THE INTERSECTION OF MEDICINE AND RITUAL IN *LIBER MEDICINALIS*

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Sarena Matriano Lim. The Intersection of Medicine and Ritual in *Liber Medicinalis*.

(Dr. Thomas Frazel, Latin)

The objective of this thesis is to contextualize *Liber Medicinalis* within the traditions of ancient medicine, Latin poetry, and Latin medical treatises. *Liber Medicinalis* is an epic, didactic poem about medicine which was written by Quintus Serenus Sammonicus during the Roman Imperial period. In 1107 lines of dactylic hexameter, Q. Serenus offers treatments for about 80 ailments and injuries. With only one translation in English and one commentary in French, *Liber Medicinalis* has remained a relatively unstudied medical treatise. The introduction will present information about the author, Roman medical practices, Roman medical writings, treatment, and ritual. Commentary for select chapters of *Liber Medicinalis* will address a wide range of topics of interest: ritualistic practices, semantic extension, violent imagery, affordable medicine. Analysis of these themes in the conclusion will provide a better understanding of the author, the audience, and the unique qualities of *Liber Medicinalis*. *Liber Medicinalis* proves to be a complex work that both follows and deviates from the traditions in which it resides. *Liber Medicinalis* remains consistent with ancient medical practices with the combination of tangible and ritualistic treatment. *Liber Medicinalis* follows the layout of most medical handbooks but differs with its poetic structure and elements. With the direct addresses and expressive language, *Liber Medicinalis* adheres to the tradition of epic, didactic poetry; however, the therapeutic content and technical medical vocabulary differentiates it from other poems. This thesis establishes that *Liber Medicinalis* is a unique representation of medical content within a poetic structure and prompts further investigation into its novel terminology and treatments.
Acknowledgements

For my teachers, past and present, who continue to inspire me.
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Introduction

Quintus Serenus’ *Liber Medicinalis* (“Medical Book”) is a unique Latin poem about medicine.¹ In his remarkable study of medical Latin in the Roman Empire, D. R. Langslow presents the following summary of *Liber Medicinalis*:

“Q. Serenus, *Liber medicinalis* (s. i, ii, or iv?: essentially undatable): this didactic poem – our only properly therapeutic medical poem from this period – offers remedies to about 80 diseases in 1,107 hexameters divided into 64 chapters. Its chief source was <the *Naturalis historia* of> C. Plinius Secundus (= “Pliny”); it was possibly used by Marcellus <in his *De medicamentis liber* (early s. v or late sc. Iv AD)>. It was copied on the orders of Charlemagne and was of very considerable influence among the Humanists and in the early modern period.”²

Because of the short length of the summary, Langslow was not able to convey the unique point of view of Q. Serenus nor capture the poem’s many nuances. This thesis will explore *Liber Medicinalis* in detail in order to situate it in the rich traditions of both medical Latin writing and Latin poetry.

¹ For the text of *Liber Medicinalis*, I cite the on-line text from the Packard Humanities Institute; all translations of *Liber Medicinalis* are my own. For both the text and translations of Pliny the Elder, I use Jones 1963. For both my translations of Serenus and for my paper as a whole, I have consulted the edition of Q. Serenus by Pepin 1950 and the English translation of Pearce 1974.
² Langslow 2000: 64.
Author

There is very little information about the author, but it is clear from the composition and references in *Liber Medicinalis* that he is an educated man and proficient poet. The author was conventionally called Quintus Serenus Sammonicus, but I will refer to him as Q. Serenus. There are two probable candidates for the author: Serenus Sammonicus the Elder, a friend to the emperors Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) and Geta (209-211 AD), or Serenus Sammonicus the Younger, a tutor to the emperor Gordian II (238 AD). The Elder was a collector of books and close friend of Geta. Geta acted as joint emperor with his brother Caracalla, but both men desired to be the sole ruler. Caracalla overthrew Geta in 211 AD and afterwards killed Geta’s followers.³ *Historia Augusta* records the death of Serenus Sammonicus the Elder (4.4):

> Occisique nonnulli etiam cenantes, inter quos etiam Sammonicus Serenus, cuius libri plurimi ad doctrinam extant.

And some even dining [were] killed, among those also Serenus Sammonicus, of whose many books exist for learning.

The brutal slaughter of Geta’s supporters occurred in all places, including the dinner table. With his close association to the emperors, the Elder Serenus Sammonicus would have elite connections. With his vast collection of books, he would have access to medical writings.

Pearce makes the argument that Serenus Sammonicus the Younger is the author of *Liber Medicinalis* (8). The Younger was reported to be a poet, friend of Gordian I, and tutor to Gordian II:

*Serenus Sammonico, qui patris eius amicissimus, sibi autem praeceptor fuit, nimirum acceptus et carus usque adeo ut omnes libros Sereni Sammonici patris sui, qui censebantur ad sexaginta et duo milia, Gordiano minori moriens ille relinqueret. quod eum ad caelum tulit, si quidem tantae bibliothecae copia et splendore donatus in famam hominum litterarum decore pervenit.*

Serenus Sammonicus, a great friend of his father’s, was his tutor, and a very beloved and agreeable one he was, in fact, when he died, he left the young Gordian all the books that had belonged to his father, Serenus Sammonicus, and these were estimated at sixty-two thousand. And this raised him to the seventh heaven, for being now possessed of a library of such magnitude and excellence, thanks to the power of letters he became famous among men.

This description presents the outstanding qualities of Serenus Sammonicus the Younger. Champlin argues that the Younger fits into the category of fictitious sons which is present in *Historia Augusta* (191). With the belief that the Younger is merely a fictitious character, the author is more likely Serenus Sammonicus the Elder. Although the true

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4 *HA* 18.2.
5 Magie 1924: 412.
authorship is still unclear, it is important to consider that both the Elder and the Younger were not physicians.

**Roman Medical Practices**

Medical treatises like *Liber Medicinalis* were popular during the Roman Imperial period. Medical authors obtained their information from both Greek and Roman sources, creating a unique combination of ritualistic and tangible medical practices. The authorship of medical works was not limited to physicians. Notable medical writers like Pliny, Celsus, and Cato were not physicians but greatly advanced the depth and dissemination of medical knowledge. With the low availability and slow acceptance of doctors in Rome, families preferred to contain medical treatment within the household. For instance, families concocted their own remedies based on information from medical encyclopedias, traditions passed down within the generations of a family, and word of mouth among the educated members of society. Thus, medical writings played an important role in the health of the common people and reflected the accepted practices of the population.

Roman medical practices placed importance on both tangible treatment and religious devotion. Q. Serenus upholds these values in *Liber Medicinalis* by combining ritualistic practices with ingredients sourced from plants and animals. He prioritizes the physical remedies and their divine origin more than religious devotion alone as a cure. *Liber Medicinalis* exemplifies the mixing of both religious and scientific treatment common to Greco-Roman medicine.

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6 King 2001: 32.
Roman Medical Writing

In the long tradition of medical writing, the preferred structure was prose. Most medical writings followed a recipe-style approach which consists of four parts: rubric, indication, collection of ingredients, and preparation. The rubric includes the type, origin, and inventor of the remedy. The indication specifies the patients who would benefit from the remedy. The collection of ingredients gives a list of the ingredients and their amounts. The preparation, often using imperative verbs, instructs the reader on how to work with the ingredients. Adams offers Pelagonius, *Ars veterinaria* 273, as a clear example of this fourfold structure:

\[
\text{unctio Optati ad curam suprascriptam. cerae lib., resinae-III, apopanacis-II, medullae ceruinae-II, olei storacini-III, olei laurini-III: haec omnia decoque et in sole aut in loco calido uterere.}
\]

The ointment of Optatus. For the disease written above. One pound of wax, 3 of resin, 2 of panacea, 2 of marrow of deer, 3 of storax oils, 4 of laurel oils. Boil all these things and use them in the sun or in a hot place.

Q. Serenus uses the fourfold structure occasionally but prefers the threefold structure of indication, ingredients, and preparation. By mainly using the threefold structure, Q. Serenus establishes a precise and efficient medical treatise.

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8 Examples of the fourfold structure can be found in: chapters 3, 5, 12, 15, 19, 21, 24, 29, 38, 43, 45, 56, 58, 60, 62.
Q. Serenus sources much of the information in *Liber Medicinalis* from Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*. *Naturalis Historia* is an encyclopedia that consists of 37 books, each covering a different topic related to nature, her processes, and her materials. Pliny creates an “atmosphere of excess” in his endeavor to record the total knowledge obtained by humans (Conte 498). Because he compiled such a vast amount of information, Pliny was not able to incorporate much stylistic embellishment due to the exceptional length. In contrast, *Liber Medicinalis* is a shorter handbook that emphasizes expressive language and dramatic imagery of disease.

There was also a tradition of didactic poems in antiquity. Greek and Roman writers made use of didactic poems to teach the reader about a variety of topics. The poetic structure aided students with memorization. The early forms of didactic poetry give instruction on moral and philosophical matters, while the later forms focus on specialized subjects. Dactylic hexameter is a form of meter used for didactic and epic poems in both Greek and Latin.

Q. Serenus transforms a medical treatise into a didactic poem to create the impressive feat of writing: *Liber Medicinalis*. He remains consistent with the traditions of didactic poetry by directly addressing the reader. Expanding beyond the restraints of prose, Q. Serenus draws on an abundant source of imagery to render the violent nature of diseases and other attacks on the body. The poetic elements allow for novel avenues of expressive language and imagery that are usually absent from medical writings written in prose. Q. Serenus enriches his presentation of medicine with vivid descriptions that ironically give life to the illnesses and trauma which destroy the lives of so many people.

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The ailments become worthy opponents for the multitude of remedies presented in the poem. Although violence and war are common themes in poetry, they rarely have a place in recipe-style medical works. The poetic language and structure showcase the ingenuity of Q. Serenus and elevate the content beyond the level of simple recipe-style medical works.

**Treatment and Ritual**

Q. Serenus formats the whole work with a structure that is common in ancient medical works: *a capite ad calcem* (“from head to toe”). The first half covers natural maladies that arise from the body itself. The second half, beginning at chapter 42, examines unnatural maladies that are caused by an outside force. Q. Serenus covers many branches of medicine including infectious disease, obstetrics, dermatology, and trauma. The subject matter includes both acute and chronic conditions, therefore, making this treatise useful for a wide variety of patients. He provides treatments for both life-threatening conditions and cosmetic imperfections. I will define treatment as the application of remedies to heal a patient after disease or injury. Treatment includes but is not limited to plants, animal products, and ritualistic practices. I will define ritual as a prescribed, systematic activity involving specific words or actions that go beyond tangible treatment. Ritual in *Liber Medicinalis* presents as incantations, tools for harvesting the ingredients, and symbolic actions done to the ingredients.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) Didactic epic poetry that includes the themes of violence and war include *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius and *Georgicon* by Virgil.

\(^{11}\) Incantations can be found in chapters 33 and 51. Harvesting tools can be found in chapters 22 and 25. Symbolic actions can be found in chapters 25 and 33.
Objectives

This thesis will contextualize Liber Medicinalis within the traditions of ancient medicine, Latin poetry, and Latin medical writings. I will examine the involvement of nature and divine influence in mortal suffering and healing in order to better understand the beliefs of Q. Serenus and the audience. I will analyze how semantic extension, violent imagery, and references to other authors contribute to a dramatic, poetic description of illness and injury. I will determine Q. Serenus’ ingenuity and his source of therapeutic information by studying the prescribed treatments, which range from affordable ingredients to magical words. Liber Medicinalis presents an elaborate combination of medicine and ritual in the unique structure of an epic, didactic poem.
Commentary

Preface

Apollo is a god associated with both healing and prophecy. Q. Serenus emphasizes Apollo’s power to dispel disease and bring back the dead. Q. Serenus implies that he is in the favor of the god by claiming that Apollo provided information for Liber Medicinalis. The Severan emperors also alleged that they were favored by the gods. Champlin concludes that Q. Serenus was an acquaintance of Septimius Severus and the tutor to Geta and Caracalla (193). Septimius Severus celebrates himself and Apollo in a relief in Phyrgia, and Caracalla prominently features Apollo on his coinage (O’Grady 29). Although he does not explicitly dedicate the poem to the emperor, he may be showing his support for the emperor through his discussion and praise of Apollo. Q. Serenus displays knowledge of the religious worship of Apollo when he mentions the prevalent temples of Apollo at Aegeae, Pergama, and Epidaurus. These locations were important for many other medical traditions. Apollo’s son Aesculapius had prevalent sanctuaries at Pergama and Epidaurus. Galen also established his school at Pergama.

Chapter 2

The term hemicranium which means “a pain on one side of the head” can be more fluidly translated as “migraine.” The use of hemicranium and its alternate form, hemicrania, is rare. Before Q. Serenus, Pliny supplies a remedy for hemicrania. Around the same time as Q. Serenus, Theodorus Priscianus, Cassius Felix, Marcellus Empiricus, and Plinius Valerianus utilize the term hemicranium. Because it is used infrequently and only by medical writers, hemicranium may only belong to the genre of medical Latin.
This chapter introduces the theme of violent language within the poem (2.26-30):

porto si capitis morbo temptatur acuto,
alia diuersam lana contecta per aurem
inducta prosunt et eodem balsama pacto;
alia uel ternis piperis terna addita granis
trita linis: certam dabit haec tibi cura salutem.

If a part of the head is attacked with sharp illness, garlics, wrapped with wool, introduced through the opposite ear, and balsam are beneficial in the same way; or three garlics, added to three peppercorns, rubbed on with cloths; this cure will give sure health.

Q. Serenus focuses the idea of war as an attack on the body and its individual parts (temptatur) This attack can come from disease or trauma. Interestingly, when compared to other instances of warlike word usage, this line is the only one paired with a passive verb. The choice of a passive verb emphasizes the weakness of the body’s defense against the onset of illness of the head. Q. Serenus focuses his writings on curing the disease only after it has negatively impacted the body and rarely discloses information on the prevention of disease. He includes garlic and pepper in other treatments; however, the amount and dosage frequency differ. The last sentence of the chapter displays Q. Serenus’ confidence in his remedies. With the use of the indicative mood, dabit, he

---

12 Pepper and garlic are also used in chapters 18 and 38.
boldly assures his audience that good health will come to them if they trust in his treatment plans.

Chapter 3

This chapter, dedicated to dandruff, acts as an effective example of the difference between the focus of topics of Q. Serenus and Pliny.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Liber Medicinalis</em> 3.31, 34</th>
<th><em>Nat.</em> 20.84</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>est insensibilis morbus, sed noxia formae, hanc poterit maluae radix decocta leuare;</em></td>
<td><em>ulcera manantia in capite sanant in urina putrefactae, lichenas et ulcera oris cum melle, radix decocta furfures capitis et dentium mobilitatem.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This disease is an undetectable one, but a damage to the appearance. The mallow root, having been boiled, will be able to alleviate this;</td>
<td>Mallows rotted in urine heal shedding sores on the head, mallows with honey heal lichens and sores of the mouth, the mallow root, having been boiled, heals dandruff of the head and looseness of the teeth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both Q. Serenus and Pliny include diseases that affect appearance, not only health, indicating that the people of the Roman Imperial period cared about their outward appearances in addition to internal health. Because both writers use *radix decocta* (“having been boiled”) to describe the mallow root and its preparation, the recipes appear
more reliable. Although Pliny does not explicitly use *malva* (“mallow”) in the selected sentence, he does apply this word earlier in the chapter. Therefore, the reader can confidently assume that mallow is the main subject of the sentence. Pliny offers a great amount of detail for the different types of mallows and their many uses but does not suggest any alternative treatments for dandruff. Q. Serenus however lists a variety of remedies for dandruff but does not elaborate on the specific uses of mallow. Although Q. Serenus directly borrows from Pliny, the focus of topics differs. Q. Serenus concentrates on giving many cures for a specific ailment, and Pliny centers his discussion on different uses of one ingredient.

Chapter 4

Like dandruff, Q. Serenus provides a cure for a purely cosmetic affliction, the graying of hair (4.43-45):

*quos pudet aetatis longae, quos sancta senectus offendit, cupiunt properos <si> abscondere canos et nigrum crinem fuco simulare doloso,*

If those people who are ashamed of a long lifetime, whom sacred old age offends, if they desire to conceal their hasty gray hair and to imitate dark hair in a deceitful disguise…
Although Q. Serenus gives numerous remedies for graying hair, the language that he uses to describe the reasoning behind this remedy exposes his disapproval of covering up the signs of old age. Q. Serenus asserts that old age is venerable and should not be hidden. By giving remedies for a condition that is not detrimental to bodily health, Q. Serenus respects his audiences’ preferences for physical appearance. He is versatile and willing to provide a wide range of remedies while also passing his own judgement.

Chapter 5

Q. Serenus makes a point to include two famous sufferers of lice, Pherecydes and Sulla, and a vivid account of their demise due to the disease (5.56-63):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{noxia corporibus quaedam de corpore nostro} \\
&\text{progenuit natura uolens abrumpere somnos,} \\
&\text{sensibus et monitis uigiles intendere curas.} \\
&\text{sed quis non paueat Pherecydis fata tragoedi,} \\
&\text{qui nimio sudore fluens animalia taetra} \\
&\text{eduxit, turpi miserum quae morte tulerunt.} \\
&\text{Sylla quoque infelix tali languore peresus} \\
&\text{corruit et foedo se uedit ab agmine uinci.}
\end{align*}
\]

Nature, wanting to disrupt sleep and afflict cares on the senses that had been warned, produced from our body certain things that are harmful to our bodies. But who should not fear the fate of Pherecydes the tragedian, who, pouring with
excessive sweat, bore the offensive creatures, which carried him, miserable, to an unsightly death? Also, unlucky Sulla, eaten up by such languor, fell and saw himself defeated by the shameful army.

Q. Serenus depicts nature as an enemy of men and a bringer of disease. The body creates the creatures that will eventually lead to its own destruction. Q. Serenus likens lice to an army, causing ruin in the body which is defenseless against the external disease. With the use of *nostro* (“our”) and *se* (“himself”), Q. Serenus places emphasis on the attack of one’s own body. There are many accounts of Sulla and his alleged prowess as a general, but information about Pherecydes is more difficult to find and is sourced indirectly. The description of Sulla as *infelix*, which means “unlucky” or “unhappy,” humorously contrasts with Sulla’s cognomen *Felix*, which means the exact opposite. Although Q. Serenus does not explicitly name the disease, information from other writers like Aristotle, Pausanias, Plutarch, and Pliny indicates that the disease is phthiriasis (Cilliers and Retief 36). Aristotle records that Pherecydes of Syria succumbed to the disease. Pausanias explains that Sulla contracted the same disease that attacked Pherecydes because of wrath of Athena after the fall of Athens. Plutarch claims that Sulla’s lifestyle of drinking and consortiing with many women transformed his ulcers into lice. In *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny briefly depicts Sulla’s death due to phthiriasis (26.86):

> *phthiriasi Sulla dictator consumptus est, nascunturque in sanguine ipso hominis animalia exesura corpus.*

---

13 Aristotle *History of Animals* 31; Pausanias *Description of Greece* 1.20.7; Plutarch *Sulla* 36.
The dictator Sulla was consumed by phthiriasis, and creatures that will consume the body are born in the man’s blood itself.

Pliny and Q. Serenus give the same general origin for phthiriasis, and both employ *animalia* to describe the lice themselves. To explain the origin of the disease, Pliny uses *nascuntur*, and Q. Serenus uses *eduxit*. When analyzing their most frequent meanings, *nascor* is used to describe birth and growth while *educo* conveys a military sense. The military use of *educo* can be prominently seen in the works of Caesar. Q. Serenus stresses the warlike nature of phthiriasis by choosing *educo* instead of *nascor*. In contrast to Q. Serenus, Pliny does not directly implicate nature as the cause. Beagon reports that “Pliny never tires of emphasizing the divine power of *Natura*, whose *remedia* far outweigh her poisons” (240), so it is fitting that he does not place the blame on nature.

Chapter 7

Q. Serenus presents a rare instance of preventative medicine when providing a remedy for delirium and other mental diseases (7.95-97):

*non semper praesens dolor est sanabilis: ergo*

*cura magis prodest uenturis obuia morbis*

*atque ideo sanos etiam curarier est par."

---

14 *Educo* is found 26 times in *De Bello Gallico* and 22 times in *De Bello Civili*. 
The present distress is not always curable: therefore, a cure that meets the illness before it comes is more useful and for that reason it is suitable for even the healthy people to be treated.

Q. Serenus recognizes that ailments affecting mental sharpness cannot be cured after they have already had an effect. The head is susceptible to many diseases and disturbances. While this prescription prevents a disease that originates within the body, the other two instances of preventative medicine in *Liber Medicinalis* pertain to external traumas: snake bites (chapter 45) and poisonings by humans (chapter 60).

Chapter 11

Cosmetic imperfections seem to be of great concern for the audience, and Q. Serenus offers solutions for many of these conditions (11.142, 152, 155):

- *inuida si maculat faciem lentigo decoram*...
- *horrebit si liuor atrox aut nigra cicatrix*...
- *si vero vitium est quod ducit ab impete nomen*...

if the envious freckle stains the beautiful face…

if a terrible bruise or dark scar has an unsightly appearance…

but if the disease truly is the one which takes its name from *impetus*…
The grammatical structure remains consistent for each chapter of Liber Medicinalis. Q. Serenus often uses *si* (“if”) to introduce the problem and then instructs the patient on how to treat it. *Impetus* is the first of many examples of semantic extension in Liber Medicinalis. Langslow notes that semantic extension occurs when authors of medical Latin transform the meaning of non-medical words (140). The noun *impetus*, originating from the verb *impeto*, can be translated as “attack” or “onrush” in non-medical Latin. From a medical perspective, the use of *impetus* means “the onset of disease,” and the term *impetigo* refers to various kinds of scaly skin eruptions. The suffix -igo added to the stem of a noun creates abstract and concrete references and is commonly found in the formation of disease names (Langslow 315). The choice to include the origin and transformation of meaning for *impetus* and the corresponding disease *impetigo* could indicate that the audience comprises of readers who are not familiar with the terms of medical Latin.

Chapter 12

In another example of violent word usage, Q. Serenus describes ailments of the ears (12.161):

* cum saevus teneras dolor alte sauciat aures *...

When a fierce pain deeply stabs the delicate ears...
With such violent imagery, Q. Serenus empathizes with the patient and increases the perceived potency of his remedies. If he can cure this painful illness, then the reader is more likely to consider him a reliable source of information. He later claims that one of the cures was given to him by Aesculapius, an important god of healing (12.181-183):

\[
\text{uis et Phoebigenae diuinam discere curam?}
\]

\[
\text{si qua uel annosis confecta doloribus auris}
\]

\[
\text{plecitur, hoc uno medicamine cuncta uigebit.}
\]

And do you want to learn the divine cure of the son of Apollo? Even if the ear, having been exhausted with chronic pains, is beaten, all will thrive with this one medication.

Q. Serenus delivers a recipe for a medication that can allegedly cure even chronic pains and afflictions. He invites the reader to learn divine cures with the phrase \textit{uis et} (“and do you want”) twice within the poem.\(^{15}\) With this direct address to the audience, Q. Serenus stresses the importance of the divine source of the cure. It is fitting that the recipe originates from Aesculapius because his temples were renowned for the healing of chronic diseases. The language used to depict the long-lasting misfortunes of the ear and the connection to Aesculapius elevates the poetic structure of this medical treatise. With the inclusion of both poetic and technical elements, Q. Serenus showcases his proficiency in poetry and medical Latin. The support of an important healing god makes this specific

\(^{15}\) See chapter 19 for the second address to Aesculapius.
remedy and the poem as a whole more credible to the reader. Q. Serenus supports the divine as an important contributor to healing.

Chapter 13

In a poetic description, Q. Serenus introduces the importance of eye health (13.188-192):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{summa boni est alacres homini contingere uisus,} \\
\text{quos quasi custodes defensoresque pericli} \\
\text{prospiciens summa natura locauit in arce,} \\
\text{sic tamen ut nullos paterentur desuper ictus} \\
\text{atque supercilio pauidi tegerentur opaco.}
\end{align*}
\]

The greatest of good is for men to attain lively eyes which foreseeing nature placed in the highest citadel as guards and defenders against danger, however, so that they should be vulnerable to no blows from above and they, fearful, should be protected with a shady eyebrow.

This introduction is a slight departure from the structure of the poem thus far. Q. Serenus structures the majority of the chapters as follows: introduction of the ailment with a brief description of symptoms, optional inclusion of examples of the illness throughout history, and immediate listing of remedies with their associated ingredients and preparations. With this longer description, Q. Serenus emphasizes the eyes as integral parts of the body.
and gives an anatomical explanation for the presence and placement of eyebrows. The word *visus* is another example of semantic extension. In non-medical Latin, *visus* means “sight,” “vision,” or “appearance”. Q. Serenus specifies the meaning of *visus* to indicate the body part that gives sight. The present participle *prospiciens*, which means foreseeing or watching, personifies nature and reveals that she has the ability to see and to give sight. This brief positive acknowledgement makes the following negative descriptions of nature even more upsetting.\(^{16}\)

Chapter 14

For defects of the teeth and bad breath, Q. Serenus presents many remedies with exotic ingredients such as mastic, a resin made from the rare mastic tree, and murex, an expensive shellfish used to make the Tyrian purple dye (14.238):

\[
\textit{ambitiosa putas? sunt ista salubria cunctis.}
\]

Do you think these things ostentatious? There are things which are beneficial for all.

Q. Serenus addresses the price of the ingredients included in his recipes and supplies remedies with more accessible ingredients. He includes alternative ingredients like mouse droppings, earthworms, and salt (14.239-246). The inclusion of lower cost, more readily

\(^{16}\) Chapters 5, 29, 34, and 58 show Q. Serenus’ critical beliefs of nature.
available ingredients increases the appeal of the poem and expands the audience to include lower income households.

Chapter 15

Q. Serenus addresses environmental causes of illness when giving cures for the throat (15.253-260):

\[
\begin{align*}
aegrescunt tenerae fauces, & cum frigoris atri \\
uis subiit uel cum uentis agitabilis aer \\
uertitur atque ipsas flatus grauis inficit undas \\
uel rabidus clamor, fracto cum forte sonore \\
plenum radit iter. sic est Hortensius olim \\
absumptus; causis etenim confectus agendis \\
obticuit cum uox domino uiuente periret \\
et nondum extincti moreretur lingua diserti.
\end{align*}
\]

Tender throats become ill when assaults of gloomy cold approach or when the disturbed air is turned by winds and a heavy breeze corrupts the waves themselves or a savage shouting scrapes the path filled with broken sound by chance. In this way Hortensius was destroyed once; because he, exhausted with arguing court cases, was struck silent when the voice with the living master was perishing and the tongue of the orator not yet killed was dying.
Like phthiriasis, nature causes illness of the throat. The imbalance of nature causes imbalance of bodily health. The use of violent language dramatizes the ailments of the throat and marks the environment as an important factor of health. The change in weather, especially the onset of cold, affects the incidence of disease in both ancient and modern times. Q. Serenus also explains that illness of the throat can arise from human actions. With striking imagery, the audience learns that Hortensius, a famous orator and rival of Cicero, experienced a horrible death due to problems with the throat. The distinction between the living man and the dying voice and tongue emphasizes the severity of the illness. Just like modern home remedies, Q. Serenus recommends boiling and drinking a combination of honey and water to soothe the throat.

Chapter 18

Q. Serenus involves repeated dosages in his remedy for the gall bladder (18.329-332):

\[
\begin{align*}
lutea si crescent & et cunctis noxia fella, \\
alia parua nouem, & piperis tot permole grana, \\
quae cyatho diluta & gari mandesque bibesque: \\
haec iterum septena & capis, post denique quina. \\
\end{align*}
\]

And if the yellow biles, harmful to all, increase, thoroughly grind nine small garlics, as many peppercorns, which have been diluted with a cyathus of fish

---

17. *Airs, Waters, Places* by Hippocrates gives more information about the ancient perspective of the environmental effects on health.
sauce, and you will both chew and drink [this]: you take these things again seven at a time, afterwards, finally, five at a time.

Yellow bile is one part of the four humors: yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. The balance of the four humors and their relation to health was an important concept in Humorism and the Hippocratic corpus. The imbalance of humors can also cause gout.\footnote{\textit{Liber Medicinalis} 41.777.}

Although other recipes in the poem do specify the amount of ingredients required, no other recipe calls for specific repeated doses of the treatment. The concoction is first administered in one dose, then in seven doses, and finally in five doses. Q. Serenus does not explain the reasoning behind the doses; however, Pliny gives insight into the popular beliefs for numbers (\textit{Nat.} 28.6):

\begin{quote}
\textit{cur inpares numeros ad omnia uehementiores credimus, idque in febris dierum observatione intellegitur.}
\end{quote}

Why do we believe that odd numbers are more powerful for everything, and that is noticed in the observation of days for fevers.

In a chapter that questions the accepted beliefs for a variety of topics, Pliny reveals that odd numbers are considered more potent than even numbers. Although he does not inject any information about the origin of this belief, the reader can infer that it held much popularity because Pliny chose to address it. Pliny’s report about the importance of odd
numbers in relation to fevers will be valuable when examining Q. Serenus’ analysis of fevers later in the poem.\textsuperscript{19}

Chapter 19

Q. Serenus includes cures for ailments in the sphere of women’s health (19.360-366):

\begin{quote}
\textit{uis et Phoebigenae caelestia sumere dona,}
\textit{ubera cum taetris laniata doloribus horrent?}
\textit{nauis ramentum et quae nomine prasion herba est}
\textit{et quae vulgari sermone insana uocatur}
\textit{(Graecus hyoscyamon propria scit dicere lingua)}
\textit{nec non et calami radix lapathique legumen}
\textit{mixta dabunt miras (experto crede) medelas.}
\end{quote}

And do you want to seize the heavenly gifts of the son of Apollo, when the breasts, having been torn with shocking pain, stand erect? Shaving from ships and the herb which is called \textit{prasion} by name and the herb which in common language is said to be widely known as insane-causing (the Greek knows to call it \textit{hyoscyamon} in his own language) and also both the root of the reed and seed of sorrel mixed up will give amazing cures (trust in the experienced).

\textsuperscript{19} See chapters 48-51 which cover fevers.
Q. Serenus opens this remedy for healing of the breasts by again claiming that the cures originate from Aesculapius. Diseases of the breast were commonly reported to be healed at the Temple of Aesculapius.\footnote{Wickkiser, Bronwen. *Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece.*} Appropriate cures appear to be prasion ("white horehound") and hyoscyamon ("henbane") (Pearce 60). The Greek writers Hippocrates (460-375 BCE), Theophrastus (371-287 BCE), and Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 AD) also work with πράσιον.\footnote{Hippocrates *De Mulierum Affectibus* 224; Theophrastus *Historia Plantarum* 6.3.5; Dioscorides *De Materia medica* 3.105.}

The inclusion of a relative clause to present a Greek medical term is rare in medical Latin (Langslow 80). The relative clause *quaem nomine prasion est* ("which is called prasion by name") is a restrictive relative clause. Restrictive relative clauses, also called defining relative clauses, are crucial for identification of the disease. The presentation of *hyoscyamon*, which he gives in its Greek name, invokes many questions. Did Q. Serenus not know that there is a Latin derivate for this herb? This option is unlikely because Q. Serenus drew much inspiration and information from Pliny and Pliny employs the Latinized version, *hyoscyamus*, in *Naturalis Historia*. Was the Latin derivate not used frequently in medical Latin and, therefore, not necessary to include in this poem? This option may be true because the Latin derivate is only used by Pliny and Celsus. Did Q. Serenus deliberately choose to not include Latin derivate because it would be unfamiliar to the reader? This option may also be true because Q. Serenus ends the chapter by explicitly telling the reader to trust in the experienced. This statement implies that the reader is a common man or woman, not a medical writer or physician who would already have some knowledge and experience.
Chapter 20

Q. Serenus creates a personal relationship with the reader when supplying remedies for the vomiting of food and blood (20.367-369):

\[
\textit{si stomachus nondum concoctas expuit escas} \\
\textit{et magis atque magis uitium recolendo ualescit,} \\
\textit{alia caedemus crebrumque trahemus odorem.}
\]

If the stomach ejects foods not yet digested and the fault grows strong more and more with repetition, we will cut garlics and draw in the repeated odor.

Q. Serenus deviates from the usual use of imperatives and indicatives in the second person when he utilizes \textit{caedemus} and \textit{trahemus}. Because Q. Serenus rarely uses first person indicative verbs, the choice to include them creates a sense of personal connection and empathy for the sick.\textsuperscript{22} Instead of merely telling the reader how to prepare and administer the remedies, he inserts himself into the healing process. Garlic, a popular ingredient in the remedies of \textit{Liber Medicinalis}, is given.\textsuperscript{23}

Chapter 21

Q. Serenus uses the fourfold structure to deliver inexpensive recipes for a pain in the side (21.392-401):

\textsuperscript{22} The use of first person plural indicative verbs occurs only 19 times throughout \textit{Liber Medicinalis}.
\textsuperscript{23} Chapters 2, 18, 58 also include garlic.
What may I say about the remedies made by Philo for many things, what may I say about the various antidotes? Let the rich seek these things, but let us speak about the teachings friendly to the poor. And indeed, a lobe of the liver of a wolf will be sought and at the same time costum and a leaf and pepper will be joined; these things diluted in hard wine are given to be drunk. And there is a force of ailment, that is called telum, when suddenly a swift mad pain from a strike rages: for this a peach will give a drink from the inner core; this cure was proved to me sufficiently by an accident which showed its efficacy.

Q. Serenus again includes a recipe that is more accessible and affordable. Costum is derived from the Greek κόστος. Costum is an aromatic plant which “exhibits anti-inflammatory, anti-ulcer, anticancer, and hepatoprotective activities” (Pandey 380). In
another example of semantic extension, Q. Serenus describes telum which takes its name from its swift nature. In non-medical Latin, telum means “spear,” “missile,” or “weapon.” In medical Latin, telum means a “pain in the side.” Telum only appears in Liber Medicinalis and Origines by Isidorus Hispalensis. Instead of the usual assertion that the cure was procured from a god, Q. Serenus discloses that he found the remedy by accident. He does assure the reader that he was satisfied by the results.

Chapter 22

Cures for the spleen includes specific ingredients that have not been affected by iron tools (22.410-413):

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{nec non intactam ferro quam uideris alnum}, \\
  \text{huic liber eripitur ferro sine decoquiturque}, \\
  \text{donec uictarum pars tertia subsit aquarum}: \\
  \text{hinc medico potu pulsus dolor omnis abibit.}
\end{align*}
\]

And also, you may see an alder which is untouched by iron, from this, the inner bark is seized without iron and is boiled until a third part of the subdued waters is at the bottom: hence all the pain, having been expelled by the healing drink, will depart.

The focus on tools to obtain the ingredients is rare and only appears here and in chapter 25. Because he does not include any warnings about gathering materials by hand, the
importance lies on iron tools. He does not include an explanation for why the alder tree must not be touched by iron, but Pliny does give his opinion on the matter (Nat. 34.138):

\[ sed eodem ad bella, caedes, latrocinia...quam ob rem culpa eius non naturae fiat accepta. \]

But we likewise use it for wars and slaughter and brigandage…let us therefore debit the blame not to nature, but to man.

Iron can be transformed into a variety of dangerous weapons. Pliny believes that the evils of iron arise from humans, and he urges the reader not to blame nature for them. Pliny consistently has a positive view of nature. Pliny's strong opinion about iron might explain Q. Serenus’ concern. If such an evil weapon made contact with the medicine, it might take away its healing power.

Chapter 23

_Praecordia_ is a rare example of compounding in the Latin lexicon. Langslow explains that most Latin authors did not expand their vocabulary with compounding and that only the poets contributed to the small number of compounds that is present (275). The word _praecordia_ breaks down into _praecordia_ as _praecordia_ which means “in front” and _cor_ which means “heart.” _Praecordia_ can refer generally to the organs immediately below the heart or specifically to the diaphragm which is the separation between the contents of the

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24 See chapter 5 for more discussion of Pliny’s positive view of nature.
thoracic and abdominal cavity. Treatment for inflammation of the diaphragm includes the transmission of disease to another being (23.439-443):

\[
\textit{quin etiam catulum lactantem adponere membris}
\]
\[
\textit{conuenit: omne malum transcurrere fertur in illum:}
\]
\[
\textit{cui tamen extincto munus debetur humandi.}
\]
\[
\textit{humanos quoque contactus mala tanta sequuntur}
\]
\[
\textit{et iunctus uitium ducit de coniuge coniux.}
\]

Even also it is suitable to place a suckling puppy next to the limbs: it is said that all harm travels across into it: nevertheless, the service of burying is owed to the dead [puppy]. And also, evils so great follow human infections and the wedded spouse leads the affliction to the partner.

Q. Serenus claims that the swelling of the diaphragm can be transferred to an animal. Although some diseases can be spread between humans and animals, transmission to another being would not cure the illness. Disease is much more frequently transmitted among humans, especially those who are in close proximity. Q. Serenus uses \textit{ducit} (“leads”) to represent the action of the disease spreading. Ironically, \textit{ducere} also has the meaning of “to marry” or “to take as wife.” Instead of the happy circumstance of marriage, the spouse is spreading a horrible internal affliction. Q. Serenus places the responsibility of the funeral rites on the person who has been healed, thus, bestowing
respect onto the animal. This chapter is the only one to include information about the events after death.

Chapter 25

Q. Serenus includes ingredients untouched by iron and ingredients from unlikely sources for pains of the stomach (25.480-484):

\[
\textit{nec non iungenda est utero noua uirga myricae:} \\
\textit{inlaesa haec ferro terraque intacta geratur.} \\
\textit{aut medio uentris prodest aspargere terram,} \\
\textit{quam signauerunt uestigia pressa rotarum.} \\
\textit{proderit et puluis facili sub cardine raptus.}
\]

And also, a new twig of tamarisk should be joined to the belly: this, unharmed by iron and untouched by earth, should be worn. Or it is beneficial to scatter over the middle of the stomach earth, which the pressed tracks of wheels marked. And the dust seized from under an easily movable hinge will be beneficial.

Like chapter 22, Q. Serenus specifies that the ingredient should not be touched by iron. Even though tamarisk is a tree that grows from the earth, he adds the qualification that the fresh twig should not be touched by the earth. In addition to concern about the origin of the ingredients, healing properties seem to be derived from the action of the ingredient.
The motion of the wheels and hinge could represent the movement of pain out of the body.

Chapter 26

With a vivid description of its causes and symptoms, the reader learns of the horrors of dropsy (26.493-497):

* corrupti iecoris uitio uel splenis acerbus
* crescit hydrops aut cum siccatae febre medullae
* atque auiae fauces gelidum traxere liquorem.
* tum lympha interius uitio gliscente tumescit
* secernens miseram proprio de uiscere pellem.

Harsh dropsy arises from disease of a corrupted liver or spleen or when marrows, dried by fever, and a greedy throat dragged in icy liquid. Then water inflates the insides when the affliction flares up, severing the wretched skin from its own organs.

Dropsy, also known as edema, is an abnormal accumulation of fluid (Estes 689).

Langslow argues that *hydrops* was the ordinary Latin word for dropsy by the time of Horace, so Q. Serenus would not need to include the etymology of *hydrops* (94). Even though it is assumed that the audience recognizes the term *hydrops* and is familiar with
the disease, Q. Serenus includes an intense description of its effects. The imagery of skin and viscera being severed dramatizes the affliction.

Chapter 27

The earliest physicians came to Rome from Greece during the second half of the third century BCE. The acceptance of Greek physicians stimulated the formation of a profession discipline of medicine throughout the Roman empire. There is much evidence that medical professionals, even those at the lower levels, had a high level of literacy in the subject of healing. With no formal regulations on education or practice, the title of “physician” could apply to many people with varied skill sets. In the only reference to medici (“physicians”), Q. Serenus compares the price of remedies (27.518-521):

\[
\textit{multos praeterea medici componere sucos}
\]

\[
\textit{adsuerunt; pretiosa tamen cum ueneris emptum,}
\]

\[
\textit{falleris frustraque immensa nomismata fundes.}
\]

\[
\textit{quin age et in tenui certam cognosce salutem.}
\]

Moreover, doctors are accustomed to put together many healing juices; however, when you buy something for an expensive price, you will be cheated and will pour out endless coins in vain. Why not come and learn the sure remedy for a small [price].

\footnote{Israelowich 1972: 2 and Harris 1991: 5.}
Q. Serenus claims that the cures made and advertised by *medici* are expensive and ineffective. This negative perspective implies that Q. Serenus does not belong to this profession. The sense of authority created by the imperative verbs *age* and *cognosce* reveals that Q. Serenus holds knowledge of medicine even though he might not be a physician. Pliny has the same negative opinion about physicians, especially the physician Asclepiades (*Nat. 26.16*):

> id solum possumus indignari, unum hominem e levissima gente sine opibus ullis orsum vectigalis sui causa repente leges salutis humano generi dedisse, qua stamen postea abrogavere multi.

One thing alone moves me to anger: that one man, of a very superficial race, beginning with no resources, in order to increase his income suddenly gave to the human race rules for health, which however have subsequently been generally discarded.

Pliny gives an impassioned depiction of the greed and danger of physicians. Like Q. Serenus’ account, the physician tricks the vulnerable patient for his own gain.

**Chapter 28**

This chapter begins the ongoing analysis of contradiction within the field of medicine (28.534-535):
tam uarii casus mortalia saecla fatigant,

ut sint diuersis obnoxia corpora morbis.

So many different misfortunes tire the mortal ages that bodies are vulnerable to opposing diseases.

Humans are defenseless against disease, and this sentiment is supported by the small amount of preventative medicine in *Liber Medicinalis*. The body is subject to the extremes of disease. Q. Serenus specifically points out that the stomach can be blocked shut or open too much. He later gives remedies for patients who have too little or too much urine in chapter 31. The poem itself serves as an opposition to disease and trauma.

Chapter 29

Q. Serenus expounds on the misfortunes brought by nature (29.558-560):

*quid non aduersum miseris mortalibus addit
natura, interno cum uiscere taenia serpens
et lumbricus edax uiuant inimica creanti?*

What adverse thing does nature not add to wretched mortals, that the crawling tapeworm and the voracious intestinal worm live with the internal viscera as enemies to the creator.
The most common meaning of *taenia* is “band,” “ribbon,” or “fillet;” however, the meaning can be extended to tapeworm. The most common meaning of *lumbricus* is “intestinal worm” or “maw worm,” but it can also refer to an earthworm. In reference to the medical uses of the words, both *taenia* and *lumbricus* were used by Pliny, Cato, and Largus.²⁶

Q. Serenus argues that nature attaches all adversities to mortals. He does not supply any reasoning for the seemingly evil disposition of nature. Like phthiriasis, the cause of the illness arises from the body itself. Nature violates the perceived control that humans have over their own bodies. The betrayal of one’s own body is shocking. With few medical treatises that also incorporated poetic elements, the information introduced by *Liber Medicinalis* and its vivid presentation might have been distressing to the audience. I believe that this graphic description is an intentional addition by Q. Serenus rather than a mere feature of the violence in Latin epic poetry. With miraculous cures and comforting reassurances, Q. Serenus highlights his knowledge of medicine and power to overcome the adversity of disease.

Chapter 30

Q. Serenus extends the meaning of two words when focusing on the colon (30.574):

> cum column, inuisum morbi genus, intima carpit...

²⁶ *Taenia* can be found in Plin. *Nat.* 11.113; Cato *Agr.* 126; Larg. 140.  
*Lumbricus* can be found in Plin. *Nat.* 27.25; Cato *Agr.* 126; Larg. 141.
When *colum*, an invisible type of disease, harvests the intestines…

*Colum* can refer to the colon itself or to a disease of the colon. Authors such as Celsus, Cassius Felix, and Pliny use *colum* both as an anatomical term and name of the disease. Langslow remarks that “the ambiguous use of the word illustrates the ease with which the semantic extension can occur” (92). As seen here and in many other cases in *Liber Medicinalis*, semantic extension is an integral component of medical Latin. *Intimus* means “innermost things,” but in a medical perspective, it can be translated as “intestines.” It is unusual that Q. Serenus does not use the more technical term for intestines, *intestinum*, since he has used a great number of specialized terms thus far. The use of *carpit*, which means “harvest, pluck, or gather,” personifies and gives more power to the disease. Poets usually apply this word when describing crops and farming, but some, notably Horace, elevate it to create a metaphorical meaning.²⁷ The disease plays the role of the farmer, gaining subsistence from the source of nutrients, the human body.

Chapter 32

Fertility problems have various sources and cures (32.603-608):

*inrita coniugii sterilis si munera languent*

*nec subolis spes est multos iam uana per annos*

*(femineo fiat utio res necne, silebo:*

²⁷ In *Odes* 1.11, Horace strays away from the traditional agricultural meaning of *carpere*. He uses the phrase *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) to urge the reader to live in the moment and not worry about future problems.
hoc poterit magni quartus monstrare Lucreti)—

sed natura tamen medicamine uicta potenti

saepe dedit fetus studio curante paratos.

If ineffective services of a sterile union are weak and hope of offspring is now in vain through many years (the situation may happen from feminine fault or not, I will be silent: the fourth book of the great Lucretius will be able to show this)—but nevertheless nature, conquered by a strong medicine, often gave children prepared with healing zeal.

The adjectives inrita ("ineffective") and sterilis ("sterile") accentuate the infertility of the couple. By redirecting the audience to Lucretius, Q. Serenus gives his support to Lucretius and his beliefs about fertility. In the fourth book of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius gives the opinion that the inability to conceive can arise from abnormal motility of a man’s seed, an unsuitable mix of male and female seed, or deflection of the seed by the woman (4.1233-1277). Lucretius places blame on the husband, wife, or the chemistry between them. To obtain fertility, Lucretius advocates for offerings to the gods. In contrast, Q. Serenus supplies material remedies. He outlines one recipe for the wife alone and a second recipe for both spouses (32.609-614). He does not specify a cure only for the husband, therefore, indicating that he does not place sole blame on the male side of the relationship. With enthusiasm from both parts of the relationship and an effective medicine, a previously infertile couple can conquer the restraints created by nature.
Chapter 33

Chapter 33 includes two aspects of ritual: an unusual action done to an ingredient and an incantation (33.651-655):

\[\textit{quod si feminei properabit sanguinis imber},\]
\[\textit{est qui frusta molae percussu decutit uno},\]
\[\textit{quorum aliquod lanis tectum ad praecordia nectit},\]
\[\textit{haec simul incantans: sisti debere cruorem},\]
\[\textit{ut lapis ille uiae solitos iam destitit orbes}.\]

But if the flow of feminine blood will quicken, there are some who knock off a piece of millstone with one strike, who bind it to the chest wrapped with wools, at the same time chanting these words: “let blood be halted, as this stone has now ceased its accustomed rotation of path.”

Like chapter 25, the action of the healing ingredient is important. Just as one strike is sufficient to knock off a piece of the millstone, this one remedy will stop the problem. The added component of chanting may increase the efficacy of the remedy. The chant addresses the blood as if it were an entity with volition and the ability to understand reason.

Chapter 34

Nature launches its attack on the body through eyelashes (34.660-662):
namque oculos infesta pilorum tela lacessunt,
quodque illis dederat uallum natura tuendis,
inde inimica seges proprios desaeuit in orbes.

For indeed troublesome spears of eyelashes attack the eyes, and nature that had given those as a wall to those who are to be defended, from there the enemy thicket rages into its own eyes.

Eyelashes, which are meant to protect the eyes, sometimes turn against them. The intense, warlike language dramatizes a small problem which is not life-threatening in most cases. *Orbis* means “circle,” “ring,” “rotation,” or “the Earth” in nonmedical Latin but is extended to mean “the eyes” in medical Latin.

Chapter 38

Q. Serenus introduces a novel word to represent a carbuncle (38.718-720):

*horrendus magis est perimit qui corpora carbo:*

*urit hic inclusus, uitalia rumpit apertus.*

*hunc ueteres olim uariis pepulere medellis.*

The carbuncle which destroys bodies is more horrible: this enclosed burns, this exposed tears the vitals. Once our forefathers defeated this with different cures.
Q. Serenus contrasts the effects of carbuncles when they are closed or open, but both forms lead to injury. Carbuncle, a bacterial skin infection, arises from contact with inflammatory particles in air that has been polluted by coal smoke (Swiderski 8). Carbo can be literally translated as “coal,” and Q. Serenus is the only writer to extend the meaning into “carbuncle.” Like carbo, the most frequent meaning of carbunculus is “coal,” and the extended meaning is “carbuncle.” Other writers, like Pliny, Celsus, and Largus, employ carbunculus instead of carbo. Q. Serenus deviates from his usual source of inspiration and information, Pliny. It is unclear why Q. Serenus invented a new meaning for carbo and did not utilize carbunculus.

Chapter 40

The chapter title, igni sacro dimouendo, can be translated as “for driving away the sacred fire.” However, Q. Serenus calls the disease “fire” (40.754-755):

est etiam morbi species, quae dicitur ‘ignis,’
languida quod multo torrentur membra calore.

Also, there is a type of disease, which is called ‘fire,’ because the weak limbs are burned with much heat.

28 Plin. Nat. 32.127, 26.5; Cels. 6.6.10, Larg. 63.
As Pearce suggests, the fire could refer to the diseases that modern medicine calls St. Anthony’s fire, erysipelas, or shingles (41). Erysipelas, which is derived from the Greek ἐρύσιπελάς, is another name for St. Anthony’s fire. St. Anthony’s fire is a manifestation of ergotism, a disease caused by the vasoconstrictive properties of ergot and characterized by burning pain and blackened limbs (De Costa 1768). Ergot is a product of fungus which grows on rye. Because rye was not a main staple in the Greek and Roman diet, there are no conclusive cases of ergotism in the literature. An alternative explanation for the identity of sacred fire is shingles. Shingles, an infection resulting from reactivation of the same virus that causes chickenpox, presents with unilateral rashes and lesions that cause severe pain (Cohen 1). Although shingles is a possibility, Q. Serenus does not include a description of an earlier illness that would represent chickenpox or specify that the symptoms occur on only one side of the body.

Chapter 41

Q. Serenus reveals that he acquires information from reading (41.785-788):

\[ non \ audita \ mihi \ fas \ sit, \ sed \ lecta \ referre: \]
\[ hoc \ quidam \ rabidus \ morbo \ per \ tempora \ messis \]
\[ uicino \ plantas \ frumenti \ pressit \ aceruo \]
\[ euasitque \ grauem \ casu \ medicante \ dolorem. \]
Let me relate what I have not heard but have read: someone mad with this disease, during the seasons of harvest, pressed the soles of the feet in a nearby heap of grain and escaped the heavy pain with a healing accident.

By including an anecdote of a person who suffered with the disease, Q. Serenus relates to the audience. Although he did not hear this story personally, Q. Serenus places trust in the literature. If a cure is effective, then the circumstance in which it is discovered should not affect its use. In chapter 21, Q. Serenus also discovered a cure without specifically seeking it out. Only the remedies in this chapter and chapter 21 are noted to be found by accident. Q. Serenus more frequently attributes divine influence for the origin of his medicaments.

Chapter 42

The second half of the poem shifts away from natural diseases and towards more traumatic events. Q. Serenus begins with injuries deliberately caused by humans (42.789-790):

\[ \textit{natura} \textit{e u} \textit{ii} \textit{s med} \textit{icas obiecimus artes,} \]
\[ \textit{nunc et fortuna} \textit{e iaculis obsistere par est.} \]

We have exposed the healing skills for diseases of nature, and now it is suitable to oppose the javelins of fate.
The first person plural *obiecimus* includes the reader in the poem. This is the first reference to fate in the poem, and there is only one other reference in chapter 52. With the remedies presented in *Liber Medicinalis*, Q. Serenus gives humans the power to work against fate.

Chapter 43

Q. Serenus depicts the horrors of the human condition and acknowledges that he is not able to give cures for all ailments (43.806-810):

> quam magna humanae mala pondera condicionis!
> tam multae innumeri species mihi uulneris adsunt,
> ut nequeam proprias cunctis adscribere curas.
> isdem igitur monitis casus sanabimus omnes,
> sic tamen ut nullus medicinam luserit error.

How great are the evil weights of the human condition! So many countless types of injury are present for me, that I may be unable to prescribe individual cures for all. Therefore, we will heal all misfortunes with the same precepts, however, in a way that no mistake may ruin the cure.

Q. Serenus uses adjectives like *quam magna* ("how great") and *tam multae* ("so many") to increase the severity of the suffering caused by disease and injury.²⁹ Q.

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²⁹ A similar dramatic description of human misfortunes can be found in the Sibyl’s description of Tartarus (*Aeneid* 6.625-627).
Serenus moves beyond this bleak description and begins to inspire hope in the reader. He acknowledges that he is not able to discuss specific treatment for each types of injury and instead gives treatments that will allegedly work for all. Interestingly, he contradicts himself and gives different treatments for many traumas in the following sections.

Chapter 45

Q. Serenus dramatizes the severity of snake bites and the poison of vipers (45.824-826):

\[
cuspidnon quisquam, longae neque caede sarissae,
\]

\[
fulmine non gladii, uolumcris nec felle sagittae
\]

\[
quam cito uipereo potis est affligier ictu.
\]

Not anyone is able to be struck with a spear, nor with the strike of a long pike, nor with a thunderbolt of a sword, nor with the poison of a flying arrow more quickly than a viper bite.

Humans have created many weapons such as spears, pikes, swords, and arrows, but none compare to the creations of nature. With the repeated negation created by *non, neque*, and *nec*, Q. Serenus asserts that snake venom is faster than any military tool. Lucan also warns of the vast danger of serpents in his portrayal of the serpent attack on Cato’s
army. Both authors expound on the dangers of many types of serpents with violent language. The mixing of military and medical language creates a dynamic narrative.

Q. Serenus addresses the topic of preventative medicine when supporting the remedies of other writers (45.842-847):

\[
\text{si uero horrendum uulnus fera iecerit aspis,}
\]

\[
\text{urinam credunt propriam conducere potu:}
\]

\[
\text{Varronis fuit ista senis sententia. nec non,}
\]

\[
\text{Plinius ut memorat, sumpti iuuat imber aceti.}
\]

\[
\text{dicendum et quae sit praecox medicina timenti;}
\]

\[
\text{cautio namque potest diros praeuertere morsus.}
\]

But if the wild asp has sent a horrible wound, they believe that your own urine is helpful as a drink: this was the opinion of old Varro. And indeed, as Pliny recounts that a drink of the selected vinegar helps. And I should say what preventative medicine there is for one who is afraid; for caution is able to anticipate dreadful bites.

Q. Serenus employs various words when describing snakes. Aspis refers to a venomous snake of North Africa, an asp. Aspis was mainly used in prose before Q. Serenus and Pliny, so its usage in Liber Medicinalis and Naturalis Historia is unusual. Uipereus in the previous quotation means “belonging to a viper or similar snake” and was mainly

---

30 Bellum Civile 9.700-733.
31 Cic. Rab. Post. 23; Vell. 2.87.1; Sen. Dial. 5.30.1.
used in poetry. In *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny uses *aspis* on three occasions (28.65, 36.77, 21.147) but does not use *uipereus*. Q. Serenus deviates from Pliny by using *uipereus*, thus, proving that he does not merely copy Pliny. Q. Serenus advocates for preventative medicine that goes beyond physical ingredients. Caution and awareness of surroundings can work as effectively, if not better, than treatments after the trauma has occurred. By placing emphasis on the benefits of human action, Q. Serenus empowers the reader.

Chapter 46

Q. Serenus covers remedies for attacks of the scorpion, spider, and shrew-mouse in chapter 46:

| sunt miniae specie, sed dirae uulnere pestes, | There are pests, the smallest in appearance, but dreadful with respect to the wound, which, hiding in a small body, deceive more, that is, the fierce scorpion and spider: these evils always seize the peaceful sleep in the middle of the night. And Orion, overthrown, gave warnings to us, that great things may often be destroyed by small venoms. But if |
| quae magis in tenui latitantes corpore fallunt, | |
| scorpius ut grauis est et araneus: haec mala semper | |
| captant securos multa iam nocte sopores. | |
| et documenta dedit nobis prostratus Orion, magna quod exiguis perimantur saepe uenenis. | |
| quod si uulnus atrox incussit scorpius ardens, continuo capitur; tunc digna caede reuulsus uulneribusque aptus fertur reuocare uenenum. | |
| aut calidis pelagi lymphis loca laesa fouentur. | |

---

siue meri potu dissoluitur improba pestis.

ad cunctos autem morsus ictusque minorum

caseus aptus erit pauïdae de lacte capellae

cumque hoc absumi debetit origanus herba:

haec duo mirificis curabunt icta medelis.

nec non fenuculo calidum adnectetur acetum

aut uium sulphur sicci cum faece Lyaei.

exiguo piperis cerebrum conspargito galli,

quo lita sanescent depulso membra dolore.

sin autem muris nocuit uiolentia caeci,

quae sola signauit uoluendis orbita plaustris,

inline: mira datur uili de puluere cura.

savage wound, immediately it is

seized; then it, torn apart with a

worthy slaughter and fastened to the

wounds, is said to call back the

poison. Or the injured places are

bathed with hot waters of the sea. Or

the wicked poison is dissolved with

a drink of neat wine. However, for

all bites and blows of small

[creatures], cheese from the milk of

the frightened goat will be suitable

and with this the herb origan should

be consumed: these two things will

heal stings with amazing cures.

Also, hot vinegar with fennel will be

rubbed on or fresh sulfur with the

dregs of dry wine. You will sprinkle

the brain of a rooster with a small

amount of pepper, with the limbs

rubbed, they heal with the pain

expelled. But if violence of a shrew

mouse injured [you], smear on the

things which only the track from
rolling wagons marked: an amazing cure is given from inexpensive dust.

The beginning of chapter 46 provides a clear example of how Q. Serenus creates a striking portrayal of trauma and presents key information about healing with emotional language (46.860-865):

*sunt minima specie, sed dirae uulnere pestes,*

*quae magis in tenui latitantes corpore fallunt,*

*scorpius ut grauis est et araneus: haec mala semper captant securos multa iam nocte sopores.*

*et documenta dedit nobis prostratus Orion,*

*magna quod exiguis perimantur saepe uenenis.*

There are pests, the smallest in appearance, but dreadful with respect to the wound, which, hiding in a small body, deceive more, that is, the fierce scorpion and spider: these evils always seize the peaceful sleep in the middle of the night. And Orion, overthrown, gave warnings to us, that great things may often be destroyed by small venoms.

Q. Serenus chooses to add mythology and warlike imagery into this introduction. Pliny, his primary source, does not include these additions and strictly adheres to lists of
information. In the first line of this chapter, Q. Serenus repeats the same structure: an adjective in the nominative case (minimae/dirae) followed by a noun in the ablative case (specie/uulnere). The repeated format emphasizes the close relationship of the topics: small organisms can cause a large amount of damage to the body. Animals like scorpions and spiders can be the source of mala (“evil”) and hold the power to destroy even large and clever animals like humans. Q. Serenus stresses the destructive power of small animals with examples both from the real world and from the mythical world. Orion, a giant, was honored by the gods as a hero after he saved Leto from a scorpion. Even though Orion had a noble purpose, he was defeated by a tiny animal. The contrasting word choice of magna (“great things”) and exiguis venenis (“small venoms”) implies a kind of struggle between good and evil. Q. Serenus condenses material from two different books of Naturalis Historia and makes his own additions of warlike imagery, emotional language, and ethical views:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liber Medicinalis 46.866-870</th>
<th>Nat. 29.91</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>quod si uulnus atrox incussit scorpius ardens, continuo capitur; tunc digna caede reuulsus uulneribusque aptus fertur reuocare uenenum. aut calidis pelagi lymphis loca laesa fouentur. siue meri potu dissoluitur improba pestis.</td>
<td>prodest et gallinarum fimi cinis initus, draconis iocur, lacerta divulsa, mus divulsus, scorpio ipse suae plagae inpositus aut assus in cibo sumptus aut potus in meri cyathis duobus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
But if the stinging scorpion inflicted a savage wound, immediately it is seized; then it, torn apart with a worthy slaughter and fastened to the wounds, is said to call back the poison. Or the injured places are bathed with hot waters of the sea. Or the wicked poison is dissolved with a drink of neat wine.

Beneficial too is ash of hens’ dung applied, the liver of a python, a lizard or a mouse torn open, the scorpion laid on the wound it has itself inflicted, or roasted and taken in food or in two cyathi of neat wine.

Natu. 23.43

*merum quidem remedio est contra cicutas, coriandrum, aconita, viscum, meconium, argentum vivum, apes, vespas, crabrones, phalangia, serpentium scorpionumque ictus contraque omnia, quae refrigerando nocent,*

Neat wine indeed is a remedy for poison by hemlock, coriander, henbane, mistletoe, opium, mercury, for the wounds of bees, wasps, hornets, spiders, snakes, and scorpions, and for all poisons that harm by chilling,
In *Nat. 29.91*, Pliny delivers a wide range of remedies for attacks of many small animals. Both Pliny and Q. Serenus use the impersonal *prodest* (“it is beneficial”), which is commonly used in medical treatises. Both writers use a form of *vello* (“tear”) but use it to describe different subjects. Pliny offers *divulsus* to indicate that the mouse, the cure, should be torn open. On the other hand, Q. Serenus uses *revulsus* to teach the reader that the scorpion, both the attacker and the cure, should be torn apart. While Pliny expands his content to include other organisms, Q. Serenus keeps the focus on the scorpion and reveals that the harm that it has inflicted will be inflicted on it in return. Pliny dedicates *Nat. 23.43* to the many uses of wine. By merely listing the problems that can be cured by neat wine, Pliny remains detached from the reader. He takes a more neutral stance by omitting imagery and following a strict structure.

Q. Serenus condenses information from two different chapters of *Naturalis Historia* into five short lines. He focuses on the idea that the wound and the cure come directly from one source: the scorpion. He describes the scorpion as *ardens* (“stinging”) and the wound as *atrox* (“savage”). These striking adjectives give a strong negative connotation of the scorpion. The active verb *incussit* (“inflicted”) gives even more power to the scorpion. Like an assailing enemy, the scorpion actively attacks the innocent patient, thus, making its slaughter a worthy action (*digna caede*). Q. Serenus’ description of the *improba pestis* (“wicked poison”) reveals that he views these attacks as evil and human intervention as noble. This ethical coloring persists throughout *Liber Medicinalis*. Although both serve as a valuable source of information, Q. Serenus creatively reshapes and adds to Pliny’s encyclopedic knowledge. Q. Serenus transforms information from a
standard catalogue into an emotional piece of poetry that retains its value in the context of medicine.

Fouere is a verb commonly used in recipe-style medical works. The original meaning of fouere is “to warm.” Adams notes that an expression like *aqua calida fouere* (“to bathe in warm water”) is “originally marked by hypercharacterization, in that the warmth of the application is expressed not only by the adjective but by the semantic content of the verb” (359). Later, the meaning of fouere shifted to “to bathe,” so authors were expected to indicate the temperature. Q. Serenus remains consistent with the late meaning and specifies that the temperature of the water must be hot (*calidis*). He makes the instructions more poetic with the choice of *lymphis* (“with waters”) instead of *aqua* and addition of *pelagi* (“of the sea”).

Q. Serenus often seeks to evoke an emotional response from the reader. In this section, he envelops the cure for attacks of small creatures with emotional diction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liber Medicinalis 46.871-876</th>
<th>Nat. 28.156</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>ad cunctos autem morsus ictusque minorum caseus aptus erit pauidae de lacte capellae cumque hoc absumi debeat origanus herba: haec duo mirificis curabunt icta medelis. nec non fenuculo calidum adnecetetur acetum aut uiuum sulphur sicci cum faece Lyaei.</em></td>
<td><em>ad reliquos bestiarum morsus caprinum caseum siccum cum origano inponunt et bibi iubent;</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, for all bites and blows of smaller [creatures], cheese from the milk of the frightened goat will be suitable and with this the herb marjoram should be consumed: these two things will heal stings with amazing cures, and also hot vinegar with fennel will be rubbed on or fresh sulfur with dregs of dry wine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For the other bites of beasts dried goat cheese with marjoram is applied and is recommended to be drunk;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Both Q. Serenus and Pliny give remedies for bites (*morsus*), but Q. Serenus accentuates their smaller size (*minorum*). Q. Serenus specifies that the cheese should come from a frightened (*pavidae*) goat. Just as the patient is scared of the harm inflicted by such small animals, the goat must be frightened to give an effective cure. Unlike Pliny, Q. Serenus boldly declares that his ingredients will provide an amazing (*mirificis*) remedy. The interplay between fear and comfort creates a moving narrative that garners the trust of the reader.

Pliny equips the reader with supposedly effective ingredients, but Q. Serenus gives a holistic approach to medicine:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liber Medicinalis 46.877-878</th>
<th>Nat. 29.88</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>exiguo piperis cerebrum conspargito galli,</em>&lt;br&gt; <em>quo lita sanescent depulso membra dolore.</em></td>
<td><em>contra omnium morsus remedio est</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>gallinaceum cerebrum cum piperis exiguo potum in posca,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will sprinkle the brain of a rooster with a small amount of pepper, with the limbs rubbed, they heal with the pain expelled.</td>
<td>For the bites of all spiders remedial is a cock’s brain with a little pepper taken in vinegar and water,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While small animals can inflict large and serious wounds, small ingredients can prove to be massive healing agents. Both authors present the same remedy, but Q. Serenus extends beyond the list of cures to portray the whole process of healing. The medicine is rubbed on (*lita*), the pain is expelled (*depulso dolore*), and the body is able to heal (*sanescent membra*). By detailing the body’s return to health, Q. Serenus acknowledges the patient’s pain and provides comfort. Assertions of efficacy are common in medical recipes. For example, Cato uses the phrase *sanum facient* (“they will make [the patient] healthy”) at the end of many chapters of *De Agricultura*. Q. Serenus follows the tradition of including a reassurance by using the verb *sanescent* (“they heal”). In doing so, he asserts the efficacy of the recipe and builds rapport with the audience. Q. Serenus makes a unique addition to the tradition with *depulso dolore* (“the pain is expelled”). Like an enemy, the pain is expelled by the powerful remedy. This warlike language differentiates *Liber Medicinalis* from the uniform tone of most medical treatises.

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Q Serenus depicts the bite of a shrew mouse with unexpected diction and offers an unusual remedy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liber Medicinalis 46.879-881</th>
<th>Nat. 29.89</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sin autem muris nocuit violentia caeci, quae sola signauit uoluendis orbita plaustris, inline: mira datur uili de puluere cura.</td>
<td>Est et contra morsum eius remedio terra ex orbita, ferunt enim non transiri ab eo orbitam torpor quodam naturae.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But if violence of a shrew mouse injured [you], smear on the things which only the track from rolling wagons marked: an amazing cure is given from inexpensive dust.</td>
<td>Another remedy for its (sc. shrew mouse’s) bite is earth from a wheel rut. For they say that it will not cross a wheel rut owing to a sort of natural torpor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pliny states the information with verbs like *est* (“there is”) and *ferunt* (“they say”) that create an indifferent and matter-of-fact tone. Q. Serenus describes the mouse with aggressive language like *violentia* (“violence”) and *nocuit* (“injured”). Brutality is not normally associated with small animals, so it is shocking to read about attacks like these. Q. Serenus includes this brutality to provoke caution in the reader. Like the use of dust for pains of the stomach in chapter 25, the action done to the medication holds importance. Both Pliny and Q. Serenus presume that the mouse will recognize the dust that has been rolled over by a wheel and seek to avoid it. Similar to the assurance in the previous lines, Q. Serenus guarantees that an effective cure can be sourced from affordable ingredients (*mira datur uili de puluere cura*). Just as the danger of small
animals is underestimated, dust is so common that the reader would not immediately believe that it is an effective remedy. Q. Serenus is clearly exposing the audience to the unexpected. He wants the readers to take care to avoid attacks and expand their perspective of medicine. After giving a shocking portrait of the dangers of the world, Q. Serenus ends the chapter with the comforting phrase. This deliberate structure, which confers reliability and credibility, is present in many chapters of Liber Medicinalis.35

Chapter 47

Q. Serenus is the first writer to address ostocopos, “bone-fatigue” (47.882):

ostocopum lento conductit melle perungui.

It is useful for the bone-fatigue to be smeared with sticky honey.

Ostocopos is taken from the Greek ὀστοκόπος which means “bone-breaking” or “bone-fatigue.” Adams speculates that it was first used to label a fatigue that affected the bones and later was implemented as a term for fatigue that entailed weakness (305). This unusual word is only utilized by two writers. Its first use transpired around the second to the fourth century A.D. from Q. Serenus within the field of human medicine, and its second use occurred during the fourth to fifth century A.D. from Pelagonius within the field of veterinary medicine.36 Although veterinary terminology sometimes shows

35 Other examples of assertions at the end are present in chapters 3, 10, 11, 14, 16, 19, 21, 24, 31, 42, 45, 46, 51, 55, 59, 64.
36 Pelag. Vet. 3.10.
difference in meaning when compared to medical terminology, “it is not difficult to find close correspondences which suggest the study by veterinary writers of medical texts” (Adams 35). Ostocopos appears to be a condition that can affect both humans and animals. Because there are only two instances of ostocopos, its origin, development, and timeline are hard to determine.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 begins the extended discussion of fevers (48.895-898):

\[
\text{nec tu crede leuem dilato tempore febrem,}
\]

\[
\text{quaes spatium sibi dat, magis ut cessando calescat:}
\]

\[
\text{letali quoque grassatur quartana calore,}
\]

\[
\text{ni medicas adhibere manus discamus et herbas.}
\]

Do not believe that fever, which gives itself space, is trivial with an extended time as it may grow intense in abating: and also quartan [fever] attacks with a deadly heat, unless we learn to apply healing labors and herbs.

Q. Serenus warns the audience to be wary of fever that has waves of intensity and discloses the severity of quartan fever. To combat the fever, Q. Serenus offers a treatment that does not include the usual ingredients sourced from animals and plants (48.907):

\[
\text{Maeoniae Iliados quartum suppone timenti...}
\]
Place the fourth book of the *Iliad* of Maconia under the fearing [patient]…

The fourth book of the *Iliad* presents the healing powers of the healer and warrior Machaon. When Menelaus is injured by an arrow, Machaon sucks out blood and applies herbs which were given to his father Aesculapius by the healer Chiron. Although the fourth book displays the process of medicine on the battlefield, it does not disclose any information about fevers. The connection of the number four may be important, but Q. Serenus does not explain the reasoning behind the treatment.

Chapter 50

Q. Serenus makes a seemingly contradictory statement when deliberating about cures for the quotidian fever (50.927-931):

\[\text{nec non ossa iuuant saeptis inuenta domorum:} \]
\[\text{conuenit haec tereti pendentia subdere collo.} \]
\[\text{multaque praeterea uerborum monstra silebo:} \]
\[\text{nam febrem uario depelli carmine posse} \]
\[\text{uana superstitio credit tremulaeque parentes.} \]

And also, the bones found in the enclosed spaces of houses are beneficial: these things are suitable to place as pendants on the smooth neck. And moreover, I will
be silent about many monstrosities of words: for empty superstition and quivering parents believe that fever is able to be driven out by different incantations.

The bones of the walls of a house could be animal or human bones. According to table 5 of the *Lex Duodecim Tabularum*, the dead must be interred outside of the city, so human remains would most likely not be found within the home. The use of bones in a cure is unusual in Roman medicine, but Pliny does give a use for bones in a chapter about infant illnesses (*Nat. 30. 135*):

*ossibus in canino fimo inventis adustio infantium quae vocatur siriasis adalligatis emendatur,*

The inflammation of babies called siriasis is cured by the bones found in dog's dung worn as an amulet,

Siriasis refers to an abrupt prostration due to high heat and humidity. Siriasis is named after Sirius, the Dog Star, which appears before the sun during the hottest months of the summer.\(^{37}\) Although the cause of siriasis and quotidian fever differ, both illnesses include high temperature. The remedy of animal bones from a dog’s excrement seemingly counteract the illness caused by the Dog Star. Because of Pliny’s use of animal bones and the superstition around human bones, it is likely that Q. Serenus’ recipe refers to animal bones. Pliny’s remedy does not give any additional insight into why Q. Serenus specifies that the bones are found within the spaces of the house.

Q. Serenus ardently warns against incantations; however, he supplied an incantation in chapter 33 to end bleeding for women and extensively covers an

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\(^{37}\) Sinclair 1985: 261.
incantation in the next chapter. The hypocrisy of this statement could provoke the audience to question the credibility of the poem.

Chapter 51

The identity of semitertian fever is highly variable among the accounts by ancient authors. Hippocrates describes the fever as milder on one day and more intense on the next. Celsus defines semitertian fever as a fever that recurs on the third day and remarks that it can be mistaken for other diseases. Galen warns that semitertian fever consists of symptoms alternating between tertian fever and quotidian fever. Interestingly, Pliny does not discuss semitertian fever. Q. Serenus does not define semitertian fever but does provide an explanation for its name and cure. The cure heavily relies on ritualistic elements (51.932-946):

mortiferum magis est quod Graecis hemitritaeos
uulgatur uerbis; hoc nostra dicere lingua
non potuere ulli, puto, nec uoluere parentes.
inscribes chartae quod dictur abracadabra
saepius et subter repetes, sed detrahe summam
et magis atque magis desint elementa figuris
singula, quae semper rapies, et cetera ſſiges,
donec in angustum redigatur littera conum:

---

38 Epidemics 1.2.
39 De Medicina 3.3 and 3.8.
40 De februm differentiis 2.8.
More deadly is the one that is known as *semitertian* in Greek words; no one was able to say this in our language, I think, nor did parents want to. You will write on paper abracadabra which is to be said more often and you will repeat underneath but remove the last [letter], and more and more letters, which you will always take away, may be missing from the forms one at a time, and you will fix the rest, until a letter may be reduced into a narrow cone: remember to encircle the neck with a linen thread. Some recount that the fat of a lion is beneficial. Indeed, if you want to tie coral with a scarlet cloth, you should not hesitate to mix real emeralds to this, a round pearl valuable with respect to its snow-white color should be present: let such cords be placed on the neck of the fainting and the power, about to be marveled at, will remove the lethal illnesses.

Unlike previous accounts, Q. Serenus reveals some details about the process of transitioning a Greek word to Latin. Others have made attempts but were unable to create a Latin equivalent for semitertian fever. Notably, Q. Serenus does not transform
hemitriteaeos into Latin either. The difficulty of translation and possible superstition results in use of the term exclusively in Greek. There are three integral parts of the ritual: the use of the word abracadabra, the removal of letters to form a cone, and the encirclement around the neck. There are a variety of ways to interpret the formation and shape of the cone:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABRACADABRA</td>
<td>ABRACADABRA</td>
<td>ABRACADABRA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABRACADABR</td>
<td>ABRACADABR</td>
<td>ABRACADABR</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABRACADA</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The origin of abracadabra is highly debated. Ohrt explains that it could have originated from the Arabic ‘abra qad ‘abra, Aramaic abbada kedabra, Hebrew ‘abra ka dabar, or Greek akrakanarba (87). The Hebrew ‘abra ka dabar means “it shrinks as the word.” This translation supports the argument that the removal of the letters symbolizes the removal of the illness. Nelson argues that it is derived from the Greek αβρα-καδ-αβρα, which he roughly translates as “may the servant bring back good health for those now ill” (935). With this translation, the amulet would represent the servant who works to help the master, the patient. After removing the letters one by one and ending with one letter, it is important to tie the paper around the patient’s neck. Adams reveals that “the binding in itself may be influential, in that the person or at least the part affected must be encircled”

41 Pepin 1950: 89.
The paper, a physical manifestation of healing, is joined to the sick patient. The physical contact between the healing agent and the patient is important.

The source of most remedies in Liber Medicinalis is Naturalis Historia, so it is interesting that only one part of the recipe comes from Pliny:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liber Medicinalis 51.41</th>
<th>Nat. 28.90</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>nonnulli memorant adipem prodesse leonis.</em></td>
<td><em>cor in cibo sumptum quartanis medetur,</em> <em>adips cum rosacea cotidianis febribus.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some recount that the fat of a lion is beneficial.</td>
<td>The heart taken as a good cures quartans; the fat with rose oil cures quotidians.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although both authors consider lion fat beneficial for fevers, the type of fever differs. Q. Serenus uses lion fat for semitertian fevers, while Pliny uses it for quotidian fevers. Because of the distinct lack of inspiration from Pliny, this chapter becomes even more impressive. Q. Serenus displays his knowledge of medicine with a seemingly controversial approach for curing sickness. He explains each detail of the ritual and makes it a feature part in the cure.

The ending assertion (*letalesque abiget miranda potentia morbos*) remains consistent with the traditions of medical writings. Q. Serenus often uses a form of *mirare* (“to wonder/marvel at”) in the assertions to elevate their perceived efficacy.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{42}\) Other examples of *mirare* are present in chapters 14, 15, 19, 42, 45, 46, 48, 51, 59, 62.
Chapter 52

Fate can be an aid against traumatic injury (52.947-948):

\[\text{infandum dictu cunctis procul absit amicis,}\]
\[\text{sed fortuna potens omen conuertat in hostes.}\]

May the unspeakable be far away from all friends, but may powerful fate turn an omen back against the enemies.

Q. Serenus grants humans the power to combat disease and trauma in the majority of the treatise; however, he gives fate more authority in this chapter. He influences the audience to also consider fate in the subject of illness and healing. Instead of opposing fate like he suggested in chapter 42, Q. Serenus now wants fate to work in favor of the patient and fight against the violence caused by trauma.

Chapter 54

The treatment for sleeplessness includes a ritual component (54.982-983):

\[\text{charta igitur, uariis pinxit quam littera uerbis,}\]
\[\text{uritur, inde cinis calido potatur in amni.}\]

Therefore, a paper, which handwriting has decorated with different words, is burned, then the ash is drunk in cold water.
With the ritual burning of paper, the patient could be destroying the words or illnesses that keep him awake. The different words could represent the varying causes of sleeplessness. By consuming the remains of the ritual, the patient takes control of the condition and his own health.

Chapter 55

In the previous chapter, Q. Serenus advocates for the importance of sleep, but in this chapter, he discloses the outcomes of too much sleep (55.993-996):

\[
diximus hanc sortem miseris mortalibus esse,\]
\[
\text{ut saepe inter se mala sint contraria morbi.}\]
\[
denique nonnunquam somno sic membra grauantur,\]
\[
\text{ut coniungatur leto sopor altus acerbo.}\]

We have said that this is the lot of wretched mortals, that often among themselves diseases are mutually opposing evils. Finally, sometimes limbs are so weighed down with sleep that deep sleep is united to bitter death.

Intensifiers like *saepe* (“often”), *sic* (“so”), *altus* (“deep”), and *acerbo* (“bitter”) magnify the bleak fate of humankind. Even sleep, which is vital for a healthy life, can be destructive. The balance of sleep is important for overall health.
Chapter 56

Comitial disease is known as epilepsy in modern medicine. Q. Serenus gives the origin of the name for comitial disease (56.1006-1011):

est subiti species morbi, cui nomen ab illo
haesit, quod fieri prohibit suffragia iusta.
saepe etenim membris atro languore caducis
concilium populi labes horrenda diremit.
ipse deus memorat dubiae per tempora lunae
conceptum, talis quem saepe ruina profundit.

There is a type of sudden disease, to which the name came from the fact that it prevents legal votes to be made. As a matter of fact, with the limbs falling with a gloomy languor, the horrible collapse often interrupted the assembly of the people. The god himself recounts that a man whom such a collapse often prostrates was conceived during the times of the changing moon.

Although Q. Serenus does not specifically name the disease, the information that it interrupts political proceedings and causes a collapse indicates that it is comitial disease. Gowers explains that the Romans called the disease *morbus caducus* (“the sudden disease”) and more frequently *morbus comitialis* (“the comitial disease”) because the occurrence of a collapse was viewed as so unfavorable that a *comitia* (“assembly for

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elections”) would be ended (xvii). The specific naming of the disease indicates that there were enough cases that a substantial portion of the population would recognize the name and symptoms.

Before the time of Hippocrates, the Greeks called it “the sacred disease” because of the suspected supernatural cause of the collapse. The mixture of disease and divine influence brings hardship for mortals. According to Q. Serenus, a god reveals the cause of this disease to be conception during a changing or new moon. It is unclear whether the god refers to Apollo or Aesculapius. Q. Serenus calls upon Aesculapius more frequently in the poem, but Apollo is the original healing god.

The Hippocratic corpus holds an opposing belief for the cause of “the sacred disease.” The accepted theory was an accumulation of phlegm, not a divine cause. Remedies from the Hippocratic corpus advise the patient to undergo trepanation, a procedure in which a hole is drilled or cut into the skull, to release the excess of phlegm. Q. Serenus chooses a less invasive approach of herbs and an amulet (56.1021-1022):

\begin{quote}
\textit{aut lapis ex nido, uaga quem congesit hirundo,}
\textit{uellitur, et nexe souet attollitque iacentem.}
\end{quote}

Or a stone is plucked out from the nest, which the wandering swallow collected, and it is hung and nurtures and sustains the sick one.

\footnote{Hippocrates. \textit{On the Sacred Disease}.}
Like chapter 46, Q. Serenus uses *fouere* to describe the power of an ingredient. In addition to the meanings of “to warm” and “to bathe,” *fouere* can specifically be translated as “to nurture.” With the use of both *fovet* and *attollit*, Q. Serenus intensifies the healing power of the amulet. Q. Serenus does not explain why the stone has healing properties, but Pliny does provide reasoning (*Nat.* 30.91):

> Magis placet...lapilli e ventre hirundinum pullorum sinistro lacerto adnexi.
> dicuntur enim excluso pullo lapillum dare.

The Magi recommend small stones from the nest of young swallows tied to the left arm. For [swallows] are said to give a small stone to their hatched chicks.

The stone, which supposedly benefits the chicks, can also heal humans. Like the adult swallows, Q. Serenus and Pliny search for remedies and aid their dependents.

Chapter 57

Q. Serenus briefly explains how the name of a disease came from the location of its cure. (57.1024-1025):

> regius est uero sublimi nomine morbus
> molliter hic quoniam celsa curatur in aula.
The disease with the elevated name is truly royal since this is easily cured in a lofty court.

Jaundice, a condition that is caused by gall bladder disease or cirrhosis, was called “the royal disease” by the Romans (Connor 1). Celsus reports that the name for jaundice arose because of the effectiveness of remedies that reflect a royal, carefree lifestyle such as bathing, exercise, and swimming. Pliny claims that the name originated from the remedy of honeyed wine, a royal drink.

Chapter 58

In Roman mythology, the story of Ascalaphus establishes the connection between the owl, the underworld, and ill omens. Ascalaphus, the son of Acheron and Orphne, told the other gods that Persephone ate pomegranate seeds in the underworld, thus, trapping her there. There are different accounts of the resulting retaliation. In one myth, Demeter buried Ascalaphus under a rock and transformed him into a screech owl after he escaped. In another myth, Persephone uses water from the river Phlegethon to transform him into a screech owl. Ascalaphus thus represents ill omens in the form of a screech owl. The screech owl proves to be a formidable enemy for children (58.1035-1038):

praeterea si forte premit strix atra puellus
uirosa inmulgens exerts uera labris,

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45 *De Medicina* 3.24.
46 *Nat.* 22.53.
47 *Apollodorus. Library* 1.5.
Moreover, if by chance the deadly screech owl pursues the children, milking her poisonous teats into their stretched-out lips, the opinion of Titinus, who wrote famous comedies in the old manner, advised garlics to be tied.

Q. Serenus amplifies the horror of the attack with striking vocabulary. *Immulgens* ("milking") and *ubera* ("teats") are words most used in the context of giving nourishment and caring for young. The addition of aggressive words like *atra* ("deadly") and *virosa* ("poisonous") sharply contrasts with these positive words. Although owls seem to be a formidable enemy for children, the solution of garlic is simple. The application of garlic changes based on the nature of the attack on the body. For internal diseases, garlic is consumed or smelled. For external dangers, garlic is tied around the body.

Chapter 60

In a third inclusion of preventative medicine, Q. Serenus gives instructions for how to identify and prevent poison (60.1053-1055):

*ut tutus fias infestae fraude nouercae*  
*uel quicunque tuo carpetur liuidus auctu,*  
*non expectatis eat obuia cura uenenis.*
So that you may become safe from the deceit of the hostile stepmother or some envious person who is consumed by your money, a cure may go against unexpected poisons.

Identification of the possible poisoners gives insight into the family and social dynamics of the Roman Imperial period. Q. Serenus specifically points out that stepmothers may hold contempt. Disagreement and stress within a family can incite a crime. Jealousy of material wealth can also cause violence.

Q. Serenus gives two different types of recipes: recipes that are useful for identifying poison before consumption and recipes that are meant to be ingested before a meal to counteract the poison. With these two approaches and omission of a cure after poisoning, Q. Serenus demonstrates the effectiveness of preventative medicine. Q. Serenus goes on to examine the famous antidote of Mithridates (60.1061-1068):

*antidotos uero multis Mithridatia fertur*
*consociata modis; sed Magnus scrinia regis*
*cum raperet victor, uilem deprendit in illis*
*synthesin et uulgata satis medicamina risit.*
*bis denum rutae folium, salis et breue granum*
*iuglandesque duas, tereti tot corpore ficus:*
*haec oriente die parco conspersa Lyaeo*
*sumebat, metuens dederat quae pocula matri.*
Truly the Mithridatian antidote is reported as compounded in many ways; but when Pompey the Great as victor snatched the chests of the king, he discovered cheap compounds in these chests and laughed at the sufficiently common antidotes. Twice of ten a leaf of rue, and a small grain of salt and two walnuts, as many figs with a round shape: at day break, he used to take these sprinkled with a little wine, fearing the cups which he had given to his mother.

The antidote of Mithridates was renowned as a panacea. After the story of Mithridatum spread and was sought out by members of the elite population like emperor Marcus Aurelius, physicians and quacks fought to replicate and create their own recipes. Totelin explains that “for a wealthy clientele, an expensive drug was synonymous with a good drug” (11). In sharp contrast, Q. Serenus presents exceptionally common ingredients. Q. Serenus confidently lists the components of the antidote even though they had been debated for centuries. The contrast between the perceived elaborate ingredients and the supposedly real, accessible ingredients pushes the reader to reconsider any preconceived notions about the relationship between the cost and effectiveness of medicine. By using the antidote of Mithridates, a highly regarded cure which had been studied and sought out for centuries, Q. Serenus proves his argument that inexpensive ingredients can serve as potent cures.

Pliny provides a very similar story and recipe in *Naturalis Historia* (23.69):

*in sanctuariis mithridatis, maximi regis, devicti cn. pompeius invenit in peculiari commentario ipsius manu compositionem antidoti e ii nucibus siccis, item ficis*
totidem et rutae folis xx simul tritis, addito salis grano: ei, qui hoc ieunus sumat, nullum venenum nociturum illo die.

In the sanctuary of Mithridates, the greatest king, conquered, Gnaeus Pompey discovers in a personal notebook the composition by his hand of an antidote from two dry nuts, just as many figs and twenty leaves of rue ground at the same time, with a grain of salt added: no poison would injure he who, fasting, may take this, for that day.

When referring to Pompey, Q. Serenus only uses his cognomen Magnus (“the Great”), but Pliny uses his praenomen and nomen Gnaeus Pompeius. Pliny uses maximi, a superlative which means “greatest,” to describe Mithridates and not Pompey. The omission of Magnus for Pompey and addition of maximus to Mithridates could indicate that Pliny holds a negative opinion about Pompey. Q. Serenus’ choice to label Pompey as “the Great” and also “victor” expresses a positive sentiment for Pompey. Like other recipes in Liber Medicinalis, Q. Serenus borrows from Pliny. The ingredients for the famed Mithridatian antidote are the same for both writers, and only one of the amounts differs. While Q. Serenus calls for as many round figs as possible, Pliny suggests only two. The specification of the amount for each ingredient is rare in Liber Medicinalis, so the amounts must be important for the accuracy of the recipe.
Chapter 63

Q. Serenus gives the origin of a cognomen based on physical appearance
(63.1092-1094):

*interdum existit turpi uerruca papilla:*

*hinc quondam Fabio uerum cognomen adhaesit,*

*qui solus patriae 'cunctando restituit rem'.*

Occasionally a wart appears with an ugly nipple: hence, once the cognomen truly
stuck to Fabius, who alone of the fatherland “rebuilt the state with delaying.”

Q. Serenus is describing Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus. According to Plutarch,
Fabius obtained the cognomen Verrucosus, which means warty, because of a wart on his
upper lip.⁴⁹ Q. Serenus supports this story and compares the speed of the emergence of a
wart with the speed of Fabius’ military advances. During the Second Punic War, Fabius’
strategy against Hannibal included avoiding battle and obstructing the enemy’s food
supply (Erdkamp 128). This slow approach to war relates to the unhurried development
of warts.

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⁴⁹ *Life of Fabius Maximus* 1.3.
Conclusion

Q. Serenus both follows and deviates from the traditions of ancient medicine, Latin poetry, and Latin medical writings in the extraordinary medical Latin poem, Liber Medicinalis. By adhering to some traditional values, Q. Serenus creates an approachable handbook that would be useful for a wide audience. By introducing unconventional vocabulary and remedies, Q. Serenus creates his own unique contribution to ancient medical writings and medical knowledge.

When analyzing the content of Liber Medicinalis, I found that nature causes many horrible misfortunes and that the divine sphere grants knowledge and power of healing to mortals. The divine influence on health is overwhelmingly positive in Liber Medicinalis. Q. Serenus reveals that much of his information originates from Apollo (chapter 1) and credits Aesculapius for two of his recipes (chapters 12 and 19). With the aid of the divine sphere, Q. Serenus elevates his writing and confers reliability. Except for the one positive acknowledgement of nature’s contribution to human anatomy in chapter 13, the role of nature in Liber Medicinalis is the source of misery. Chapters 5, 29, 32, 34, 45, and 58 show that nature actively strives to bring suffering to mortals. Q. Serenus develops a narrative featuring the struggle and subsequent victory over nature by the power of treatment. This dramatic narrative inspires hope in the patient and contributes to Liber Medicinalis’ place in epic poetry.

With a thorough study of the Latin text, I discovered that Q. Serenus follows the tradition of medical Latin with the use of semantic extension (chapters 11, 13, 21, 29, 30, 34, and 38). Semantic extension allows Q. Serenus to connect with readers who have not been exposed to medical knowledge. He separates Liber Medicinalis from standard
medical treatises with the relative clause, compounding, and development of new
terminology. The restrictive relative clause in chapter 19 reveals Q. Serenus’ familiarity
with Greek medical terms and provides an example of his creativity and transformation
of medical Latin. The use of compounding in chapter 23 exposes Q. Serenus’ ability to
mold technical vocabulary into coherent medical terms. Q. Serenus brings two medical
terms into existence: carbo (chapter 38) and ostocopos (chapter 47). When analyzing
carbo, it is unclear why Q. Serenus did not use the usual medical term carbunculus. The
meter of the poem could have prompted Q. Serenus to extend the meaning of carbo
instead of carbunculus. Another possible explanation is that carbo was the more
frequently used term for “coal,” so the extension of meaning would be easier to
understand. Q. Serenus creates the Latin term ostocopos to describe a fatigue of the
bones. Because there are only two recorded applications of ostocopos, I suspect that it
may be a newly identified or a very uncommon illness.

The emotional language and violent imagery within Liber Medicinalis
comfortably situate it in the tradition of epic poetry and differentiate it from standard
medical treatises. Q. Serenus creates a strong connection to the audience with emotional
language, assurances of efficacy and affordability, and exposure to unexpected cures. Q.
Serenus deliberately chooses to incorporate warlike depictions of trauma, mythology, and
ethical perspectives. The source of horrible illness can originate from the body itself
(chapters 2, 5, 12, and 34) or from a malicious outside force (chapters 42 and 45). With
the constant onslaught of misfortunes, humans can reclaim control and power over their
own bodies by trusting and utilizing the amazing remedies given by Q. Serenus. Q.
Serenus creatively transforms the bland tone of standard medical works into an emotive, intense poem.

Q. Serenus mainly incorporates physical ingredients into his treatments, but he also conveys the importance of ritualistic practices like incantations, harvesting with certain tools, and specific actions performed on an ingredient. Q. Serenus concocts three new and unusual cures: the fourth book of the *Iliad* (chapter 48), bones found in the structure of the house (chapter 50) and abracadabra (chapter 51). The fourth book of the *Iliad* depicts an inspiring scene of healing, which could comfort the patient during their time of sickness. The bones are likely animal bones, and the patient wields their alleged healing power by wearing them as an amulet. *Liber Medicinalis* introduces the first concrete use of the word abracadabra. With such detailed instructions for its use, Q. Serenus ardently supports his inventive word. Interestingly, these strange remedies are all given to combat fever, thus, suggesting that Q. Serenus is especially interested in fever and developing new ways to cure it. His miraculous cures become even more impressive when considering that he is likely not a physician.

**Audience**

With a unique combination of medical and poetic elements, I will now speculate about the identity of the intended audience for *Liber Medicinalis* from a close reading of the material. I will use the authorship, discussion of *medici*, diction, and references to other authors to aid in the determination of the audience.

The authorship of *Liber Medicinalis* could give some clues for the identity of the audience. The few historical references to Q. Serenus indicate that he was a learned man
who was in the company of elite individuals. Liber Medicinalis could merely be a showcase of Q. Serenus’ skills to his elite connections; however, the affordable ingredients and reassurances of healing suggest a wider audience of common people. An elite audience would have less need for inexpensive and accessible ingredients.

The warning against medici (“physicians”) could be directed to both an elite and common audience. With no formal education required, it is likely that some medici did not provide effective treatment. Q. Serenus empowers the audience to be free of the expense and tricks of medici and to seize the power of healing for themselves. The emphasis on the expensive prices of the medici provides more evidence that Q. Serenus was targeting the common person.

The diction of Liber Medicinalis ranges from colloquial to technical terms. I will examine the reader’s knowledge of medicine by analyzing the technical medical vocabulary in Liber Medicinalis. Certain terms like hemicranium (chapter 2), praecordia (chapter 23), hydrops (chapter 26), carbo (chapter 38), and ostocopum (chapter 47) are not explained by Q. Serenus. The omission of an explanation for these technical terms could indicate that they are widely known or that the reader is a physician or medical writer. Q. Serenus gives the etymology or definition of some terms like impetus (chapter 11), hyoscyamon (chapter 19), telum (21), colum (chapter 30), and morbus comitialis (chapter 56), thus, suggesting that the reader is not familiar with advanced medical terminology. Analysis of diction does not provide concrete evidence for the audience’s proficiency in medicine.

50 HA 4.4; 18.2.
51 Discussion of medici can be found in chapter 27. Discussion of accessible and affordable ingredients can be found in chapters 14, 21, 46, 60.
References to other men increase Q. Serenus’ credibility and reveal information about the education level of the audience. Explicit references to famous men like Pherecydes (chapter 5), Sulla (chapter 5), Hortensius (chapter 15), Philo (chapter 21), Lucretius (chapter 32), Varro (chapter 45), Titinus (chapter 58), and Fabius (chapter 63) reveal Q. Serenus’ knowledge of history. Implicit references to many authors (mostly Pliny) give merit to the recipes and exhibit Q. Serenus’ expertise in literature. Both the explicit and implicit references indicate that the audience consists of educated individuals with access to various types of literature.

Q. Serenus goes beyond the mere imitation of material from *Naturalis Historia* and creates an accessible and stimulating medical poem. Q. Serenus condenses the vast amount of material from *Naturalis Historia* into a more accessible format. For the twelve books concerning pharmacology and medicine (*Nat.* 20-32), Pliny dedicates a chapter to each ingredient. Within the chapter, Pliny surveys the variety of ailments that can be cured by that ingredient. The encyclopedic structure of *Naturalis Historia* targets a reader whose main goal is scholarship. Q. Serenus deviates from this structure and instead organizes his work into chapters covering various remedies for a single medical problem. Thus, Q. Serenus makes remedies more attainable for patients with a specific problem or for readers who may not have access to medical encyclopedias.

In conclusion, the true identity of the audience is unclear. I suspect that the audience consists of educated individuals who may have some knowledge of medicine because of the expressive language, extensive medical vocabulary, and references. On account of the warning against medici and accessible structure, the audience is likely a sick patient and not a physician. With its poetic elements and accessible structure, *Liber*
*Medicinalis* proves to be a complex medical poem that has appeal for a variety of members of Roman society.
Works Cited


