

LUDOVICUS NONNIUS, M.D., 1553-1645

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Few visitors to London's National Gallery who stand admiringly before the portrait of Ludovicus Nonnius (Figure 1), one of the best paintings by Peter Paul Rubens, are aware of the remarkable personality of the sitter, Ludovicus Nonnius, M.D.

This painting, completed in 1627, was sold in 1687 (for £26/10/0) by one Edward Davis to Anthony, the Earl of Kent, whose descendant Baroness Lucas left it on loan to the National Gallery from 1946 to 1962; in 1970 the painting was bought by the National Gallery for an undisclosed sum. For more than 300 years no one was certain whose portrait it was, although the marble bust of Hippocrates indicated the sitter's connection with medicine. Until 1950 the painting was catalogued as "Portrait of an unknown physician." It was only then that Ludwig Burchard, the art historian, solved the mystery when he saw in the Plantin Moretus Museum in Antwerp a copy of this portrait by Erasmus Quellin.^{1,2} A receipt found in the account book of the famous printer Balthasar Moretus II indicated that Quellin was paid for this copy on 18 April 1647, and that the portrait was that of Ludovicus Nonnius, one of Rubens's physicians.^{3,4} But who was Ludovicus Nonnius?

Several Belgian authors, describing the history of the Collegium Medicum Anverpiense and the famous printing houses of sixteenth century Antwerp, tell us a great deal about the medical family of Nuñez or Nonnius.^{5,6} Although the family name is of Portuguese origin, Alvarez Nuñez, the father of Ludovicus was born in Spain at Frarinala.⁷ He became a well known physician, emigrated to Flanders about 1550, latinized his name to Nonnius, and established a practice in Antwerp.^{4,5}

It appears that Alvarez was of Jewish origin, but a convert to Catholicism. A large number of Portuguese and Spanish Jewish converts, marranos, were permitted in 1532 by Charles V, the ruler of the Holy

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Fig. 1. Ludovicus Nonnius. Reproduced by permission from the Trustees of the National Gallery of London.

Roman Empire and King of Spain, to emigrate to Flanders and to reside in Antwerp. Several distinguished physicians (Amatus Lusitanus, Emmanuel Gomez, Lopez Garcia, Antonio Spinoza) were among this group. During the next four decades many of them left for the Netherlands to avoid religious persecutions, but those who remained intermarried with the local gentry and became fully integrated into the Antwerp patriciate.^{8,9}

An erudite historian and writer, Alvarez Nonnius, published in 1574 a volume about Francisco Arceo, one of the great Spanish surgeons (*Annotationes ad libros duos Francisci Arcoei de curandorum vulnerum ratione* [Antwerp, Christopher Plantin]).⁵ The fine city of Antwerp was then at the peak of its opulence and fame. Merchandise from all over the world flowed into its large harbor, and its cosmopolitan population grew at such a rate that the previous circle of fortifications had to be extended to make room for new quarters. However, when religious and political troubles appeared to menace Spanish domination, the Duke of Alba's punitive expedition against the Calvinists in 1567 crushed the rebellion with a ferocity that left 10,000 dead, hundreds of houses burned, and

made the “Spanish fury” proverbial. It took many years for the once proud city to recover, but slowly trade and industry revived. Christopher Plantin, who established his famous printing works in 1549, was turning out a large number of books, some of them very costly productions, such as the Polyglot Bible. Jan Moerentor (Moretus), Plantin’s son-in-law and successor, greatly expanded the printing industry and Balthasar Moretus I (Jan’s son) appointed Rubens official designer to the Plantin-Moretus press. Some of Rubens’s sketches made in Rome from the antique busts and statues were printed by the Moretus press in 1608, and this established a close relationship between them, especially when Rubens painted an altar piece above the tomb of Jan Moretus in the Cathedral.⁹ Many books published by Moretus were illustrated by Rubens during the 30 years of their friendship and collaboration. The drawings were engraved, mostly by Cornelius Gallus, a master of technique whom Rubens admired; other engravers also worked for Rubens, including Erasmus Quellin, who composed frontispieces according to Rubens’s indications until 1638, when Rubens’ health declined.¹⁰

Balthasar Moretus, the master printer, like his father and Plantin, loved the company of scholars and artists whose series of portraits for him were commissioned from Rubens. Among these were portraits of the humanist Justus Lipsius, the theologian Pantinus, the geographer Abraham Ortelius, the classicist Gaspar Gevaertius, and others.^{10,11}

Rubens, whose interest in classical archaeology dated from his voyage to Italy, would have met Ludovicus Nonnius in Antwerp among this brilliant circle. It appears that Rubens consulted Nonnius for this “tertian fever” (“*trovando mi simile al letto con una terziana molto gagliarda*,” as the painter mentions in one of his letters).¹² He also consulted Nonnius in 1625 when plague broke out in Antwerp, and on his advice left the town and took lodgings in a tavern at Laeken.* In June 1626 Rubens and his family returned to Antwerp, perhaps prematurely, because Isabella Brandt, the painter’s wife fell ill and died at the age of 34.³ She was treated during her illness by Nonnius and three other physicians, Guglielmus Verwilt, Godfried Verecken, and Lazarus Marquis.^{3†} Soon after Isabella’s death Rubens fell ill with acute fever, treated by his

*The medical history of Peter Paul Rubens and his friendship with physicians are well described by Beaudouin in the *Liber Memorialis* for the 350th anniversary of the *Collegium Medicarum Antverpiense*.⁴

†Lazarus Marquis, who obtained his medical degree in Padua and then settled in Antwerp, wrote a treatise on plague, which was published in 1636 under the Flemish title *Volcomen Tractat van de Peste*. It was Marquis who treated Rubens in 1640 during the latter’s fatal illness.

doctors by copious blood-letting and much purgation. This did not endear the medical profession to the painter, but his friendship with Nonnius remained firm. The latter's artistic talents must have been considerable, as in 1634-35 he prepared a drawing for a triumphal arch to be erected by the city for the entry of Cardinal-Infant Don Ferdinand. Nonnius was also one of the three members of the committee to approve the Latin text of a dutiful and loyal volume *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi*, a book equally remarkable for its typographical splendor and literary obscurity.⁴

Nonnius' classical erudition and scholarship were revealed well before that time. He was the author of a book on Spain (*Hispania sive Populorum Urbium, Insularum et Fluminum in ea accuratior descriptio*) published in 1607 and of two books on Greek and Roman coins. His professional interest in urinary calculi led him to write three essays on their etiology and attempted treatment.⁴

However, his main contribution to medical history was related to problems of food and nutrition. A study entitled *Ichthyophagia sive de esu Piscium Commentarius* was published in Antwerp in 1676; it describes in alphabetical order the alimentary merits of some 37 different kinds of fish, with a glossary of their names in four languages. But his truly remarkable work was *Diaeteticon sive de re cibaria Libri IV*, perhaps the first treatise on food and its nutritional value, seen from the scientific angle. First published in 1627 and reprinted as a second edition in 1645, this book, compiled from various sources, describes the nature, digestibility, and other merits of several hundreds of various foodstuffs, from bread, through cereals, legumes, meat, fish, poultry, fruit, and beverages. It stresses the nutritional value of fish, the advantages of fresh bread and fruit, deplores the overuse of salts and spices, advises on the different types of meat, warns not to mix various wines, etc. Much of it is based on Roman and Greek authors; Horace, Juvenal, and Martial are quoted when ridiculing some unusual foods of the Roman aristocracy. The motto of this book is *Non est vivere sed valere vita*. The four parts of it, each comprising up to 50 sections, are spiced with literary references and comments. Altogether, the book is a remarkable account of ancient and contemporary dietetics and nutrition. (Figure 2)

This book became widely known among the medical fraternity of Antwerp and, when in August 1627 Rubens sent a parcel of books to his friend Pierre Dupuy in Paris, he wrote: "This little treatise by Ludovicus Nonnius is good, according to our physicians".^{4,12}

Ludovicus Nonnius lived in a house called "Schild van Spanje" (The



Fig. 2. Frontispiece of the 1645 edition of Ludovicus Nonnius' *Diaeteticon*. Courtesy of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

Spanish Shield) bought by his wife Francisca Godines in 1623. It still stands in the old Lange Gasthuis street in Antwerp. He died there in 1645 at the ripe age of 92. It is indeed fortunate that, through the genius of Rubens, the sensitive, thoughtful, and noble face of a remarkable man and notable physician has been preserved for posterity.

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