderate, balanced lifestyle that would guarantee the maintenance of health. In order to treat a disease, the physician would attempt to re-establish the balance of the four body humours by purging, expelling the excess or peccant humour through evacuating methods such as bloodletting, sweating, urinating, bowel evacuation, vomiting, etc.

In the case of the French Disease specifically the humoral theory had a profound influence, since it aimed for an elimination of the morbid humours (through salivation, blood-letting, sweating, etc.), which was considered an essential aspect of its cure. In these evacuating procedures, that were central in both curative and preventive treatments, moderation - a key concept in Galenic medicine- was a catalyst: too much purging or not enough could harm the patient.²³ In this medical framework, Mercuriale’s medical gymnastics becomes pertinent as a purging, evacuating treatment, since exercise was considered a suitable method to achieve purging through sweating. Mercuriale marks that “moderate exercise has a considerable contribution to the

²¹ Ibid., p. 11.

²² It was considered that sharp or bitter foods, old or sweet wine, or wine that was heated for too long made individuals vulnerable to the French Disease. Cf. Arrizabalaga, Henderson, and French, *The Great Pox*, *ibid.*, p. 122.

²³ Ibid., p. 131.

maintenance of health”,²⁴ with moderation emerging as a key element throughout Mercuriale’s medical discourse.

Nonetheless, Mercuriale notes that this imbalance was triggered by gluttony, lust, greed, and intemperance, indicating an association between pathology and deviant behaviour condemned by the Church. As regards these habits, attitudes implied excess, indulgence, lack of moderation and self-restraint and were stigmatized by the Catholic Church as vices and sins; in fact, it was considered that disease had a divine origin as the result of immorality. This belief incorporated the idea of infection and encouraged purificatory practices. The Roman Catholic Church put more blame on the sick themselves and confession was added to the ancient purificatory rites and exorcisms.²⁵ Mercuriale adopts the belief, shared by medical and lay men alike, that excess in regimen (e.g., excess of food, drink, sexual activity, emotion, etc.) and the lack of moderation are both unhealthy and sinful, physically as well as morally detrimental.

In these terms, the concept of new disease in Mercuriale’s medical discourse is both a physiological event and a social phenomenon. Disease is not socially neutral; rather, it entails moral and ethical nuances. According to Charles Rosenberg “each disease entity, as a social phenomenon, is a uniquely configured cluster of events and responses in both the biological and social spheres”.²⁶ This becomes evident in the causation (physiological and moral deviance) that Mercuriale attributes to the outbreak of the new diseases: the new diseases are not mere physiological events; they are also social events defined and constructed around moral and religious values which affected the way disease was understood and treated. This understanding and definition of (new) disease, in which medical ideas and theory overlap with moral and religious views and aspirations, informs decisively Mercuriale’s medical gymnastics as a method of medical treatment and a means of control of human behaviour and conduct.

²⁴ Pennuto (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 543.

²⁵ Mirko D. Grmek, “The concept of disease”, in Mirko D. Grmek, (ed.), *Western Medical Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, trans. Antony Shugaar, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1998, p. 257.

²⁶ Charles Rosenberg, “The Definition and Control of Disease-an Introduction”, in Arien Mack (ed.), *In Time of Plague: The History and Social Consequences of Lethal Epidemic Diseases*, New York University Press, New York 1991, p. 6. Cf. Elliot G. Mishler, *Social Contexts of Health, Illness and Patient Care*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981; Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1962.

The treatment of the new diseases: order, moderation, and control of the body and soul

In Books II and III of the *De arte gymnastica* Mercuriale examines the medical exercises that make up the whole art of the medical gymnastics. In Book II he examines the exercises of dancing, ball games, wrestling, boxing-pancratium-cestus, running, jumping, discus and weights, and the throwing of the javelin. In Book III he examines the exercises of standing still, combat, holding one's breath, vociferation and laughter, hoops-wheels-petaurum-pall-mall, riding, being carried (in a carriage, litter, and chair), rocking in hanging beds, sailing, and fishing, swimming, and hunting. Each Chapter of Books II and III explores one medical exercise, its ancient origin, how many parts or kinds of it there are, how it was performed/practiced in Greco-Roman antiquity, what was the apparatus involved, why and how the ancient forebears used it, where and by whom it was practiced.

The humanists' goal was to turn their patrons into replicas of ancient Greek and Roman statesmen, embracing the crucial role of exercise in the moral life of the ancient predecessors and emphasizing the body-soul interaction and the strong connection between physical and moral health. Similarly, in his *De arte gymnastica*, Mercuriale highlights the body-soul interaction as an essential feature of the medical gymnastics. He marks the importance of taking care of the soul as well as the body and that the treatment of the body favours the treatment of the soul. In Book I, Chapter IV, *De gymnastica subiecto et eius laudibus* ("The subject of gymnastics and its reputation"), he notes that "if one should always look after one's soul, it, in turn, is not strong enough to achieve anything serious and important without help from the body"; "one should certainly strive after the body's health and wellbeing", Mercuriale continues, "so that it may attend to the soul and enhance its activities rather than impede them".²⁷ He notes that it is for this reason that Plato in his "Protagoras" asserted that "the person who only exercises his soul, while sloth and inactivity consume his body, deserves to be called a cripple".²⁸

Furthermore, in Book III, Chapter I, *De agendis et de ratione praesentis tractationis* ("Our agenda and the rationale behind this treatise"), Mercuriale, drawing from Plato's "Timaeus", marks that "gymnastics, although it may appear to concern

²⁷ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

itself solely with the body, also treats body and soul together, as Plato recommended in his *Timaeus*, so that it does not allow the body to rampage insolently in its toughness and strength, but subjects it to the domination, control and direction of the rational activities of the soul”.²⁹ Mercuriale also notes that “as Galen so clearly wrote there are innumerable types of exercise which, if rightly and properly performed, improve and even abolish natural weakness in the body and human errors in lifestyle”.³⁰

These claims are crucial as they directly relate the medical gymnastics with the causes of the outbreak of new diseases described in the previous section of the paper; the capacity of the medical gymnastics to favour the domination and control of both body and soul towards rationality emerges as an “antidote” for the immoderate, inordinate, irrational lifestyle that is responsible for the outbreak of new diseases. Mercuriale is highlighting the role of exercise in correcting, appropriating lifestyle, thus, favouring the control of the outbreak of new diseases perceived as the consequence of an immoderate lifestyle. Furthermore, by shaping the medical value and efficacy of the medical gymnastics around the values of control of the body and the soul, Mercuriale corresponds to the calls of the Roman Catholic Church for spiritual reform and healing as well as control of human conduct, as manifested in the framework of the Catholic Reform: an individual’s daily activities needed to be controlled and to conform to a set of rules or standards.

Additionally, in the *De arte gymnastica*, the body-soul interaction is also what separates the medical gymnastics from the other two types of gymnastics: athletics and military gymnastics. Various athletic activities, body practices, games, etc., performed in the context of the elite court-etiquette and a series of more specific activities (e.g., excessive pomp and ceremonial, banquets, pastimes, needless and inordinate games, etc.) were regarded as inordinate and adorning of the body, coming under moral and religious scrutiny. The overlaps between the medical gymnastics and the athletics, as they shared many exercises, was quite problematic in the Counter-Reformation era, due to the origin and characteristics of athletics and the lifestyle of athletes. In these terms, it was crucial for Mercuriale to separate his medical gymnastics from the athletic gymnastics, the “perverted gymnastics” (*gymnastica vitiosa*) as Galen called them,

²⁹ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 323.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

notes Mercuriale in Book I, Chapter XIV, *De vitiosa gymnastica sive athletica* (“Perverted gymnastics or athletics”).

As far as the origins of the gymnastics is concerned, although Mercuriale locates them in the ancient popular and pagan culture, he then describes a trajectory in which gymnastics had been notably developed and improved, resulting in the creation of the medical gymnastics. According to Mercuriale, gymnastics developed into a refined, controlled, organised art with a particular place for its practice, with rules, and with the sole purpose of maintaining health and obtaining a sound constitution, separating thus the medical gymnastics from the pagan, popular athletics. In this way he manages to ennoble the medical gymnastics that shared the same exercises with the “perverted”, “corrupted” athletics and make it a suitable body practice for his elite (ecclesiastical and lay) audience.

Mercuriale notes that at first the athletic gymnastics was illustrious and worthy of admiration but later became so corrupted and adulterated as “the wicked ways of men who in order to win prizes were concerned with beefing-up their bodies and gaining greater strength and produced minds and senses that were dull, torpid and slow”; “hence athletes were deservedly called dozy, slow, cowardly, and lazy by Plato, and were subject to vertigo and other diseases”.³¹ Mercuriale notes that according to Hippocrates the condition of athletes was dangerous and most unhealthy and that according to Plutarch it introduced effeminacy and slavery into Greece. In Book I, Chapter XV, *De vivendi athletarum ratione* (“How athletes lived”), Mercuriale argues that the athletes’ lifestyle was to be condemned vigorously and he goes on to examine it according to the six non-naturals:³² athletes made mistakes in food and drink as far as quality, quantity, order, and timing were concerned; they were disordered in sleeping and wakefulness; they were dozy and had no moderation in their movement and resting; they made no distinction regarding the air and they did not take into consideration the parameters of a healthy environment; they were extraordinarily affected by the passions of the soul. Overall, Mercuriale argues that the regimen of athletes was extremely damaging to health, the athletes suffered accidents, and they never lived long.

So, along with their essential quality of body-soul interaction, as noted previously, exercises should be “rightly and properly performed” to have a beneficial

³¹ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 179.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

role in the maintenance and/or obtaining of health. Thus, in Book IV, Chapter I, *De ratione agendorum et de exercitationis usu* (“Our plan of action and the value of exercise”), Mercuriale goes through the general rules that should pertain the nature and practice of exercises so as to be “medical”, have beneficial results for the patient, and avoid error in their practice: the purpose of an exercise must be medical, it should be practiced in moderation, there is a proper time, place, extent/amount, and manner of exercising, and the physician should take into consideration the physical condition of the individual and the type of each exercise.

In particular, as far as the manner of exercising is concerned, the principle of moderation emerges again as a key element. Moderation and temperance in everyday life was a prerequisite for the post-Tridentine Catholic Church, while a strong emphasis was put on the moderate, controlled movement of one’s body by the religious authorities, humanists, moral writers, and physicians alike, indicating a widespread concern regarding the control of the body and human conduct in general.³³ In this they drew from Aristotle’s teachings and the Latin rhetorical texts that stressed the importance of moderation in relation to virtue and eloquent movement. Moderation in movement was seen as natural and it signified a virtuous soul, whereas excess movement or lack of moderation was regarded as unnatural, ugly, and as a sign of the vices or defects of a person’s character.

Mercuriale’s medical discourse on dance as a medical exercise is very indicative of this emphasis. Dance was under severe scrutiny from the protagonists of the Counter-Reformation, with particular dances being singled out for denunciation; it was considered that excessive indulgence in dancing had begun, temporally, to break down social barriers, while confusion and disorder were common features of court entertainment.³⁴ This moral discourse prevailed within the medical discourse on dancing as well, but although physicians indicated excessive and disordered dance as a cause of disease, the beneficial role of dance as an exercise was rarely challenged.

In this context, Mercuriale marks that “indeed in our own times no one would deny that other dances performed in time, formation, and a prescribed way, would have such utility, inductive to good deportment and the maintenance of health, just as Galen declares that he had restored many to health, and he had maintained others in health by

³³ Jennifer Nevile, *The Eloquent Body*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2004, p. 90.

³⁴ Ibid.; Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2008, p. 178.

the art of dance alone”,³⁵ noting that Galen regarded dance training as one of the things sought after by doctors. Mercuriale notes that “no one should doubt that we have properly included dance in the category of gymnastic medicine, especially since Socrates in the Symposium of Xenophon openly declares that he had practiced dancing with a view to both achieving and maintaining health and also to acquire strength of body”.³⁶ Nonetheless, according to Mercuriale, the medical -and pedagogical- benefits of dance are achieved only when practiced at a particular time and place (e.g., the theatres or the space of a gymnasium/palaestra) and if practiced in time, formation, and a prescribed way; the utility of controlled and ordered dancing in the maintenance and/or obtaining of health is verified by the ancient authorities of Galen and Socrates, notes Mercuriale.

Furthermore, in Book V, Chapter III, *De saltatoriae effectibus* (“The effects of the saltatory”), Mercuriale discusses the medical effects of dancing through a comparison between the ancient and contemporary dance practices. He presents the ancients’ dance practices as a model for his contemporaries to follow, noting that when one looks at the various types of the ancients’ dances, he will see that “they were not lacking in rhythm, pattern, proportion and musical harmony”.³⁷ These qualities imply order in movement, a principle highly valued among humanists and dance masters alike. In dance, order was seen as leading to moral virtue; particularly geometric order (also applied to Renaissance architecture and garden design) and geometric shapes in choreography represented the order of the cosmos, while geometrical movement was thought to encourage men and women to imitate the divine order in their lives through noble and virtuous behaviour.³⁸ Additionally, it was considered that a spectator watching such a performance could appreciate the moral values by watching their physical manifestation.³⁹

Mercuriale criticizes his contemporaries by noting that “Consequently it can be supposed that our own dances, cavorting, and gestures, which are enjoyed nowadays both by women and by men, in pursuit of delight and pleasure, differed from the dances of the ancients in this way: the latter often were good for the preservation of health, whereas ours seldom or never have that end in view. On the contrary, they are indulged

³⁵ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

³⁸ Nevile, *The Eloquent Body*, *ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

in, mostly, after dinner and by night, as part of the banquet at an hour when sleep and rest would be much better”.⁴⁰ Mercuriale concludes noting that “So it is that dancing, if only it were practiced at the right time, as it was by our ancestors, and as we have already shown that all exercises ought to be, would undeniably be productive of many advantages”.⁴¹

It is therefore the principles of rhythm, pattern, proportion, musical harmony, and the purpose of maintaining and/or obtaining health that the ancient example designates, around which Mercuriale shapes the medical utility and value of dance as a medical exercise, separating it from contemporary dance practices which were considered time-wasting, inappropriate, and harmful. According to Mercuriale, contrary to the ancient example, contemporary dance habits involve indulgence and the pursuit of mere delight and pleasure as its aim; they lack in rhythm, proportion, and harmony and they are practiced at the wrong time (i.e., after eating, late at night) and with the wrong aim (i.e., for pleasure). In these terms, contemporary dance practices imply disorder and lack of control, favouring thus the outbreak of diseases, while proper conduct/comportment is an essential feature of the nature of the dance as a medical exercise and a precondition for its beneficial role.

Conclusion

In an era when the worldliness of sixteenth-century Roman courts was viewed as one of the “vulnerabilities” of the Roman Catholic Church for which Rome was severely attacked by the Protestants and which the policies of the Council of Trent targeted, religious authorities sought to moderate the behaviour of the clergy and direct the Catholic flock towards spiritual reform in order to deal with heresy. As the medical discourse overlapped with the political-religious discourse, in the framework of the Catholic Reform that aspired for spiritual reform and healing, control, order, moderation, and decorum in human conduct, humanist medicine in the Roman *milieu* took up a broader social role.

Mercuriale, the personal physician of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, in his *De arte gymnastica* addresses the crucial issue of the French Disease and the outbreak of the new diseases, indicating as causes gluttony, lust, greed (i.e., lack of moderation,

⁴⁰ Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 545.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

intemperance in lifestyle), attitudes and habits that were stigmatized as sinful by the Church. Throughout the *De arte gymnastica* Mercuriale suggests that the medical exercises are superior to curative medicine and the use of drugs, because as part of preventive medicine they avert future diseases, protect existing health, and help those recovering from illness to build their strength,⁴² whereas curative medicine, although valuable, cannot provide a cure as it lacks in knowledge of the nature of disease, perceived as the result of an immoderate lifestyle. Indeed, one of the most notable battles regarding remedies especially in the case of the French Disease was the one between Galenists who advocated the use of herbal remedies and Paracelsians who advocated chemical medicines.⁴³ The Galenist physicians linked chemical remedies (e.g., remedies based on mercury) with deceit, danger, and mere empiricism; at the same time Paracelsianism, often being identified with all the above, was accused as unorthodox and heretic by both medical and religious authorities.⁴⁴

Mercuriale's medical gymnastics, advocating humanist values that the sixteenth-century athletic manuals and chemical medicine disregarded, reflected, perhaps more than any other means of preventive medicine or therapeutics, a moral and spiritual view of medical treatment that corresponded to the moral and religious views regarding the origin of disease and its treatment. In his *De arte gymnastica* Mercuriale shapes the medical nature, value, and efficacy of a series of exercises based on the premise of body-soul interaction, favouring the control of both body and soul, as well as the values of order, moderation, and decorum, values shared by moralists and the religious authorities alike. Thus, it is an ideal method of medical treatment of the new diseases as it favours the maintenance of moderation, temperance, and order in everyday lifestyle; it was the immoderate and intemperate lifestyle that caused the outbreak of the new diseases.

Moreover, as aspects of the Roman elite court life, such as the taste in antiquity, the ancient physical culture, and body practices that made part of the elite's court etiquette, went under moral and religious scrutiny, Mercuriale manages to "legitimize"

⁴² Pennuto (ed.), *Girolamo Mercuriale*, *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴³ Cf. Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626-1660*, Duckworth, London 1975; Allen Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, Oldbourne Press, London 1965; Allen Debus, *The French Paracelsians*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; Bruce Moran, *The Alchemical World of the German Court: Occult Philosophy and Chemical Medicine in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen, 1572-1632*, Steiner, Stuttgart 1991; Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: an Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*, S. Karger, Basle 1958.

⁴⁴ Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 64.

them through medicine and the ancient example. It was not the activity/practice *per se* that was criticized; rather it was the attitude, the circumstances, the manner, and the purpose of a body activity/practice that defined it as decorous, appropriate, moral or as immoral, inappropriate, and an inappropriate use of time causing thus the disapproval of the religious authorities.⁴⁵ In this context, Mercuriale endorses the ancient example that overlapped with the moral and religious aspirations of the Catholic Church for control of the body and human conduct, while he medicalizes a series of exercises and body practices that were part of the elite's court life: as long as an exercise was practiced for medical purposes, in time, order, with eloquence, and in moderation it was a medical exercise, thus, it could be practiced by the noble since it corresponded to the aspirations of the Catholic Church; if an exercise/body activity did not meet these criteria then it was bad for health, it was a potential cause of disease, as well as physically and morally inappropriate for the noble.

Mercuriale's *De arte gymnastica* is an important historical source that reveals tensions and shifting attitudes towards body culture, as manifested in the context of court medicine in Counter Reformation Rome. Mercuriale's humanist medical discourse throws light on the medical, moral, and religious tensions that courtly fascination with antiquity and body culture raised. It shows how the Roman (mostly ecclesiastical) elite's fascination had to be consolidated with the aspirations for spiritual reform raised by the Counter Reformation papacy that went hand in hand with body reform. The *De arte gymnastica* demonstrates the humanist physician's endeavour to bring bodies and social-cultural practices that were well-rooted in the early modern world, however problematic in terms of physical and moral health, under control according to the demands of the Catholic Church. It becomes evident that, in the historical context of a religious and spiritual crisis, humanist medicine as manifested in the Roman *milieu* had a much wider responsibility and role than merely providing cures.

⁴⁵ Alessandro Arcangeli, *Recreation in the Renaissance: Attitudes towards Leisure and Pastimes in European Culture, c. 1425-1675*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire 2003, pp. 69-70.

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