



# *T*he Medieval Appropriation of Maimonides

Michael R. McVaugh

RETHINKING OTHERNESS SEMINAR

IMF-CSIC WORKING PAPERS 1

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IMF-CSIC

Egipcíaques, 15

E-08001 Barcelona, Spain

<http://www.imf.csic.es>

Tel: +34 934 426 576

Fax: +34 934 430 071

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INSTITUCIÓ MILÀ I FONTANALS  
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## Abstract

Between 1295 and 1305 two rather different individuals—one the nephew of Arnau de Vilanova, an academic physician trained at Montpellier, the other a Jew converted to Christianity and practicing at the papal court—undertook independently to translate into Latin all the medical works of Maimonides, above all his short works on asthma, on poisons, on coitus, and on hemorrhoids. In these works, taken as a whole, Maimonides passed along details drawn from the whole spectrum of life in Egypt in his day, ca. 1200. A comparative study of the translations of these two individuals allows us to study the kind of picture of Islamic life that they chose to present, and how they depicted Maimonides himself, to a European readership.

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## Michael R. McVaugh

Michael McVaugh (A.B., Harvard College, 1960; Ph.D. Princeton University, 1965) has been Wells Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and he is now Emeritus Professor at that university. He studies the history of medicine and science from the Middle Ages to the late seventeenth century. Much of his published research has concerned the growth of medical learning within a university setting in the Middle Ages, particularly the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the concomitant medicalization of European life. This latter theme in particular was developed in his 1993 book, *Medicine before the Plague: Doctors and Patients in the Crown of Aragon, 1285-1335* (Cambridge University Press). Since 1975 he has been a general editor of the *Arnaldi de Villanova Opera Medica Omnia*, the collected Latin writings of one of the most famous of medieval physicians, Arnau de Vilanova (d. 1311); the international series is more than half complete. He has also explored medieval surgery and its place in the world of medieval learning; he edited the last great surgical treatise of the Middle Ages, the *Inventarium* or *Chirurgia magna* of Guy de Chauliac (Brill, 1997), and published *The Rational Surgery of the Middle Ages*, a general account of the development of medieval surgery, in 2006. At the moment his research is focused on the process of translation of medical literature in the Middle Ages: between Arabic and Latin, Hebrew and Latin, and Latin and the European vernaculars.

# The Medieval Appropriation of Maimonides\*

*Michael R. McVaugh*

Department of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## I

It is not so long ago that we marked the 800th anniversary of the great philosopher Maimonides' death —December 13 1204 is the conventional date. He spent much of his life in Cairo as a physician, caring for poor patients as well as serving exalted ones, but his medical writings are far less well known than his philosophical ones, like the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Nevertheless, a half-dozen medical works survive, and for the last nine or ten years a project has been under way to produce editions of these, directed by Gerrit Bos at Köln, and published by Brigham Young University Press in their series on Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy. It is a difficult business, because Maimonides wrote in Arabic but copies exist not only in Arabic but in Judeo-Arabic, Arabic written in Hebrew characters; and gaps have sometimes to had be filled in with medieval Hebrew translations.

I became involved with this project by chance, when I suggested to Gerrit early on that the medieval Latin translations of these works would provide very different, quite independent witnesses to the Arabic tradition; and, because many of these translations had never been edited or published, I volunteered to prepare editions of the translations of four of the shorter works: *On Asthma*, *On Hemorrhoids*, *On Poisons*, and *On Coitus* —all of them originally written by Maimonides for specific patrons who wanted medical advice about problems that worried them. The first of these that I took up was *On Asthma*: Gerrit's edition of the Arabic text (with English translation) came out in 2002 and a second volume with the Latin and Hebrew translations came out in 2008. *On Poisons* (Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew) appeared in 2009, and *On Hemorrhoids* should be published at the end of this year. I have undertaken quite recently to edit the Latin translations of his *Regimen sanitatis* for the series, which is a much longer work.

I referred to Latin «translations», in the plural. That is because, round about the year 1300 (a hundred years or so after Maimonides' death), two Latin scholars quite independently took up the task of translating Maimonides' medical works. One of these, Ermengol Blasi (who is perhaps better known as the nephew of Arnau de Vilanova), was a graduate of the medical faculty at Montpellier. Before setting to work on Maimonides, he had already made translations of other medical and astronomical works, both from Arabic, which he could read himself, and from Hebrew, where he needed a Jewish colleague to help him. Perhaps it was just such a colleague who brought Maimonides to his attention —Maimonides was not yet well known in the Christian West, even as a philosopher. At any rate, Ermen-

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gol seems to have begun to translate Maimonides' short medical works about 1295, and they made his career: *On Hemorrhoids* was a great success with King Jaume II of Aragón-Catalunya, who suffered from hemorrhoids and promptly made Ermengol a court physician in Barcelona; and *On Poisons* was dedicated to Pope Clement V, who may or may not have been worried about being poisoned but in any case immediately made Ermengol a papal physician in Avignon, where he died about 1309.

The second of these translators, Giovanni da Capua, conveniently for us composed a kind of autobiographical preface that he attached to many of his translations. He tells us that he was born a Jew but converted to Christianity, and that he decided to use his knowledge of Hebrew to make Latin translations of scientific works; he may actually have been able to read some Arabic as well. He can be found practicing medicine and translating scientific works at the Roman papal court in the 1290s: his versions of the *Tasrif* of Abulcasis and the *Taisir* of Avenzoar were dedicated to clerical courtiers, but at least some of the Maimonidean treatises seem to have translated at the request of another physician at court, Guglielmo da Brescia. There is no firm evidence of Giovanni after 1300.

Both these men produced a translation of Maimonides' work *On Asthma*, and as I began to transcribe and collate the surviving manuscripts of the two and to compare them with Gerrit Bos's Arabic edition, I began to think about matters that were not strictly textual. Ermengol and Giovanni themselves were working at the interface between two cultures, between the Arabic-Egyptian culture in which Maimonides lived, and the elite European culture in which they hoped to make their careers; but the readers of the finished translations would have no access to that interface. For those readers, Maimonides would be experienced as a *Latin* author. How would the Latin Maimonides have come across to a fourteenth-century reader? The *two* Latin Maimonides, perhaps I ought to say, because the translators were rather different people: one birthright Christian, one converted Jew; one the product of the new Western learned world, another who seems to have aspired to membership in that world. Did those differences «translate» into equally different Maimonides, distinguished maybe by matters of literary style or tone or word choice; or perhaps by what the two translators chose to include or exclude?

Some years ago, speaking about the late eleventh-century translator Constantine the African, Monica Green stressed the cultural differences between the Muslim and Christian worlds of that day, and gave an example of the possible tensions that that difference might raise for scientific translation: «The problem [that] Constantine's translations posed to the West», she wrote, «was simple yet fundamental: how does one culture assimilate the science of another without assimilating the ethical principles that underlie it?» To illustrate her point, she showed that when Constantine, working at the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, translated Ibn al-Jazzār's *Viaticum*, he suppressed the Arabic work's chapter on abortifacients, apparently because it was inconsistent with Christian ethics. This was very much the general subject that I began to think about for my two translators of a couple of centuries later, but now with a comparative element: did they recognize in Maimonides' works the kinds of intercultural tensions Monica had suggested are inherent in translation; and if so, did each one respond to them differently?

I was curious about one aspect of the Maimonidean texts in particular. As I told you, they were addressed to meet the health concerns of specific patrons, and it is therefore not surprising that Maimonides tended to frame them in terms, not of remedies narrowly conceived, but of a broad regimen of health. He naturally structured them around the famous six «non-naturals» from Galenic medical theory that govern our health (air, food and drink, exercise, and so forth), and this meant that Maimonides had repeated occasion to comment on local life-styles: these works of his have a great deal to say, in passing, about the practices and habits of late twelfth-century Egyptians. What, I wondered, would a European translator do with this anecdotal material? Would he leave it out because he thought it was irrelevant? Would he seize the opportunity for a polemic against a «Saracen» world? Would he substitute meaningful European parallels, without comment? And how would his choices determine the kind of Latin Maimonides his fourteenth-century readers would encounter?

## II

Let us begin by thinking about style and its role in shaping the perception of a personality —I will draw most of these next examples from *De asmate*, or *Asthma* for short. The styles of our two translators are in fact quite distinct, for while they often use the same Latin root to render a particular Arabic verb, their constructions, their tenses, are normally very different, though occasionally, where the Arabic is simple and straightforward, the two translations will coincide for three or four words before diverging again. Of the two, Ermengol deployed a much richer vocabulary, larger by some fifteen percent. A symbol of this richness is that Giovanni fell back thirty-eight times on the vague word «res» to speak of something, Ermengol only twelve times. Ermengol's translation is also the longer, averaging about ten percent more words in rendering Maimonides' language, chapter after chapter. This is primarily a consequence of his more elaborate style, not of gratuitous additions he made to the text: Ermengol simply wrote at greater length to express the same thought, while Giovanni often translated the Arabic nearly word for word. In one place, where the Arabic expresses a basic dietary principle in just five words as «diminution of food so that there is no satiation», Giovanni writes equally succinctly, translating essentially verbatim, «minuere de cibo ut non satietur»; but Ermengol chooses to say that the rule is «ut cibi quantitas minuatur in tantum ne ex eo quis saturetur». Further on, Maimonides refrains from enumerating the treatment of every symptom that might occur, saying in five Arabic words that to do that «would be the whole of the art of medicine»: Giovanni again translates the phrase literally, «hoc enim est tota ars medicine»; Ermengol instead says, much more floridly, «hoc enim pertinet ad doctrinam universalium canonum in operatione huius artis».

Part of the wordiness of Ermengol's version is due to a peculiar feature of his translational style, one that can be observed in all his Latin translations: it is his tendency to use a pair of Latin terms together to translate a single word in Arabic, which he does over and over again. I will illustrate this with some examples drawn from *On hemorrhoids*. In chapter 6 of that work, Maimonides passes on a recipe from Avicenna for what



Maimonides calls «one of the strongest medicines for soothing [pain]» (*min ‘azam al-murakkabāt taskīnan*), but his phrase has been developed by Ermengol into «ex maioribus autem et fortioribus mitigantibus et facientibus quiescere dolorem earum» —both the subject and the verb have now been doubled. An even more striking example comes at the beginning of chapter 2, where Maimonides is explaining that hemorrhoids are observed «always to arise from black bile» (*dā’iman hiya al-mutawallada min al-saudā’*). Ermengol renders this phrase as «tota die et communiter generantur, contingunt, et causantur ex melancholia», saying the adverb in two different ways, and the verb in three different ways! We can compare this with the compact and essentially literal translation of the same phrase by Giovanni da Capua: «cotidie generantur ex colera nigra». Once you recognize this peculiarity of Ermengol’s style, it becomes almost painfully obvious as you read his Latin, but it does have its positive side, because it has recently helped me to identify him as the author of an previously unattributed translation of Maimonides’ *Regimen sanitatis*.

Sometimes, however, Ermengol seems deliberately to have expanded the original, not just for stylistic reasons but in order to make the meaning (as he saw it) clearer —though of course it is possible that these apparent additions of his have simply dropped out of the Arabic text in the form that we have it today. Maimonides described how to modify a drug so as to make it more incisive —Ermengol added «so that the patient can spit more easily and powerfully» (*ut facilior et fortior sit sreatus eius*). There are many such amplifications in Ermengol’s version that are not to be found in Giovanni’s more literal one. Ermengol’s apparent desire to make the meaning as clear as possible may account for one further interesting feature of his translation. Maimonides’ original composition was designed as a regimen of health specific to the needs of a particular asthmatic patient. The patient remains unnamed in the treatise, but he must have been of high rank, because Maimonides refers to him always with great respect, as «my Master». He addressed his patient by that title some twenty-five times. Giovanni da Capua translated only about half these occurrences of the phrase, and always in the third person (as «dominus rex»), not the second. In contrast, Ermengol chose to increase rather than reduce the occurrence of the phrase: in his translation, Maimonides is made to address his master (*dominus*) directly, more than forty times. Whether deliberately or not, therefore, Ermengol’s version reminds the reader much more insistently than Giovanni’s that *De asmate* was not intended to be a general treatise on asthma but a regimen directed toward a specific individual.

In the second section of his preface to *Asthma*, Maimonides provided a summary of his patient’s clinical history and the conclusions he had drawn from it: his client was middle-aged, was especially subject to asthmatic attacks in the winter, and was of a generally balanced temperament but possessed an excessively hot brain, a fact revealed to Maimonides by the discomfort produced in his patient by the weight of his hair (which forced him to keep his head shaved) and by the heat of his headgear. The two translations represent this summary equally faithfully, but because Ermengol’s version, like Maimonides’ original, is addressed directly to the patient he is describing, it conveys an element of intimacy and individuality that Giovanni’s third-person account does not. In general, Ermengol’s presentation tends more to underscore the specificity of the regimen being



described, and for that reason it reinforces (probably unintentionally) Maimonides' own belief expressed in *On Asthma* that, as he says, «the physician should not treat the disease in general, but, rather, the individual case of the disease».

For anyone today trying to reconstruct the Arabic text, Giovanni's approach to translation, providing a succinct, direct, not particularly stylish version of the original, is certainly more helpful. For fourteenth-century readers, however, Ermengol's translation might well have seemed superior, since it allowed Maimonides to evoke his world and its medical practice in a smoother Latin, with some professional amplification to make it even clearer. We will see some other differences in the way they translate. Each one, however, had real success in turning Maimonides into a Latin author.

### III

I do not mean, of course, that they were trying deliberately to do so. They certainly did not try to disguise the geographical setting of Maimonides' works. To be sure, they appear not to have understood that when Maimonides referred to practices in the Maghreb (the word literally means «west» in Arabic), he was referring to a particular part of the Islamic world, and their normal translation, «occidens», may have misled their readers into thinking that western Europe was in question. Similarly, when Maimonides speaks of «al-Andalus», both men identify the region in Latin as «Hispania», and again European readers could be forgiven if they automatically thought of Christian Spain. Many locations in the Islamic world named by Maimonides become anonymous in Latin: the young weaver from Almería, on the coast of Spain, who appears in the work *On Poisons*, bitten by a mad dog, is simply from «quodam civitate» in Giovanni's version. Perhaps the unfamiliarity of Arabic names was responsible for this, although Almería was a target for Catalan expansion around 1300 and might well have been known to Ermengol.

But Egypt is something else again. Neither translator hides or omits their author's frequent references to his life there; they accurately reported Maimonides, for example, when he described his patron's habit of leaving Alexandria for the purer air of «Egypt» at the onset of an asthmatic attack. Probably neither one knew that the Arabic word, *misr*, here actually referred to the old section of Cairo, not Egypt itself, but they still made sure that the reader would be aware of the physical, geographical setting of the work. Only once does one of the translators deliberately break that sense of place and tear the reader away. Maimonides introduced *On Poisons* with a long eulogy of its dedicatee, al-Fādil, the counselor and secretary of Saladin: he praised the astuteness of his master, his master's benevolence, his ingenuity, his equity—all of which Ermengol translated faithfully until at last, as if unable to bear all this enthusiasm for a Muslim lord, he had Maimonides speak of the «supervision of princes by my master, *Jesus Christ*». Having gotten that out of his system, Ermengol wrenched his translation back to the world of Egypt and never left it again.

Yet in fact I suspect that the Egypt of the Latin Maimonides would not have come across to European readers as a particularly alien world. Perhaps the genre of these short medical works, regimens of health, has something to do with this. In the East *or* the

West, a Galenic regimen aimed at certain practices of general validity. Galenic physicians everywhere set the same goals for their patients: to seek out clean air and pure water, for example, to keep the bowels loose but not fluid, to be wary of incautious bathing, and to give up sex in old age. The individuality of Maimonides' patient does not prevent him from being a recognizable representative of a particular complexional type familiar to physicians all around the Mediterranean. Even when discussing the most variable element of a regimen, food, Maimonides' advice would not have seemed particularly exotic. His recommended foodstuffs might sometimes have strange names —most of the terms the translators ended up transliterating, for lack of a Latin alternative, are names for dishes—but the strangeness was usually offset by Maimonides' tendency to provide recipes. A reader of *Asthma* would not have been much startled by «mezeg» (Ar. *mizāj*) when he went on to read that this was simply chicken broth, fennel, barley, lemon juice, and spices. He would not have been disconcerted by «cinaba» (Ar. *sināb*) when he found it immediately glossed by the translator, «id est sinapis», and recognized with interest that this apparently exotic word for mustard was related to the Latin word for the same thing. In this case Maimonides went on to describe an Andalusian mustard sauce helpful for asthmatics, made of ground mustard seed, olive oil, wine vinegar, and almond paste—something that could just as easily have been prepared in Ermengol's Montpellier or Giovanni's Rome. So even these Egyptian dishes could be «naturalized», as it were: the familiarity of the ingredients, the homeliness of the preparation, once again could help Maimonides seem not so different from a Latin or a European writer.

#### IV

There remained, of course, one feature of Maimonides' Egypt that would have been impossible to «naturalize»—that is, its Islamic religion, with all its consequences for society. Did the translators try deliberately to minimize the differences between his Islamic surroundings and theirs? In fact, they did not. It is true that for whatever reason they do not begin their translations with a Latin version of the formulaic invocation to «God, the Merciful and Compassionate», that Maimonides probably prefixed to each of his texts, but they do not omit Maimonides' concluding words, where he typically invoked God in much more individualistic ways. Ermengol was usually more punctilious about this than Giovanni: for example, he renders the end to *Asthma* quite literally, «Deus autem sui gratia et bonitate dirigit nos in utilibus ad duo secula, cui sit laus et gloria in eternum», whereas Giovanni a little uncharacteristically compresses this to «Deus autem nos rectificet ad id quo nostra sit salus in hoc mundo et futuro, et cui semper sit laus». But broad appeals like this to a generalized Deity were obviously nothing either translator would have found objectionable.

The same thing is true, however, about their treatment of material specific to Islam. They did not gloss over passages where they found their author giving an account of the details peculiar to Muslim life, nor did they feel compelled to gloss them in a polemical manner; their translations are perfectly matter-of-fact when they touch on such things. As an example, consider the way they deal with Maimonides's reference to the prohibition

of alcohol in Islam. Maimonides began the seventh chapter of *Asthma*, on the regimen of drink, by praising the use of wine, but he acknowledged that «most of this regimen does not apply to Muslims, since wine is prohibited to them and the different kinds of *nabīd* are prohibited to most of them» —*nabīd* here refers to any intoxicating drink. He could not resist going on to speak of wine's «very great benefit» to health, before cutting his account short by saying that it was useless to discuss the advantages of something that could not be consumed. In his more succinct translation, Giovanni said simply «wine is forbidden to Saracens» (*sit prohibitum vinum sarracenis*) —the subtle distinctions made by Maimonides about Islamic practice were omitted from his account, but all the same he did not editorialize in any way. However, Ermengol reported these distinctions quite faithfully in his translation, even maintaining Maimonides' perplexing implication that *some* Muslims *could* drink *nabīd*, which Ermengol supposed must refer to beer: «many of these recommendations are impossible for the Saracens (he translated), since wine is forbidden to them, and many of them are not even allowed to drink beer» (*plurimum eius [regiminis] sit a sarracenis elongatum, eo quod sit eis vinum prohibitum, quin immo quod pluribus ex eis sunt cervisie prohibite seu interdicte*).

There are a number of passages in these short works where Maimonides has occasion to refer to the religious law of Islam (*shari'a*), but it is not clear to me that the translators understood all the implications of the Arabic word. When in *Asthma* VIII.3 Maimonides says that «by the constraints and admonitions of the Law a person will attach little importance to this world», Giovanni renders this as «doctrinam et fidem», Ermengol as «dogmatibus et monitionibus fidei», neither of which seems quite to convey the idea of an externally enforced code of social behaviors, or law, based on the will of God. I suppose one might wonder whether, in translating another short work by Maimonides, *On Coitus*, Giovanni was implicitly criticizing *shari'a* marriage law and its permission of polygamy when, at the beginning of the work, he represents Maimonides as telling his patron, «You have told me that you will not abandon any part of your sexual activities, but that in fact you wish to enhance them, because of the multitude of young maidens»; it sounds a little cynical, as though Giovanni might have been distorting the language of the original in order to convey a Christian condemnation of Islamic sexual practices. Yet in fact he was faithfully translating Maimonides' own Arabic words, to which Maimonides added the phrase (and I find it hard to think that Maimonides was not being at least a little ironic here) «may your glory increase». Giovanni did not include that last phrase. Perhaps the irony was lost on him, for he treated this work's recommendations, like *Asthma*'s, in a perfectly matter-of-fact way.

Actually, *On Coitus* strikes today's medieval historian as a remarkable work, one unlike anything available in Latin up to that point. It is a work that places detailed emphasis on the relationship between psychology and the sexual act, but it does not stint its discussion of pharmacology either. You might easily imagine that a prudish translator would have chosen to skip over some of its recommendations, but Giovanni carefully and precisely communicates, for example, its recommendation of an ointment made by mixing carrot oil, radish oil, and mustard oil, and then steeping live yellow ants in the combination —this will maintain an erection even after intercourse, Giovanni says: «no physician has ever found anything like it!» Clients in Papal Rome were probably just as

concerned with a good sexual life as they were in Fatimid Cairo, and Giovanni was doing his best to be as informative and helpful as possible.

There is another obvious instance where Islamic practice might have given rise to polemic, but did not. In *On Poisons*, Maimonides mentions the date on which his patron had requested the work: in the month of Ramadan of 595 AH (corresponding to 1198 AD). In translating this, Giovanni gives the month and year with no attempt at explanation; Ermengol omits the month and gives the year as 595 «of the Arabs». You would not expect them to have glossed it with the exact equivalent in the Christian era, I suppose, but it would have given them an easy opportunity for polemicizing if either translator had been interested in doing so; after all, the two calendric systems represent the core events of the two religions. Or, if they had wanted to minimize their readers' confusion, they could easily have omitted the parenthetical passage. Yet they did neither; they simply passed on the Hijra date without comment. In their hands, here, Maimonides becomes a kind of travel writer moving among the «Saracens», reporting to his readers more or less objectively, neutrally, the details of the world around him.

It is not that Maimonides' medical writings focused narrowly on physical health and tried to avoid making moral judgments. In fact, he offered very explicit ethical advice to his Islamic patients, advice that as it happens also conformed very well to the ideals and priorities of his eventual Christian readers. A Galenic regimen, as I have already said, was normally built around the six non-natural things which needed to be kept in balance if a patient was to remain healthy, and the one that concluded every list was the «accidentia anime» or passions of the soul—the emotions. These needed to be kept under control, so as not to overpower the patient's ability to behave moderately and rationally. Maimonides discussed this most fully in his *Regimen sanitatis*, a long regimen that he composed for the Egyptian ruler al-Afdal, the son of Saladin. Here he explained that observing the religious law, heeding the Prophets, and studying a philosophical tradition that even predated Islam would improve a man's moral qualities and would keep him free from influence by the passions. He had in mind, I think, the Stoic tradition, and his ideal for al-Afdal was to maintain an almost Stoic indifference to good fortune or bad. This program made its way easily into Latin, divorced as it was from any reference to a particularly Islamic context. Giovanni translated Maimonides' advice literally: «follow the teachings of the laws and the judgments of the prophets and of others living before the Saracens»—expressed like that, they were all authorities that a Christian reader would have had no difficulties at all in accepting. And Giovanni went on to translate faithfully Maimonides' words about the best way to live:

Often a man acquires great wealth and achieves authority and power, which weakens his body, destroys his soul through his evil ways, shortens his life, and separates him from God, when the greatest good is to be one with God! While often if a man loses his wealth, if a king is deposed from his kingdom, he becomes healthier, his soul is strengthened by his virtuous life, his days are lengthened, and he grows closer to God, the eternally good.

These words had probably been written with al-Afdal's particular situation in mind; he was repeatedly attacked by his brothers during his reign and was finally deposed by

them. But of course European readers would not have known this: to them, Maimonides would have been offering timeless advice that was universal in nature, and indeed potentially even Christian in spirit, with powerful echoes of the Sermon on the Mount: «non potestis deo servire et mammonae».

There are other echoes of Scripture in Maimonides' medical writings, but this time, curiously, they are a translator's contribution. In the final chapter of *Asthma*, Maimonides drew repeatedly on his own experiences to warn against depending on any but physicians who based their practice on rational deliberation, and he advised his patron to leave his health to nature if the only alternative was submitting to an incompetent empiric. There is a vividness in this concluding material that comes in large part from its detailed account of medical practice in the Maghreb and in Egypt, and the anecdotes Maimonides tells here are the closest the work comes to evoking an alien society. Here is another passage I have found where a translator might possibly have been deliberately trying to impose a Christian veneer on Maimonides for the reader, and again it is Ermengol who does it (it will be remembered that at one point in *On Poisons* Ermengol had Maimonides appeal to «Jesus Christ» as his master). In rendering Maimonides' dramatic account of a Moroccan ruler's sudden death from an overdose of theriac, describing the uproar in the palace, Ermengol chose to put a mixture of Christian passages (from the New Testament) into his Jewish author's text: «factus est repente . . . clamor magnus» — the words are a fusion of texts from Acts and St. Matthew's gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Originally I thought this echo of scriptural language was only coincidence, and that familiarity had brought the words unconsciously to Ermengol's mind (Giovanni, the Jewish convert, simply translated the passage «audita est vox fletus»). But after preparing an edition of Ermengol's *Hemorrhoids* I have begun to change my mind. At one point in that work Maimonides is describing the technique of suffumigation, which involves placing an earthenware pot (Ar. *qasriyya*) with a hole in its base upside down over smoking coals for the patient to sit on and absorb the smoke rectally, and Ermengol used the highly unusual word *perapsidis* to translate «pot»; it is certainly not a word in common domestic or medical use. (In contrast, Giovanni simply translated the word as «vas».) The word must be an echo of Matthew 23:25-26, where Christ commands the Pharisee: «munda prius quod intus est calicis et paropsidis [Gr. *paropsidos*], ut fiat id quod deforis est mundum», —in the old Reina-Valera translation, «limpia primero lo de dentro del vaso y del plato, para que también lo de fuera se haga limpio!». I cannot easily believe that this word choice was unconscious. Was it the image of «cleansing» that brought the word to Ermengol's mind as he was thinking about this particular medical treatment? Or might he have actively *wanted* to give a Scriptural overtone to Maimonides' text? Whatever his motives, to readers familiar with the New Testament (or even with liturgical usage) the result of this kind of language would certainly have been to associate Maimonides with the Latin Christian world, and perhaps, once again, to make him —and even the society he was describing— seem less foreign.

1. «Factus est repente de coelo sonus advenientis spiritus vehementis» (Acts 2.2); «Media nocte clamor factus est, ecce sponsus venit» (Matthew 25.6). The passages need not have been familiar to Ermengol from scripture alone; both also had seasonal liturgical use.



## V

Not that Ermengol imagined that Maimonides *was* a Christian. As I said, he was still not a widely known philosopher in the West, but he was certainly known to have been a Jew. In their several translations, Ermengol and Giovanni routinely call him «Raby Moyses» and occasionally «Israelitus». And yet his Judaism excited no more direct comment in these translations than Islam did: the translators had no interest in side issues. As they made their translations, both Ermengol and Giovanni (and particularly the latter, who had converted from Judaism) would surely have been struck by the fact that the Moroccan ruler just mentioned who died of an overdose of theriac had been (Maimonides tells us) in the care of two Muslim and two «Israelite» physicians simultaneously. Both Ermengol and Giovanni would have known very well that Jewish physicians did not easily find that kind of professional equality in the Christian world of 1300, and both probably concurred with the rationale behind the restrictions on Jews, but that knowledge did not affect their translations, or their admiration of Maimonides' work. The Latin Maimonides was a Jew, but his Jewishness was not an important fact about him.

What would these translators have seen in Maimonides, then, that might have made him appear to be a physician much like themselves? I am not denying the attraction of the clinical advice he published on these subjects, which were all of great contemporary interest (except perhaps asthma), but I think his views on medicine *as a profession* may have found a particular resonance with Ermengol and Giovanni. European academic medicine in the year 1300 was just beginning to win social approval for its new claim that only the learned literate practitioner of scientific medicine was trustworthy, and that empirics and the self-taught were dangerous. Our two translators in their own ways both stood for the necessity of medical learning, and in Maimonides they had found a champion of that position. There were no universities as such in classical Islam, but Ermengol and Giovanni may not have been aware of this, and they would not have cared: they knew that Maimonides was proud of having studied with a learned master and that he condemned those who claimed that medicine could be learned by mere doing, like weaving or farming: «knowledge», Maimonides wrote, «is the root and practice is the branch, and there is no branch without a root». The new professionalism was altering relationships between Western practitioners and their patients, too, and again Maimonides anticipated European developments in arguing that professional authority and judgment ought to supersede patient autonomy. Across the board, he espoused exactly the program that Latin physicians had begun to believe in: he was one of themselves.

I began by speaking of «the Latin Maimonides», but I have slipped into the somewhat paradoxical «Maimonides as a Latin physician». I am suggesting that the Latin translations of his medical works were such as to let readers perceive him, not so much as a Jew, as an Egyptian, as an Arabic speaker, as an exotic «other», but as someone who in a sense was already part of their own intellectual and professional community. If we define «Latin physician» by literate written expression in that language, together with an adherence to shared intellectual principles and a common professional outlook, then the translated Maimonides fits that definition. In fact, I suspect one could make the same case for a number of other Arabic-language medical authors whose works were trans-

lated into Latin—Avicenna and Rhazes, for example. I do not believe that Maimonides' Latin readers felt that it mattered, for *their* purposes, that he had been a Jewish physician writing in Arabic for Egyptian patients: immersed in his writings, they could feel that he was, as I said, «one of them».

We are becoming more and more conscious these days that fixed notions of «The West» and «The East» as contrasting cultural models may often disguise and distort more than they reveal. When we imagine a contrast between Latin and Arabic medicine, it is an example of this West/East opposition, and it is very largely a straw man that circumstances have led us to construct. In fact, Monica Green came implicitly to this conclusion in the article that I referred to at the beginning of this talk: she ended by recognizing that, aside from that one passage on abortifacients, Constantine the African saw little or no need to adapt Eastern medical science to the ethical milieu of the West, and, what is more, that his work was enthusiastically supported by his monastic brethren at Monte Cassino. Perhaps the cultural differences we perceive were not so important to late eleventh-century Benedictines. And whatever cultural divisions there were at the end of the thirteenth century between Islam and the West, or between Christians and Jews, they did not in the least prevent Latin physicians from appropriating Maimonides as a colleague.

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