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Male Erotic Desire in the Hippocratics

Michel Foucault's (1985) *The Use of Pleasure* remains the only analysis of male erotic desire in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, despite continuing work in the last twenty years on male sexuality during the classical period. Although much of Foucault's analysis remains useful, this paper will expand and improve his analysis to argue that male sexual desire was an implicit background to Hippocratic therapies. Hippocratic medicine is concerned with the balance of fluid in the genitalia and adjusts therapy to promote and maintain that balance because of male sexual desire.

Foucault argued that *iatroi* problematized male sexual activity because ejaculation and the exertion of the sexual act produced "warming, cooling, drying, and moistening effects." Since intercourse upset bodily equilibrium, it became the province of the *iatros* to advise and regulate the patient on the proper amount and timing of his sexual activity. Most Hippocratic advice warns against the excesses of male sexual activity. In *Morb.* 2.51 an over-excited groom must restrict his sexual activity for a year and undertake vapor baths and other treatments to restore his lost fluids; in *Epid.* 3.3.10 a man catches a fever after drinking and intercourse. *Prorrh.* 2.4 generalizes that intercourse once sharpens a man's abilities, but frequent intercourse leads to dryness and tiredness. In Hippocratic thought a man's erotic desire for intercourse is taken for granted. The supposition is apparent in the therapy advocated by Hippocratic *iatroi* for males with sexual inability. The Hippocratic author of *Airs, Waters, Places* recommends in *Aer.* 22 that certain Scythian nomads who become impotent and unable to have intercourse due to their wet flesh masturbate in order to restore the drier manly physique. That is, masturbation, just like excessive sexual activity, drains moisture. It does not matter to the Hippocratic writer that the Scythians have no desire for intercourse. Rather, the belief that men desire erotic stimulation is so strong in Hippocratic thought that it dictates the therapy for men who have no erotic desire.

Further, there is little evidence that Hippocratic writers thought that a disease might affect male erotic desire (apart from the case of the Scythians, in which the disease and treatments are at odds). In *Prorrh.* 2.41 alone is the sexual function of the penis in old men impaired by disease, but the writer says nothing about an accompanying lack of desire. *Ulc.* 14 concerns the preparation of a styptic to remove lesions on the penis, but does not indicate that this disease might affect desire. On the contrary, Hippocratic writers see sexual desire even in male children. *Aer.* 9 notes that male children suffering from the stone masturbate to relieve the pain, but that women do not masturbate. Hippocratic thought holds that sexual desire is an ever-present part of male life.

Eroticism plays no role in Hippocratic therapy because it is considered part of the nature of men. Therapy must react to nature: Hippocratic therapy therefore does not encourage sexual desire but rather focuses on the mechanics of sexual acts, advocating masturbation or restricting intercourse. Perhaps this medical understanding is best seen in comparison with other treatment styles. In an Asclepian *iama* from Epidaurus (IG IV².121.104-6) an unnamed *aner* suffering from the stone incubates and has an erotic dream where he sleeps with an attractive boy; he orgasms and leaves with the stone in his hands. While the god cures by the same treatment advocated by the Hippocratic *iatros* of *Aer*. – the man, I would argue, masturbates to orgasm in sleep – he does so by sending a dream to encourage masculine *phusis*, erotic desire. That is the divine nature of this cure, whose medical background remains the Hippocratic conception of natural male desire and Hippocratic sexual therapeutics.