

Carmen salutiferum: Quintus Serenus and his health-giving Liber medicinalis

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The *Liber Medicinalis* of Quintus Serenus (perhaps Quintus Serenus Sammonicus) is a relatively neglected verse pharmacological text in which numerous recipes are presented roughly in the ‘head-to-toe’ order. The prevalence of ‘disgusting’ ingredients (Quintus Serenus himself calls them thus), such as excrement, animal bile, and other animal products, has led modern scholars to turn their nose at this poem. This was not always the case: during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the poem of Quintus Serenus was extremely successful and inspired other medical poems (such as that attributed to Benedictus Crispus). The *Liber Medicinalis* may be an unoriginal collection of recipes, mostly gathered from sources such as Pliny the Elder, but it is a highly unusual medical poem. In particular, it mentions more non-medical sources than medical ones: Cicero, Ennius, Homer, Lucretius, Plautus and Titinius, among others, are quoted.

In this paper, I will examine the role of these non-medical sources in Serenus’ medical project. I will start with the preface of the poem, where in the very first line, Serenus calls his poem a ‘*salutiferum carmen*’, a ‘health-giving song’. This appears to be an oblique reference to Lucretius’ famous lines, where the Epicurean philosopher compares the role of poetry in making philosophy more palatable to that of honey in sweetening a bitter medicinal draught. For Quintus Serenus, poetry is ‘healing’ because it conveys healing remedies, but also perhaps in itself – learning poetry, listening to it, and studying it may play a healing role. I will then examine the nature of the quotations in the *Liber medicinalis*: the ways in which, for instance, Serenus has plundered ancient comedy to find remedies. Is this merely a bookish exercise, or can we perhaps suggest that Serenus believed in the healing power of laughter? For it seems to me that the *Liber Medicinalis* is not entirely to be taken seriously, and that it is full of learned jokes. In this context, it will be useful to recall Galen’s own fascination for comedy. I hope that this paper will contribute to a re-evaluation of Quintus Serenus’ project, one that moves beyond simplistic judgements of its pharmacological and poetic value.