

BENEDETTO DE' REGUARDATI OF NORCIA (c. 1398-1469)
PHYSICIAN TO PRINCES AND DIPLOMAT

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Benedetto de' Reguardati was one of the most celebrated doctors on the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth century. Born probably in 1398 of a long-established noble family of Norcia in Umbria, after attending for seven years the Faculty of Medicine, Philosophy and Arts at the University of Perugia, Reguardati graduated in 1422 as *Magister*. We know much regarding his subsequent career, and also we have some details of his medical practice, above all from three of his treatises on the subject.¹ I propose to consider first his remarkable career and, secondly, to put his medical ideas into the context of his times.

Reguardati's first twenty years after graduation were spent as an academic, teaching the course of practical medicine either at Perugia, or at the University of Ascoli Piceno; Norcia straddles the two cities, some twenty miles nearer to Ascoli. His salary was generous: for instance in 1430 at Ascoli it was 115 florins for the year. Between 1426 and 1431 he compiled his *De Sanitatis Conservazione*, which he dedicated to Astoragio degli Agnesi, who was Governor in the pope's name of that part of the papal states which included Ascoli. This treatise, to which I will return, makes it evident that Agnesi was Reguardati's patient, hence one can suppose that the doctor supplemented his university stipend with fees from wealthy private patients.

The second phase of Reguardati's career began probably late in 1441, since certainly from 1 January 1442, with the very generous salary of 500 ducats a year, he took service with Francesco Sforza, remaining with his family until a few months before his death in 1469. From 1433 Sforza, a condottiere captain in the service of Filippo Maria Visconti, duke of Milan, had sought to establish for himself a state in central Italy. The duke's only child, Bianca Maria, was illegitimate, and the duke had sought to promote her interests in the event of his death by betrothing her in 1432, aged seven, to Sforza, then aged thirty-one. Their marriage took place on 28 October 1441, and this explains Reguardati's appointment, as he

became Bianca Maria's personal physician. The birth of a male child to the couple was crucial if they wished to succeed to the duchy when the Visconti duke died. Reguardati claimed that he cured Bianca Maria's sterility, her first child, Galeazzo Maria, being born on 15 January 1444 at Fermo, the capital of Sforza's new state. Reguardati resided some five years at Fermo with the Sforza, whose family was increased by a daughter, born in 1445.

In the decade of the 1440s the pope by force of arms slowly recovered territory that had been lost to the papal states. Francesco Sforza abandoned Fermo, and surrendered to the pope his last possession, Iesi, in 1447. In August he and his family, Reguardati included, were residing with his brother, Alessandro, in the latter's vicariate of Pesaro, when news came of the severe illness of the duke of Milan. Sforza, with his family and Reguardati, left at once, though the duke died on 13 August, before the party had reached Milan. Eventually early in 1450 Francesco was accepted as ruler by the entire duchy, and a new vista for Reguardati opened. It was one thing being personal doctor to a condottiere's wife, another to have the confidence of the duke and duchess of Milan, and initially of the heir, Galeazzo Maria.

Reguardati had played his part in furthering the Sforza cause. He loaned 6000 lire of his personal fortune, and he acted as envoy to persuade Milan and subject cities of the duchy to accept Sforza and his wife; he also went to Venice to negotiate support. Moreover he served first as co-Governor of Pavia, then as Governor of Parma. Even so, once the new duke was committed to residing in Lombardy, he appreciated that he might lose his distinguished doctor, in part because of the pull for the latter of his birth-place, in part because in 1451 Cosimo de' Medici was instrumental in renewing an offer to Reguardati of a post at the *Studium* of Florence - actually Cosimo sought the doctor's services above all for himself and his family. Sforza had no intention of releasing so valuable a medical practitioner, and used various means to block Reguardati's permanent departure. The doctor had been exiled from Norcia in 1438, unjustly he believed; Sforza used his influence with the pope to ensure that the ban on Reguardati was not lifted but rather in 1452 extended to all the papal states. Sforza wrote to Cosimo stressing that the doctor should not be given any appointment, and that Sforza's insistence on this should never be disclosed. These secret machinations the doctor may have suspected, but could not prove or thwart.

The years from 1450 to 1469 were marked by Reguardati visiting professionally princes related to or associated with the Sforza. These visits were at Sforza's expense and permitted when they least interfered with services for the duke. On several occasions Reguardati attended Cosimo and his son Giovanni, as well as his son Piero's wife, Lucrezia Tornabuoni. When the case was known to be hopeless he appears prudently to have delayed his arrival until shortly after the patient's death, as in the cases of Cosimo and Giovanni, Gentile Brancaleoni (the first wife of Federico da Montefeltro, who served in Sforza's army in the 1440s), and Sante Bentivoglio (married to a daughter of Alessandro Sforza). Such timing least damaged Reguardati's professional reputation and ensured that he could not be accused of poisoning, a charge that might be levelled if the patient was head of state.

It was the birth and early years of infancy that constituted the greatest risk to a child's life, while for a woman the most dangerous time was giving birth and its immediate aftermath. Over fifteen years Bianca Maria bore nine children, of whom eight survived; a twin girl died at birth. This was remarkable and says much for Reguardati's competence, as well as explaining Bianca Maria's faith in her doctor. Apart from the baby's death, the only complication in all her pregnancies appears to have been at the birth of her fifth child, Ludovico Maria in 1451, since thereafter she took three months to recover from a difficult delivery. It was during this period of child-bearing above all that an Italian Renaissance prince invested in the full-time services of a doctor for his wife and children; he himself probably had his own. Bianca Maria's last child was born in 1458, when Reguardati was sixty, and one should reflect that in the Renaissance at forty-five one was old.² In what was to prove the last decade of Reguardati's life, it is clear that his professional responsibilities shifted somewhat, for while they remained necessary for Bianca Maria, they came increasingly to include her husband, who was Reguardati's age and poorly in health. Reguardati, too, was ailing; in May 1460, for example, he was incapacitated with gout, unable to attend the duchess, who sought his advice; he sent his son Dionisio, likewise a doctor. In the autumn Reguardati had recovered and found his patient with a severe chill, prescribing to clear her bronchial tubes. In 1466 Francesco Sforza died, as two years later did Bianca Maria, aged only forty-three. The new duke was Galeazzo Maria, whose birth Reguardati deemed one of his triumphs, and in a letter addressed to him the doctor revealed that he believed himself to be neglected, as he had not been granted a house in Milan promised him

by duke Francesco. Early in 1469 Reguardati, with the duke's permission, left Milan for Florence to attend the crippled Piero de' Medici. There he died on 19 July after malarial fever that had lasted ten days.

Reguardati had taught a course of practical medicine, and this was his forte. From his *De Sanitatis Conservazione* we know that he revived students who were unconcious through inhaling charcoal fumes by taking them into the open air.³ A doctor of Norcia recorded his perception: a young man of Pavia on a votive pilgrimage, probably to Loreto, who was taken ill, reached Norcia barely able to stagger forward and looking yellowish in colour. Reguardati examined him for a bite or sting, but found no trace. The pilgrim had little save an almost empty wine flask, which Reguardati took and hurled to the ground, jumping on a large scorpion that emerged and whose poison had affected the wine. In his unpublished *Pharmacopoeia* Reguardati stressed the curative effects of herbs and spa water, as he had prescribed for Giovanni de' Medici, though to no avail.⁴

Reguardati's *De Sanitatis Conservazione* was in the tradition of the famous treatise of Arab medicine: *Theatrum Sanitatis*, often called *Tacuinum* from the Arabic word for list. The author was Abul Hasan al Muchtar Ibn Butlan of Baghdad, who died about 1063. This work was being read in Latin in Western Christendom by the thirteenth century, and two centuries later an illustrated version was to be found in the library of several Italian princes.⁵ Reguardati's work extended to ninety-six chapters. It began with air, and climatic effects on the body were discussed, including the dangers of impure air - charcoal fumes were an example. The second chapter focused on exercise and concluded that too much rest was dangerous; one needed to keep active. He favoured playing football, since this not only exercised all the body, it also brought joy to the spirit. The tenor of the entire work was moderation in all things, be it sleep, food, drink, sexual intercourse. He maintained that everyone should have a thorough purgation once a year, for this helped clear the brain, combat catarrh and abdominal pains. Some of the authorities claimed in support of his views expressed in the treatise were Galen, Pliny, Albert the Great, and Isaac the Jew.

The early chapters derive in essence from a work with much the same title finished in 1331 by Barnaba de' Reatini of Reggio.⁶ Reguardati modified his source to incorporate a case-

study of his patient Agnesi, to whom the work was dedicated, as already mentioned. Agnesi, a prelate, had weak digestion and was liverish. He was told to sleep six or seven hours a night on his stomach, with a little feather cushion under it. There are details for making a mastic poultice melted onto parchment which would adhere to the stomach and so render bandages unnecessary. As a general tonic, and particularly as an antidote to poison, Agnesi was prescribed a medicine of flowers, fruits, vegetables, nuts, horn and ivory shavings, crushed precious stones, powdered gold and silver, dissolved in sugar, with musk to flavour. The dose was a spoonful to be taken at dawn three or four times a month. Reguardati prepared his own prescriptions and his treatise on pharmacy provides some information. The later chapters of his *De Sanitatis Conservazione* concerned food and were based on another of Reatini's works, written about 1338. In both, for instance, one finds that *pasta* is heavy and indigestible, especially with cheese: Agnesi, it seems, much liked his *lasagna*.⁷ The work circulated in manuscript, probably as a textbook for medical students, and was printed in Rome in 1475. Six years later a reprint in Milan uniquely assigned the work to the famous physician and philosopher Ugo Benzi, who died in 1439. Since the texts are identical and as it is known Agnesi was Reguardati's patient at Ascoli, one can reject the claim of authorship of the 1482 printing.⁸

We know from letters written in his latter years by Reguardati that he looked for three things in his diagnosis. Three was a mystic number, as in the Trinity; even today we are wont to think misfortune comes in threes. When Reguardati examined Lucrezia Tornabuoni in 1467 he found her suffering from a tumour of the left breast, pains in the stomach and spleen, and sciatica on the right side: presumably she had advanced cancer, for she died shortly afterwards. Sante in 1463 was found to be ill with fever, with rheumatism, and thirdly with severe ulceration of the hand and foot. Astronomy had its place in a degree of medicine. In his last years Reguardati turned to this aspect to bolster normal precautions. He advised Duke Galeazzo Maria in 1468 to turn to prognostications of three (again the mystic number) astrologers for a kind of superhuman protection, above all against the plague - the third subject on which Reguardati wrote a treatise. Increasingly in the second half of the fifteenth century princes of the Italian peninsula looked to astrology to determine their actions. Ludovico Sforza, Galeazzo Maria's younger brother and duke of Milan from 1494, had a court astrologer, as was typical of rulers of the period.⁹ In 1488 the very hour for

consummation of Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro's marriage to his wife was fixed by the stars - not that it worked, as he remained impotent all days.¹⁰ There is a fashion in medicine, as in most things, and my suggestion is that Reguardati could see the way things were going. He believed the young duke was little interested in practical medicine, but favoured astrology, so he gave him advice that he believed would be congenial, after all a house was at stake. I doubt that Reguardati at the end of a long professional career really abandoned his views on the efficacy of practical medicine.

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Notes

1. Biographical information is provided by G. Deffenu, *Benedetto Reguardati, medico e diplomatico di Francesco Sforza* (Milan, 1955), pp. 11-52, appendix of documents, pp. 137-64; Juliana Hill Cotton, 'Benedetto Reguardati of Nursia (1398-1469)', in *Medical History*, 13 (1969), pp. 175-89; F.M. de' Reguardati, *Benedetto de' Reguardati da Norcia: 'Medicus tota Italia celeberrimus'* (Trieste, 1977), pp. 11-236, appendix of documents pp. 239-503.
2. Bianca Maria's children are listed in De Reguardati, cited in note 1, p. 236; for the Renaissance concept of ageing see C. Gilbert, 'When did a man in the Renaissance grow old?', in *Studies in the Renaissance*, 14 (1967), pp. 7-32.
3. The text is edited by Deffenu, cited in note 1, pp. 55-133, also by F. Lombardi, *Il 'De Conservazione Sanitatis' di Maestro Benedetto da Norcia* (Genoa, 1962); for early printings see note 8 below.
4. MS Riccardiano 818, Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, for which see P.O. Kristeller, *Iter Italicum* (London-Leiden, 5 vols., 1963-in progress), I, p. 179.
5. For this work and versions of it see C.H. Clough, 'The Library of Bernardo and of Pietro Bembo', in *The Book Collector*, 33 (1984), p. 320 and notes 15-17, to which should be added: Ububchasy de Baldach, *Theatrum Sanitatis, Liber Magistri* (Parma, 1970), and L.C. Arano, *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (Milan, 1979).
6. Juliana Hill Cotton, 'Benedetto Reguardati: Author of Ugo Benzi's *Tractato De La Conservazione De La Sanitate*' in *Medical History*, 12 (1968), pp. 76-83 at 78-9.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
8. For the manuscripts, of which at least eleven are fifteenth-century transcriptions, including one translation into Italian, see *ibid.*, p. 77 (where only five copies are mentioned). This study deals with early printings of Reguardati's treatise and the problem of Benzi's authorship; for the fifteenth-century printings see also A.C. Klebs, *Incunabula scientifica et medica* (Bruges, 1953), p. 79.
9. In general see E. Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita* (Bari, 1976); for two examples see Patrizia Castelli, 'Gli astri e i Montefeltro', in *Res Publica Litterarum*, 6 (1983), pp. 75-89; J. Armstrong, 'An Italian astrologer at the court of Henry VII', in *Italian Renaissance Studies: A tribute to the late Cecilia M. Ady*, ed. E.F. Jacob (London, 1960), pp. 433-54; V. Pedicino, 'Medicina e astologia nella concezione di Giovanni Manardo', in *Atti del convegno internazionale del V centenario della nascita di G. Manardo (1462-1536)* (Ferrara, 1963), pp. 213-6.
10. The relevant documents are in A. Luzio and R. Renier, *Mantova e Urbino* (Turin-Rome, 1893), pp. 31-6.

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