2 Cardano the Physician

CARDANO WAS A PRACTICING PHYSICIAN as well as a professor of medicine. Selections from the lectures he gave at Pavia and Bologna are included in his published works. They take the form of detailed commentaries on the classical medical authorities, Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna. These commentaries constitute a large part of Cardano’s medical writings and supply noteworthy information about teaching methods in the universities at that time. In addition, Cardano wrote numerous treatises on special topics, such as De Dentibus and De Urinis, as well as introductions to practical pharmacology like the Ars curandi parva. The latter text begins with a brief outline of his theory of physiology, which is essentially the same as that of Galen.

Cardano’s significance as a doctor lies, however, not in his theoretical views but in his abilities as a medical practitioner. It is to this that he owed his worldwide reputation. A collection of fifty-seven “Consilia medica” included in his published works gives us an idea of the manner in which he attended to his patients. Number twenty-two concerns the Scottish Archbishop Hamilton, and number fifty-two lists the recommendations concerning diet and mode of living which Cardano personally
handed to the patient: "Ephemeris seu vitae ratio pro Reverendissimo D. Archiepiscopo Andreae DD. Joanne Amulton." While all the other consilia only fill between one and five pages in folio, number twenty-five fills thirty. It is obviously the most important case in the collection. The consultation report includes extensive theoretical deliberations as well as numerous formulae for remedies to be considered—although very few are actually used. In addition to these two consilia I should like to discuss number nine, which concerns a case of "hypochondriac melancholia." It will impress upon the reader the sensible human attitude that was characteristic of Cardano's practice of medicine.

Numerous statements contained in these consilia are only comprehensible if one is familiar with the theory of physiology prevalent at the time. It is the Galenic theory, and it continued to exert a decisive influence on medical thinking into the eighteenth century, although its foundations had already been shaken in the seventeenth century by Harvey's discovery of blood circulation (De mortu cordis, London 1628).

In Galenic physiology major importance is placed upon the four humors. They each originate in a particular organ, or rather, they are secreted by this organ from the blood. These four humors are: the blood that is produced by the nutrients in the liver, the yellow bile from the gall bladder, the black bile (melancholia) from the spleen, and the phlegm from the brain. Coordinate to the four organs, or rather to the respective fluids, are four basic qualities: moist-warm to blood, moist-cold to phlegm, dry-warm to yellow bile, and dry-cold to melancholia (black bile). The harmonious mixture of the humors and basic qualities was called "temperature," with some variations according to "temperament." If, for ex-