

Functions of literary and narrative elements in Spanish vernacular medical treatises from the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries

The main objective of the project is to analyse literary and narrative elements in Spanish vernacular medical treatises created at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries and dedicated to lay people. Among the readers of such writings there were patients, who usually did not have access to professional medical help, as well as barbers, midwives, herbalists and other non-professional medical practitioners. The subject-matter of these treatises is very extensive and it includes descriptions of development and treatment of a particular disease, preventative measures of the most popular diseases and recommendations for selection of suitable hygiene procedures during an epidemic, among others. Moreover, they are replete with literary and narrative elements, such as poetic components (mainly sonnets), autobiographical accounts of medical doctors and anecdotes or tales about sick patients. The first stage of the study involves examining these elements from the perspective of the precepts of 16th century poetics, included in numerous Spanish treatises dedicated to this subject. The analysis is aimed at discovering the functions of literary and narrative components in the selected texts and their influence on the specific relationship between the author (a medical doctor) and the reader (a patient or a non-professional medical practitioner). It should be noted that in 16th and 17th century Spain, before beginning a four-year course in medicine, a student was supposed to graduate as a *bachiller* in arts, which included studying rhetoric, literature and philosophy. Consequently, the authors of the selected medical treatises did have knowledge in the field of humanities and, therefore, at least a basic familiarity with theories included in Renaissance treatises on rhetoric and poetics. The research results from this stage of the project will be juxtaposed with the assumptions of the contemporary theory of narrative medicine, which postulates rejecting the physician-patient relationship based only on analysing test results and dignifying the importance of dialogue and narration, as well as including literary studies into medical doctor training. The analysis carried out in this part of the project will allow to verify the research hypothesis, that is to say, that the sources or models of the so called “narrative (re)turn” in contemporary medicine may be related to the pre-Enlightenment medical discourse.

The principal reason of investigating this subject is the absence of systematic literary studies dedicated to Spanish vernacular medical writings written at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. In spite of their unquestionable literary and narrative nature, they have been examined almost exclusively by historians of medicine, whose research is usually restricted to reconstructing the state of medical knowledge of the time. Furthermore, the study will attempt to situate narrative medicine in the history of development of the scientific discourse. Although there are a considerable number of studies on this theory, taking into account a short period of its existence (ca. 20 years), the issue of its sources and models has not been properly discussed yet. Knowing the strategies used by the authors of the selected treatises and their influence on the physician-patient relationship may contribute to developing this field and shed some light on the therapeutic tools used in narrative medicine.