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Fighting and mastering disease: metaphors and masculinity

It is well known that political metaphors are a notable feature of classical Greek medical discourse, beginning with Alcmaeon's use of the terms *isonomia* and *monarchia* in his theory of health and disease causation and continuing on to discussions found in Plato and the various writers whose ideas are addressed by Anonymous Londinensis.<sup>1</sup> Such metaphors include notions of domination, opposition and victory. It has also been pointed out that, in its early stages, Greek medical discourse showed little interest in internal diseases.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I argue that the Hippocratic focus on internal diseases and the growth of political metaphors as explanatory models for internal pathologies paralleled a development in the gendering of disease and the experience of illness. Archaic descriptions of disease, when they occur at all, show a population—male or female—subject either to wasting away from disease or to attacks by the arrows of divinities; the response is either to placate the deity, to suffer pain and distress, or to receive help from healers applying gentle remedies or cutting and burning. Even in the case of these latter, harsh, remedies, the discourse does not speak of active resistance. But in the Hippocratic Corpus, we see the treatment of disease turned into a struggle, in which the patient and the healer work together to oppose the disease (cf. esp. *Epidemics I*, 11: ὑπεναντιοῦσθαι τῷ νοσήματι τὸν νοσέοντα μετὰ τοῦ ἰητροῦ). I would like to suggest that the metaphor of “combatting disease” (still so much a part of our contemporary discourse) is part of a new direction in Greek approaches to disease, one which matches up the struggle with internal disease and the mastery of the body with the work of the fighter on the battlefield and the active participant in political life. Such an approach enabled Hippocratic doctors to support contemporary ideologies of masculinity, which maintained that men—in contrast to women—were invulnerable, strong, masters of their bodies, always capable of performing their masculine roles. In fighting disease, the man weakened by bodily disfunction, could nonetheless claim to be performing a masculine role.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. particularly G. Cambiano, “Pathologie et analogie politique,” 441-458, in Lasserre and Mudry, *Formes de Pensée dans la Collection Hippocratique* (Geneva 1983) and Vegetti, M. (1983) “Metafora politica e immagine del corpo negli scritti Ippocratici,” also in Lasserre and Mudry, *Formes de Pensée*: 459-69.

<sup>2</sup> So I. M. Lonie, “Literacy and the Development of Hippocratic Medicine,” in Lasserre and Mudry, *Formes de Pensée dans la Collection Hippocratique* (Geneva 1983), 153.