

MEN AND MEDICINE

Jerome Cardan

• Girolamo Cardano (often called Jerome Cardan) exemplified one type of Renaissance physician, one whose professional life comprised a wide variety of activities and whose private life was, if anything, even more varied and irregular.

He was born in September 1501 although, according to his autobiography "various abortive medicines were tried in vain"; he narrowly escaped being a monster, being saved—he said—by a small but lucky change in the position of the planets just before his birth. His horoscope, however, ordained for him a life "bereft of bodily strength, with few friends, small means, many enemies, without ordinary human wisdom, inclined to be faulty of memory." He also had a stuttering tongue and was born "maimed in the genitals." These, and other items of his personal life are to be found in his autobiography, *De Vita Propria Liber*, written when he was 74 years old. His powers of total recall, or perhaps of vivid imagination with respect to his early life, would have made him an important literary figure if he had lived in the twentieth century.

Cardano in many ways was a man born before his time. His treatises on arithmetic (1539) and on algebra (1545) made him famous during his lifetime, despite the fact that important parts of the work on algebra had been stolen from his friend, Tartaglia. However, many of his other ideas, although recognized as important at the time, were more to be regarded as interesting topics of conversation among the sophisticated than as proposals for action by scientists. His *De Subtilitate Rerum* (1550) was a summary of what was then known about plant and animal life. In Cardano's day it was considered remarkable for its completeness; today it is considered re-

markable for its hints about evolution. This book also suggested that the blind be taught to read and write by means of a method akin to that invented by Braille two hundred years later. The possibility of using a sign language to communicate with the deaf was also discussed in the book. All these ideas lay dormant for several centuries after Cardano first suggested them.

Cardano also advanced a modern theory of dreams. Aristotle had stated that some dreams were true and others were false, but he had neglected to define ways of distinguishing the two categories. Cardano took the modern view (now ascribed to Freud) that all dreams were significant. His autobiography contains an account of one of his dreams: He dreamt that he was in a beautiful garden full of flowers and fruit, all visible through an open gate. In the dream a door opposite the gate opened and a beautiful girl dressed in white came out; Cardano embraced and kissed the girl, at which point the gardener closed the gate, shutting them both out despite Cardano's pleas to leave it open. He then

woke up. A few days later a new family moved into the house next to his and to Cardano's amazement the same girl stepped out from the doorway. He was determined to have her, but since her father was a militia officer and a man of violent actions, Cardano decided not to kidnap or seduce the girl. Instead he married her and she made the rest of his life miserable.

Cardano's autobiography actually created a precedent. Whereas religious confession had been made popular by St. Augustine and those who imitated him, the kind of personal confession presented by Cardano was different and actually is believed by the poorly informed to have been invented by Rousseau two centuries later. In this respect, too, Cardano was before his time.

Less is known about Cardano's medical ideas than about other matters. He had graduated from Padua but seemingly continued to educate himself thereafter by means of his extensive library. His purchases of books (together with gambling and high living) kept him in poverty. When asked how he overcame poverty he replied that when he had nothing left to lose he ceased to be poor. Actually, he came to be known throughout the western world for his remarkable cures. These gained him professorships of medicine at Pavia and Bologna. (He left Bologna when his son was beheaded for attempted wife-murder.) He was invited to become physician to many rich and notable persons, including the King of Denmark. However, it is impossible to ascertain how his cures were accomplished. He therefore remains an enigma in some ways. On the other hand he typifies physicians whose far-ranging interests made them not only excellent clinicians but also men who made important contributions to other disciplines.

