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Medical Dreams in the Hippocratic Corpus:  
How innovative was the author of *De Victu* really?

“And I have discovered these things, and also *prodiagnosis*, established before a man falls ill due to excess, concerning the way in which it may develop. (...) Thus I have discovered what people suffer before health is mastered by disease, and how one should change these things into a state of health.”

(*Vict*.I.2; 124,28-126,3 Joly; 6.472 L.)

The purpose of this paper is to show that on the topic of dreams, there is more consensus among the various Hippocratic authors than has hitherto been thought. Until now, the use of a patient's dream contents for diagnostic/prognostic purposes were believed to be confined to the fourth book of *On Regimen*, whose author has, at least in part, of course inspired this belief himself with claims of originality: statements like the above quote – in which he is referring to the practice of medical dream interpretation – illustrate his intention to place himself and his theories outside, no, even ahead of the contemporary medical community. However, as this paper will demonstrate, *On Regimen* occupies a less isolated position within the Hippocratic Corpus than has previously been assumed, and his approach to dreams was more ‘Hippocratic’ than it may seem.

At first sight, mention of dreams in other texts of the Hippocratic Corpus seem to give the impression that dreams were regarded merely as a part of medical anamnesis – usually alongside or within the enveloping framework of sleep – and that their contents were thought to be of little consequence. The focus of diagnosis lay on establishing *if* troubling dream experiences and anomalies in sleep behaviour occurred, and, when this was the case, on determining which underlying ailment might have caused them – without consulting the *contents* of such dreams. The treatise *De Victu* IV is an obvious exception to this way of thinking, as it combines the physiological and the hermeneutic approach to the dream event, merging the practical and the interpretive, and giving importance not only to the phenomenon itself, but also to its contents. As the author of the treatise remarks, dreams thus used are a valuable aid to medical diagnosis. Why, then, do other Hippocratic treatises in the Corpus seem to disregard the *interpretation* of dreams in the process of medical diagnosis? Did their authors disagree with the author of *De Victu* IV, and was he an exception, an irregularity, among his peers?

In the Hippocratic Corpus, there are, besides *On Regimen*, 10 treatises in which dreams are mentioned in a more than cursory fashion. In four of these (*On Humours* 4; *Prorrhetic* I.5; *On Ancient Medicine* 10-11; *Epidemics* I.10), there is no mention of *specific* dream content, although this does not mean that the

contents were indeed deemed unimportant or left out of consideration altogether. Four others are of a more explanatory nature (*Epid.VI.8.9-10*; *Morb.Sac.14-15*; *Flat.14*; *Semin.1*), but only the *Epidemics VI* passage bears a direct resemblance to *On Regimen*. The last two passages (*Morb.II.72*; *Int.48*) are specifically concerned with images that are seen by the patient, and for that reason are of great interest. In my paper, the focus will be on the last three passages: *Epidemics VI.8.9-10*, *Diseases II.72* and *Internal Affections 48*. A close reading of these will make clear that the author of *On Regimen* was not alone in his approach to dreams. *Epidemics VI.8.9-10* have always puzzled interpreters; even Galen, in his commentary on the treatise, speaks of ‘dunkle und rätselhafte Worte’. A new interpretation of the passages in question, postulated from a new point of view, i.e. that of medical dream interpretation, will bring clarity and reveal a striking likeness to the ideas put forward in *On Regimen IV*. Discussion of this passage will be followed by a comparison between *Diseases II.72*, *Internal Affections 48*, and *On Regimen 92-93*, in which I will show that the similarity in imagery used in these passages is remarkable. The likenesses between the abovementioned chapters from *Diseases II*, *Internal Affections* and *On Regimen* have been noted before (e.g. in the texteditions by Littré, Joly, and Jouanna), but the three treatises have never been brought together in this way. Although similarity provides no grounds for assuming that the authors’ views and underlying theories were of a kind, it does seem to indicate that certain ideas had a broader reach, which ultimately helps to embed the treatise *On Regimen* more securely in the context of the Hippocratic Corpus.

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### Erotic Experience in the Cures of Asklepios & the Hippocratics

A recent article by David Morris, Professor of Biomedical Ethics and Humanities at the University of Virginia (“Un-forgetting Asclepius: An Erotics of Illness,” *New Literary History* 2007), argues that western medicine has gone the way of Hippocrates rather than Asklepios: it is rational, cold, sterile, and its practitioners emotionally detached from their patients. Asklepios, by contrast, represents a type of medicine that accommodates and even encourages desire, particularly sexual desire, among its patients. The principal aim of Morris’ article is to discuss the efficacy of “erotic” medicine; a patient who is in touch with his or her sexual desires is likelier to have a more positive experience with illness, he argues.

In laying out his arguments, Morris is careful to defend his use of Asklepios and Hippocrates as representatives of two divergent approaches to healing in the modern world. Morris traces a dichotomy between Asklepios and Hippocrates that developed over time. Both healers, he contends, had early ties to eros, but Asklepios “maintained an underground and official connection with eros,” whereas Hippocrates shed those connections as the centuries passed.

This paper will use Morris’ arguments as a starting point from which to reexamine the role of sexual desire in the cures of Asklepios in the classical period and to compare that evidence to Hippocratic medicine of the time. While Morris is indeed right that links between Asklepios and the mythological figure Eros existed early in the history of the cult (e.g., Eryximachos’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*; a painting of Eros in Asklepios’ sanctuary at Epidauros, Paus.2.27.3), I believe Morris is overstating his case regarding the role that sexual desire played in the records of Asklepios’ cures at any point in time, but particularly in the classical period. Morris himself singles out only one example from all of the god’s cures to demonstrate sexual desire, and, as I will argue, the example is misleading.

The primary evidence for cures of Asklepios in the classical period is the healing inscriptions, or *iamata*, from Epidauros. The sole ailment Morris adduces for sexual desire appears in these same narratives: women who are unable to conceive. Morris states, “Barren women traveled to Epidauros so that Asklepios could impregnate them.” His statement may suggest that women came to Epidauros to have sex with the god, but this is neither explicit nor even implied in the *iamata*, as I will demonstrate. Moreover, sex itself (although whether this necessarily entails sexual desire is open to question, as Morris acknowledges) seems a logical component of any therapy at the time for women wishing to conceive. Be that as it may, the *iamata* allude to sex in only one of the four instances of women who visit Asklepios in order to conceive.

Another narrative, recording an entirely different ailment, provides the surest indication of sexual desire in an Asklepiian cure. A man suffering from a stone in

his penis dreams that he is having sex with a handsome boy; he ejaculates in his sleep and thereby expels the stone (*IG IV*<sup>2</sup> 1 121.104-106). Here sexual arousal is a means to ejaculation, which apparently is thought to be the efficient cause of pushing the stone out of the penis. The *iamata* preserve one other instance of this ailment: Asklepios treats a boy suffering stone, but it is not clear here that the stone is removed; instead, it seems Asklepios may simply have stopped the boy's pain (*IG IV*<sup>2</sup> 1 121.6871). In this latter instance it is remarkable that the patient is a boy rather than a man, which may explain the difference in treatment.

Overall, there is very little evidence for sexual desire in Asklepios' cures, which seems consistent also with the Hippocratic evidence. This in no way diminishes Morris' arguments about erotic medicine, but it does force us to question whether we might better describe healing encounters with Asklepios as characterized by emotion broadly writ than by sexual desire per se.

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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 IV<sup>2</sup>.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.