DISEASE AS AGGRESSION IN THE HIPPOCRATIC CORPUS AND GREEK TRAGEDY: WILD AND DEVOURING DISEASE

It is well known that the rational understanding of disease that we find in the Hippocratic Corpus contrasts with a much older conception that is represented in Greek tragedy. Since the subjects of Greek tragedy are mythical, the belief in the divine origin of disease is widespread, and the important healing figures are gods. By contrast, Hippocratic doctors explain disease by natural causes and reject any intervention of an anthropomorphic divinity; and their therapeutic action combats the cause of the disease through rational means.

Although the understandings of disease in medical literature and in tragedy are clearly far apart, a more detailed investigation reveals similarities as well as differences. To show these similarities, two methods of investigation present themselves. The first is to demonstrate how the rational understanding of doctors managed to influence the tragic authors. The second has been much less explored and will form the basis of this paper. It consists in showing that in spite of its prevailing rationalism, the Hippocratic Corpus’ vocabulary of pathology preserves, in what is usually called its metaphorical expression, traces of an older representation of disease, similar to that used in tragedy. It is the understanding of disease as an aggressive force that attacks the individual from the outside, penetrates him, takes possession of him and, like a wild animal, can feed on his flesh. The philologist that adopts this approach must list and semantically analyse the entire metaphoric vocabulary of disease, both in the Hippocratic Corpus and in tragedy, in order to reconstruct its force and coherence and to clarify the image of disease it contains. Since a full comparison is not possible within the constraints of this paper, I will limit myself to the specific theme of the vocabulary of wildness and devouring. The first part of the paper will study

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1 I adopted this approach in “Médecine hippocratique et tragédie grecque,” in P. Ghiron Bistagne and B. Schouler, Anthropologie et théâtre antique: actes du Colloque international de Montpellier 6–8 mars 1986 (Cahiers du Gita III) (Montpellier 1987), pp. 109–131, also included in the present volume (see ch. 4).
wild disease in general; the second part, a particular aspect of this wild disease, namely the devouring disease. Each part will begin with tragedy before moving on to the Hippocratic Corpus.

In Greek tragedy, disease is often associated with savagery. Indeed, the adjective ἀγριός, ‘wild’, to describe pathological phenomena appears in the work of the three tragedians. In Aeschylus’ Choephoroi, Orestes, recalling the dreadful diseases that Apollo’s oracle promised in punishment if he does not avenge the death of his father, speaks of “ulcers with a wild bite” (280 ff.: ἀγρίας γνάθοις /λειχήνας). In Sophocles, the expression ἀγρία νόσος, ‘wild disease’, is found in two tragedies: concerning Heracles, in the Trachiniae, beset by a new bout of pain caused by the poisoned tunic given to him by Deianeira, we find: “there leaps again ... the wild disease” (v. 1026 and 1030: θρίσκει δ’ αὖ ... ἀγρία /νόσος); and in Philoctetes, the hero complains bitterly to Neoptolemus for having been abandoned whilst he was consumed by the effect of a wild disease (265 ff.: ἀγρία/νόσῳ). Finally, in Euripides’ Orestes, performed the year after Sophocles’ Philoctetes, the same expression ἀγρία νόσος, ‘ wild disease’, is used by Electra in the prologue to describe the illness that has taken hold of Orestes after the death of his mother. She says in lines 34 ff.: “After this, poor Orestes fell ill, consumed by a wild disease” (ἀγρία ... νόσῳ). Thus, we find the theme of wild disease in four tragedies, written by three separate tragedians, that were staged within half a century of each other, from 458 (the date of Aeschylus’ Choephoroi) to 408 (the date of Euripides’ Orestes). It is remarkable that the influence of rational medicine, which is most perceptible in the tragedies towards the end of the century, does not lead to a decline in the conception of wild disease. On the contrary, it is in the two more recent tragedies, Sophocles’ Philoctetes of 409 and Euripides’ Orestes of 408, that the theme of wild disease is most extensive and recurring. In these two tragedies, not only is disease wild, but the patient has a wild aspect as well. The same vocabulary is applied to both the patient and the disease; it is the verb ἀγριῶ, from ἀγριός, that is used in the passive perfect to describe the wild aspect of the hero, either in its simple form ἠγριῶσατι in Orestes (lines 226, 387), or in its composite form ἀπηγριωμένος in Philoctetes (line 226).²

² However, we should add that in Sophocles’ Philoctetes, the hero’s feralisation is explained not only by his disease, but also because he lives in the company of wild beasts (cf. lines 184 ff.). In Euripides’ Orestes, the relationship between the wild character of the disease and the wild state of the patient is more direct, but is expressed in a rational form: the patient’s wild aspect arises from the fact that the disease has prevented him from washing (cf. 226). The similarity of the use of the vocabulary of the wild in Euripides’ Orestes and...
The representation of wild disease is less widespread in the Hippocratic Corpus than in tragedy, but its presence is stronger than we might think. Of course, we must distinguish within the Hippocratic Corpus between the technical writings and the *Letters*. Let us begin with a passage from the *Letters*, which combines the two adjectives that we find in the Hippocratic Corpus to mean ‘wild disease’. In *Letter* 2, the apocryphal author describes the diseases treated by Hippocrates as ‘beastly and wild’ (9.314,16 ff. L. = Putzger 2, 4 ff. θηριωδῶν δὲ νοσημάτων καὶ ἄγριῶν). The use of these two adjectives is justified by the context: Hippocrates the doctor, who rids the earth and sea of beastly and wild diseases, is compared to Heracles, who rid the world of wild beasts. This comparison refers to a reality of the Roman era: Pliny the Elder tells us that the deified Hippocrates received the same honours as Heracles, and this is confirmed by a coin from Cos, preserved in the numismatic collection of the National Library of Paris (no. 1246), which bears an image on its front of Heracles with his club, and on the reverse side a portrait of Hippocrates. This conception of the doctor purging beastly and wild diseases, although current in the Roman period, comes from a much older conception of the doctor that is found in Greek tragedy: we know that the doctor Apis, in Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*, purged the land of Argos of man-eating monsters (line 264).

In the technical writings of the Hippocratic Corpus, we do not find the same notion, although the two adjectives ἄγριος and θηριώδης are used to describe pathological phenomena. The adjective ἄγριος appears twice: in *Epidemics* 7, ch. 20 (5.392,8 L.), it describes an inflammation: Ctesiphon, suffering from dropsy following severe causus, developed a swelling on his right thigh with a sublivid redness, ἡ πυρή ἄγριος, “like the result of a wild inflammation.” According to Galen’s *Hippocratic Glossary* (19.134,2 K.), this wild inflammation was erysipelas. Elsewhere, in the *Diseases of Women* 1, ch. 8 (8. 38,3–4 L.), it describes certain ulcers: ἔλκεα ... ἄγριώτερα. We may add to this the use of the verb ἄγριω that we find in *Airs, Waters, Places*, ch. 4, also regarding ulcers that do not become wild (2.20,17 L. = Diller


3 Pliny the Elder, *Hist. nat.* 7, ch. 37, (123): “Hippocratis medicina, qui venientem ab Illyriis pestilentiam praedixit discipulosque ad auxiliandum circa urbes dimisit quod ob meritum honores illi quos Herculi decrivit Graecia.”
This last passage is particularly important because it shows that, although in a rational context, the original sense of ‘wild’ is still carefully chosen. It concerns a rational context, since this mention of ulcers is situated in the nosologic outline of cities that are orientated towards the northern winds. Nevertheless, the author deliberately brings out the original meaning of ἄγριος, since he compares and contrasts in two adjoining phrases the ulcers (Ελκεα), which do not become wild (οὐδὲ ἄγριοςθαι), and the characters of men (ἡθεα), which are rather wild (ἄγριωτερα). Thus, terms related to ἄγριος can apply equally well to both diseases and men in the Hippocratic Corpus.4

Like terms related to ἄγριος, ‘wild’, terms related to θηριώδης, ‘savage’, are attested in the Hippocratic Corpus to describe pathological phenomena. θηριώδης is actually more frequent than ἄγριος and occurs eleven times.5 The adjective can describe a pathological state where either the patient or the disease, or both at the same time, fly into a rage, literally like a wild beast. In French, the Greek θηριώδης is best translated by an adjective such as ‘férin’, since this technical medical term (meaning ‘agitated, troubled’), derived from Latin ferinus, ‘wild’, and ultimately from fera, ‘wild beast’, can be traced back to the same Indo-European root (*ghwer-*) as the adjective θηριώδης. For example, in Prorrhetic 1, ch. 26 (5.516, 9 L. = Polack 77, 16 ff.), we read that some “short-lived and bold madness comes from a ‘ferine’ state (θηριωδες).” Galen, in his commentary on this passage, clearly explains what is meant. It is an acute form of delirium, where “the patients thrash their feet, attack, bite, are crazy, believe that anyone who approaches them wishes to harm them.”6 The neuter noun θηρίον, from which the adjective

4 Terms related to ἄγριος continue to be used in medical technical vocabulary to refer to both patients and diseases. For example, Aretaeus uses the verb ἄγριανω either to refer to phrenetics who display wild behaviour and are delirious (Treatment of Acute Diseases 1, ch. 1, 3, ed. Hude2 92,4), or to refer to grazing ulcers that become enflamed and wild (The Causes and Signs of Chronic Diseases 2, ch. 11, 4 and 7, ed. Hude2 CMG II, p. 80,23 and 81,16 ff.).

5 The adjective θηριώδης is used eleven times in a pathological context. The uses are grouped in Epidemics 2–4–6 (Epid. 2.1, ch. 3; 5.72,12 L.; Epid. 4, ch. 16, 5.154,12 L.; Epid. 6.1, ch. 11, 5.272,1 L.; 6.2, ch. 6, 5.280,5 L.; 6.2, ch. 11, 5.282,16 L.), in Prorrhetic 1 (ch. 26, 5.516,9 L.; ch. 123, 5.552,6 L. ff.) and in Coan Prenotions (ch. 84, 5.602,5 L.; ch. 151, 5.616,6 L.; ch. 241, 5.636,14 L.; ch. 613, 5.726,17 L.). In these eleven occurrences, there are a number of parallel passages. All the passages in the Prorrhetic 1 and Coan Prenotions, with the exception of Prenotion 613, are comparable, since they concern the same case of delirium. The passages from Epidemics 2–4–6 are divided into two groups: 1) the relationship between θηριώδης and the autumn (Epid. 2.1, ch. 3; Epid. 4, ch. 16; Epid. 6.1, ch. 11); 2) the use of θηριώδης in relation to a cough (Epid. 6.2, ch. 6 and 11).

θηριώδης-derived, describes a “ferine ulcer” in *Places in Man*, ch. 29 (6.322,8 L. = Joly 64,24). Galen, in his *Hippocratic Glossary* (19.103,12 K.) glosses θηριόν with τὸ ἄγριον ἔλκος, literally ‘the wild ulcer’, which confirms, if it is necessary at all, the proximity of usage of these two families of words to describe a disease’s wild behaviour.\(^7\)

Unlike ἄγριος, the fundamental meaning of θηριώδης in the Hippocratic Corpus has been obscured by a particular meaning suggested by commentators in antiquity who, as the glosses of Erotian and Galen clearly show,\(^8\) understood θηριώδης to mean a complaint “caused by worms,” since θηριόν can also mean ‘worm’.\(^9\) This interpretation has had considerable success in modern scholarship. In eleven instances of the term θηριώδης where the meaning is debatable, Littré chose six times the meaning ‘caused by worms’, and only five times the fundamental meaning of ‘savage’.\(^10\) Since modern editors tend to follow in Littré’s footsteps, this division risks becoming canonical. Thus, in two parallel passages of *Epidemics* 6, where a dry cough is said to be neither θηριώδης (1, ch. 6, 5.280,5 L.) nor to be caused by τῷ θηριώδει (1, ch. 11, 5.282,16 L.), the modern editors of this treatise, Daniella Manetti and Amneris Roselli, understand, as Littré did, a cough that is “not caused

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\(^7\) On θηρίον, “ferine ulcer,” compare also Heschyius s.v. θηρῖον: πάθος τι σώματος, δ και καρκίνος καλεῖται. On the use of θηρίον in the sense of a ferine ulcer in the Hippocratic Corpus, see H. Dönt, *Die Terminologie von Geschwür, Geschwulst und Anschwellung im Corpus Hippocraticum* (Vienna, 1968), p. 81. In later medical writings, the noun θηρίωμα replaced θηρίον to mean a “ferine ulcer”; on uses of θηρίωμα, see L.S.J. s.v.; compare also Theophrastus *Characters* 19.3 (“the loathsome”): ἔλκη ... ἔδασι: θηριωθήναι; Dioscorides 3.9: τεθηριωθὸν ἔλκος.

\(^8\) Erotian, *Hippocratic Glossary* T 4 τὸ θηριώδες (ed. Nachmanson 84, 7–11), commentary on *Epidemics* 2.1.3 (5.72,12 L.): “Some have said that the expression describes malign ulcers (κακοηθῆν ἔλκῳ), called ferine ulcers (θηριώμα), which normally appear in autumn due to changes in the air; others have thought that it also means ‘little worms’, since they also appear in this period; others thought it referred to consumption.” Compare Galen, *Hippocratic Glossary*, s.v. θηρίον (19.103,12–104, 5 K.).

\(^9\) This meaning of θηρίον is cited by Galen in his *Hippocratic Glossary* (19.103,12 K.): θηρίον τὴν τε ἔμυνα καὶ τὸ ἄγριον ἔλκος (“θηρίον: the worm and the wild ulcer”). The division of the meaning of θηρίον into “worm” or “ulcer” is as problematic as that of θηριώδης. Modern editors follow Littré (cf. the division between the meanings in J.-H. Kühn and U. Fleischer, *Index hippocraticus* (Gottingae, 1986), s.v. θηρίον 1, 2 spec. vermes intestini six uses and II, n. path. one use) in giving the meaning of ulcer in the passage of *Places in Man* c. 29; some scholars before Littré interpreted the use of θηρίον in *Coan Prenotions* 458 and 459 (lentery with θηρία) as “worms,” and others as “ferine ulcers”; cf. note ad loc. by Littré 5.686. On the possible relationship between lentiery and intestinal ulcers, see Aretaeus, *The Causes and Signs of Chronic Diseases*, 2.10, ed. Hude\(^2\) 79,15–30.

\(^10\) He adopted the meaning of “caused by worms” in all the passages of *Epidemics* 2–4–6 and in a passage of *Coan Prenotions* (c. 613), and the meaning of “wild” in the other passages of *Coan Prenotions* and in *Prorrhetic*. 

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by worms,” and refer to a study by Op de Hipt, *Adjektive auf -ωδής im Corpus Hippocraticum* (Hamburg, 1972), pp. 71–74, which interprets these two passages of *Epidemics* 6.1, ch. 6 and 11, in the same way as Littré. Thus, Littré is at the centre of a type of vulgate of the modern interpretation of θηριώδης in the Hippocratic Corpus. However, once we remove Littré from the equation, its origin is far from clear. In the sixteenth century, Cornarius attributed to θηριώδης the meaning *ferinus* in all the eleven passages of the Corpus where it is used. Going back even further to Erotian’s and Galen’s explanations of this term preserved from Antiquity, we are struck by the contrast between the unanimity of modern interpretations compared with the richness and diversity of the surviving interpretations of this word, which was judged to be obscure. The interpretation adopted by modern translators is precisely that which was criticised by the ancients. Thus, Galen, in his *Commentary on Hippocrates’ Epidemics* 6, does not adopt the interpretation chosen by modern commentators concerning the cough, but instead strongly criticises it. Here is what he says:11 “Some say that when the worms (ἔλμυθες) settle at the mouth of the stomach, this causes a cough, but they cannot demonstrate this, neither by reason nor by experience.” Galen prefers to give θηριώδης the meaning of κακοθής; thus, for him it refers to a ‘bad cough’. Galen’s interpretation, adopted by Cornarius, seems preferable to modern interpretations, not only because it appears more coherent to the semantic field of θηριώδης

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11 Galen, *Commentary on Hippocrates’ Epidemics* 6, ed. Wenkebach/Pfaff CMG V, 10, 2, p. 89. In his interesting commentary on this passage of *Epidemics* 6, Galen presents all the interpretations proposed for the meaning of θηριώδης: 1.) general meaning: κακοθής; 2.) particular meanings: a) consumption, when the nails are curved like those of wild beasts; b) ferine ulcer (ὄριωμα) in the lung; c) worms that collect in the mouth of the stomach. This passage sheds light on the explanations that he gives in his *Hippocratic Glossary*, s.v. θηριών (19.103.12 ff. K.). Conversely, when he comments on the passage in *Epidemics* 2.1, ch. 3, where it is said that above all in autumn the θηριώδες appears along with cardialgia (see Galen, *On Hippocrates’ Epidemics* 2, ed. Wenkebach-Pfaff, CMG V 10, 1, p. 160), he chooses, amongst the interpretations already proposed (leprosy, so-called from the name of the elephant which is a threatening and vicious animal; melancholy, which renders the character of sick people resembling that of wild animals; cancer, which owes its name to a vicious creature; intestinal worms), that of intestinal worms. This is because Galen believes cardialgia to be a pain of the mouth of the stomach, which is caused by the increase of intestinal worms; compare Erotian’s gloss of this passage quoted in footnote 8. It is surprising that Galen does not mention the general meaning of κακοθής in this passage. When he returns in his commentary on *Epidemics* 6 to this relationship between autumn and θηριώδης, in a passage parallel to *Epidemics* 6.1, ch. 11, he not only highlights the general meaning of κακοθής, but he does not choose between the various interpretations (worms, elephantiasis, cancer, phtisis), all of which he judges to be possible. Is this a sign of a development in Galen’s interpretation, which becomes less analytical from one commentary to another? The interpretation of the general meaning of κακοθής appears to be that of Aretaeus: see *infra*, no. 14.
and in the meanings that are attached to it, but also because it works better in certain passages of the Corpus. I would just like to add a clarification to Galen’s interpretation. The connection between θηριώδης and κακοθήτης is sound, but the two terms are not synonymous, since there is a difference of degree between them: θηριώδης indicates a more intense degree of disease than κακοθήτης; it is the degree where the illness rages.\(^\text{12}\) Such an interpretation allows us better to account for the *Coan Prenotions* 613 (5.726,13–17 L.).

Here is the translation:

> If, when the stomach is wet, painful swellings occur, the case is bad (κακόν); but if, whilst the stomach is narrowed, without anything new happening, these swellings quickly rupture, the affliction is worse (κακοθήτεστερον); and if on top of that vomiting occurs, the case is even worse and wild (πονηρά και θηριώδεα).

We can distinguish three degrees of diseases here (κακόν, κακοθήτεστερον and θηριώδεα), of which the most intense is θηριώδεα. Littré’s interpretation, who understands the vomiting to be caused by worms, does not seem to capture the sense of an ascending scale that underlies this passage in *Coan Prenotions*.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, the problem of the different meanings of θηριώδης in the Hippocratic Corpus is far from being definitively resolved. Even if we give the adjective θηριώδης in certain passages a particular meaning such as ‘caused by worms’, this still does not exclude the possibility that the connotation of ‘wild’, ‘feral’ remains present. In any case, we cannot accept Littré’s choice without a critical re-examination that incorporates both the history of the various interpretations\(^\text{14}\) and the history of the language.

\(^{12}\) Galen is not the only commentator to have made this connection; one may compare Erotian’s gloss quoted in footnote 8. Κακοθήτης is frequently used in the Hippocratic Corpus; see J.-H. Kühn and U. Fleischer, *Index Hippocraticus*, Fasc. II (Göttingen, 1987), s.v., p. 41 ff. This adjective, which is usually applied to living beings, bears witness, like θηριώδης, to a representation of disease known as a dangerous living being with malicious intent towards the patient.

\(^{13}\) The adjectives πονηρά και θηριώδεα are to be understood as neuters giving an indication of the gravity of the case; compare *Coan Prenotions* 241 (5.636,14 L.): πονηρόν και θηριώδες. Fuchs (*Hippokrates. Sämtliche Werke*, vol. II (Munich, 1897), p. 95) interprets the syntax correctly when he translates: “Wenn Erbrechen hinzukommt, ist das schlimm und deutet auf Tobsuchtanfälle,” which renders the sense of progression well; however, his translation of θηριώδεα with “fit of mad fury” is too narrow. The concept of θηριώδης is semantically wider than this.

\(^{14}\) In the debate on the meaning of θηριώδης in the Hippocratic Corpus, we should take into account the testimony of a first-century AD doctor, Aretaeus of Cappadocia, who was an attentive reader of Hippocrates. The neuter noun τὸ θηριώδες means in Aretaeus the extreme degree obtained by a disease that becomes wild. Thus, in *The Causes and Signs of Acute
It is not my intention to end the debate on the different interpretations of the adjective ἰθριῶδης in the Hippocratic Corpus, but rather to reopen it by highlighting that this ambiguous use of ἰθριῶδης in the Hippocratic Corpus finds a parallel in tragedy with the use of an adjective belonging to the same family, ἐνθήρος—something which to my knowledge has not been observed before. This adjective, which describes Philoctetes’ diseased foot, has given rise to a similar variety of interpretations. In the first stasimon of Sophocles’ Philoctetes in verses 677–699, the choir, full of compassion but also admiration for the hero who managed to survive his infliction for so long without the help of a doctor, exclaims: “there was no one to lessen with soothing herbs the seething blood when it seized him, which oozed from the ulcers of his ἐνθήρους foot.” Mazon translated this as “with his foot swarming with vermin,” whilst Kamerbeek understands “his foot inhabited by the wild beast,” i.e. “by disease.”

Mazon’s interpretation, which appears the most rational and realistic, finds support in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, line 562, where the messenger, recalling on his return to his homeland the distant life of the expeditionary force to Troy, says that the dew left the hairs of their blankets ἰθρόν, ‘full of vermin’. However, Kamerbeek’s interpretation, apart from Diseases 2.8, 7 (ed. Hude², 29,24), Aretaeus, discussing acute disease of the vena cava, notes that it resembles a form of causus because, like causus, “in autumn it takes on a wild form” (ἐν φθινόπωρῳ γίγνεται ἐπὶ τὸ θηριῶδες). It is not by chance that this disease takes on its wild form in the autumn, since we read elsewhere in Aretaeus, in The Causes and Signs of Chronic Diseases 1.14.5 (ed. Hude² 57,3), concerning the influence of the seasons on disease of the spleen: ὑπὸ τὸ θηριῶδες, μετάπωρον, “amongst the seasons, the one that is wild is autumn.” This relationship established by Aretaeus between the wild character of a disease and the autumn, which is a wild season, inevitably recalls the two parallel passages of Epidemics 2 and 6, where autumn is the season in which ἰθριῶδες is produced (Epid. 2.1, ch. 3, φθινόπωρον μάλιστα τὸ θηριῶδες; Epid. 6.1, ch. 11 τὸ θηριῶδες φθινόπωρον). Aretaeus follows Hippocrates here and it is clear that in the Hippocratic model, he understands τὸ θηριῶδες in the general meaning of the “wild character” of the disease, and not in the particular meaning of “intestinal worms,” as Littét and modern commentators understood it. Aretaeus also says, in his discussion of epilepsy, that the disease takes on a wild character during crises (The Causes and Signs of Chronic Diseases 1.4.1, ed. Hude², 38,13 θηριῶδες µὲν ἐν παροξυσµοίς), which recalls Epidemics 4, ch. 16, where it is said that diseases are θηριῶδες ἐν τῇς κρίσεις. Should we understand in this last passage, along with Littét, that the patients “have worms” in crises (compare Pronostic ch. 11, 2.136,7–9 L. = Alexanderson 206,13 ff.), or that the disease acquires, during the crisis, a wild character that is demonstrated by the ‘savage’ behaviour of the patients?


being coherent with the representation of disease compared to a wild beast that we find throughout *Philoctetes*, accurately accounts for the metaphors in this passage. Indeed, the verb used for the treatment, κατευνάω (697), recalls the image of a wild animal which is put to sleep by making him sleep in his den (ἐνυπη). Yet it seems to me that Kamerbeek’s interpretation has to be enriched by a comparison with the Hippocratic Corpus: once we realise that also in the technical medical writings, ulcers can become wild and that a wild ulcer can be called θηρόν, and once we note that the adjective ἐνθήρος in *Philoctetes* is used next to the word ἐλκέων, ulcers, it becomes clear that the poetic vocabulary of Sophocles can describe, beyond the metaphor of a wild beast, a clear medical reality, that of the wild ulcer devouring the foot on which it is found.

Since disease is or can become wild like an animal, it acts like a wild animal that tears apart and then devours its victim. Disease devours and the diseased patient is devoured. We find this representation of the action of the disease not only in tragedy, but also in the Hippocratic Corpus.

In tragedy, the themes of devouring and wild disease are closely related. In Aeschylus and Sophocles, this connection is constant: in every case where disease is described as wild, its action is expressed in terms of devouring. In Aeschylus’ *Choephori*, the connection is immediate and the metaphor is evident: the “ulcers with a wild bite,” with which Apollo threatened Orestes, devour (281, ἐξέσθοντα). Likewise in Sophocles, the two diseases that are called wild are also described as devouring; the same adjective διαβρος, related to βιβρωκεσ, ‘to devour’, is used to describe Heracles’ disease in *Trachiniae* (1084) and Philoctetes’ disease in the eponymous tragedy (7). Euripides also recognises the devouring character of disease: in his *Medea*, written in 431, the poisoned robe that Medea gives to her rival, Jason’s new wife, devours the flesh of its victim (1189, ἐδαπτον σάρκα), just like the poisoned tunic given to Heracles by Deianeira in Sophocles ate his flesh (1054 βέβρωκε σάρκας); and the metaphor of the jaw that we find in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* concerning the ulcers reappears in the same passage of Euripides’ *Medea* concerning the poison’s action on the flesh (1200 ff.:...
“and the flesh detached itself from the bones under the invisible bite of the poison” γναθηκοί ἀδήλοις φαρµάκων). These few examples allow us to glimpse the richness of the vocabulary of devouring applied to disease in the extant tragedies. To complete the picture, we must consider the fragments, two of which are particularly important. We know that Aeschylus and Euripides had written about the myth of Philoctetes before Sophocles, and we can be sure that Sophocles wrote nothing novel compared with his predecessors on the theme of devouring disease, since both describe Philoctetes’ disease with the term φαγέδαινα, which means etymologically “the devouring disease.” Since this term is also attested in the Hippocratic Corpus, we turn now to examine how the vocabulary and the theme of devouring disease are presented in these medical writings.

It goes without saying that technical literature does not use the highest registers of a poetic style, i.e. composite adjectives or bold metaphors. We find nothing like the composite adjective διαβρός, or metaphors such as ‘wild bite’. Despite this difference, the vocabulary of devouring remains well attested in the Corpus and is comparable to tragedy. We may compare, for example, two passages where we find the term that describes devouring disease par excellence, φαγέδαινα: a fragment of Aeschylus’ Philoctetes φαγέδαινα ἧ μου σάρκας ἐσθείε, “the devouring disease that eats my flesh,” and ch. 10 of the treatise Ulcers (6.410,2–3 L.) ὅπη ἄν φαγέδαινα ἑνὴ ἵσχυροτάτα τε νέμηται καὶ ἔσθείη, “where the devouring disease sets in, grazes and eats with great force.” For the tragic author as well as the doctor, φαγέδαινα refers to the same nosologic reality: a phagadenic ulcer, or one that devours deeply.

19 All the major sets of related terms meaning “to eat” or “to devour” can be found here: the two roots that serve to form the suppletive paradigm of the verb meaning “to eat” in Ionian-Attic, i.e. *ed- (cf. Aeschylus, Choephori, 281 ἔξησο) and *φαγ- (cf. Sophocles, Philoctetes, 313 τὴν ἀδηφάγον νόσον), as well as terms related to βιβρώκω (Sophocles, Trachiniae, 1054, βιβρώκων; Philoctetes, 695 βαρυβρῶτα); Trachiniae, 1084 διαβρός and Philoctetes, 7 διαβρός), the verb δαίνωμε (Sophocles, Trachiniae, 1088 δαίνωμα; cf. Euripides Medea, 1189 δαίνωμα), the verb βροκόμω (Sophocles, Trachiniae, 987 βροκόμος; cf. Philoctetes, 745 βροκόμος), and the verb βιβρόκωμα (Euripides, Philoctetes, frag. 792 Nauck). See also terms related to δαίνω.

20 These two fragments were preserved by Aristotle in his Poetics 1458b22–25 (Frag. Aeschylus 253 Radt, and Euripides 792 Nauck).

21 The affliction called φαγέδαινα is attested four times in the Hippocratic Corpus: Airs, Waters, Places, ch. 10, 2.48,9 L. (= Diller 50,11), Epidemics 6,3, ch. 23, 5.304,3 L. (= Manetti-Roselli 74,2–4); Humours, ch. 20, 5.500,8ff. L.; Ulcers, ch. 10, 6.410,2–3 L. The derived verb φαγεδαινόμαι is attested twice: Epidemics 4, ch. 19, 5.156,4 L. and Epidemics 5, ch. 44, 5.234,1 L.

22 In his treatise On Tumours contrary to Nature (7,727,7–9 K.), Galen contrasts the phagadenic ulcer (ἡ φαγέδαινα), which attacks both the skin and the parts inside, with
It is remarkable that both the author of this technical work and the tragedian recognise the etymological meaning of the term, since both use the verb ἐσθείν, ‘to eat’, to describe the action of this disease. It highlights a certain paradox: in the example of the Hippocratic Corpus, the vocabulary of devouring applied to disease is richer than that of tragedy, since the doctor uses the verb νέμεσθαι, ‘to graze’, as well as the verb ἐσθείν.\(^{23}\) Thus, although

\(^{23}\) For the vocabulary of devouring in Hippocratic pathology, see first the terms formed from the two roots *ed and *φαιν-: ἐσθω and its composites διεσθω and καθεσθω in the active (Ancient Medicine, ch. 19, 1.616, 6 and 7 L. = Heiberg 49, 23 and 25: flow that grazes; Ulcers, ch. 10, 6.410,3 L.: phagedena: Diseases of Women 1, ch. 2, 8.20,7 L.: pust; 2, ch. 122, ibid., 264, 22: flux; Glands, ch. 12, 8.566,3 L.: flux; ch. 14, ibid., 570,1: pus); ἐσθω and καθεσθω in the middle voice (Aphorisms 5,22, 4,540,3 L.: gnawing herpes; Epidemics 4, ch. 1, 5.144,1 L.: corrosive afflictions; ch. 20, ibid., 160,6: corrosive excrements; Use of Liquids, ch. 6, 6.134,14 L. = Joly 170,18: gnawing herpes; Ulcers, ch. 3, 6.404,14 L.: devouring and serpiginous ulcers, and ch. 10, ibid., 410,2: gnawing ulcers); ἐσθω and its composite διεσθω in the passive voice (Epidemics 4, ch. 19, 5.156,12 L.: eroded tooth; Affections, ch. 4, 6.212,22 L. = Joanna Archeologie, 268,17: eroded teeth; The Sacred Disease, ch. 11, 6.382,13 L. = Grensemann 78,23: eroded brain); φαγεδαινω and φαγεδαινομαι (references are given in footnote 21); see further the terms related to μπηρόσκω (μπηρόσκω in the passive voice: Epidemics 4, ch. 19, 5.156,14 L.: eroded tooth; ch. 25, ibid., 168,18: teeth; ch. 52, ibid., 192,8 and 9: teeth; Affections, ch. 4, 6.212,18 and 19 L. = Joanna Archeologie, 268,13 and 14: teeth; διαμπηρόσκω; Epidemics 7, ch. 117, 5.462,24 L.: eroded intestine and fistula; Fistulas, ch. 3, 6.450, 2 L. part of the eroded rectum; ch. 4, ibid., 450,26; ch. 5, ibid., 452,16; Diseases 2, ch. 23, 7.38,14 and 16 L. = Joanna 158,5 and 7: eroded bone); see finally the terms formed from the root *nem- (νέμωμαι; ἐπίνεμωμαι; νομαί) which are studied below. As in tragedy (see footnote 19), we should add terms related to ἔδωκαν. On the connection between ἔδωκαν and ἐσθω, see for example Diseases of Women 2, ch. 122, 8.264,22 L.: flux that bites (ἔδωκεν) and devours (ἐσθεί). The vocabulary of devouring applied to pathology continued to be used in medical writing of the Roman period, and is enriched with the use of nouns unknown in the Hippocratic Corpus, such as διαβρωσκας “the action of devouring” (see in particular Arataeus, The Causes and Signs of Chronic Diseases 2,1, quoted in footnote 4, ed. Hude\(^{2}\), 80,23, where the expression ἔγχυσυ ἡ διαβρωσκας combines the two notions of wild and devouring) and νέμησις, “action of grazing” (Arataeus, The Treatment of Acute Diseases, 1,9,1, ed. Hude\(^{2}\), 113,9).
the Hippocratic doctor envisages the affliction called φαγέδαινα from a rational point of view, his vocabulary preserves here an archaic conception of disease considered to be a wild beast that eats (cf. ἔσθη) and grazes (cf. νε-μηται).

A more in-depth study of these two verbs, which characterise the action of devouring ulcers in the Hippocratic Corpus, shows that the vocabulary of devouring preserves a force and coherence in the technical language of doctors that modern scholars tend to overlook, as was the case for the vocabulary associated with the wild. I will not discuss here the problem of the existence of the middle participle of ἔσθω, ignored by LSJ and certain modern editors, but well attested in the Hippocratic Corpus regarding devouring ulcers, since I discussed this topic in a paper at the VII Congreso Español de Estudios Clásicos in Madrid. Instead, I will turn to the use of νέμομαι and related words.

Along with νέμομαι, used to refer to the action of ulcers, as we saw in ch. 10 of Ulcers, there is a further name of disease belonging to the same family, the noun νομη, which is found in the plural in four passages of the Hippocratic Corpus (Prorrhetic ch. 12 and 13, Ulcers ch. 18 and Dentition ch. 20). In the same way that the disease called φαγέδαινα is the disease that eats (φαγεῖν), the disease called νομη is essentially the disease that is defined by the action of νέμεσθαι. But what does νέμομαι mean? LSJ translates this word, used concerning ulcers, as ‘to spread’, and translates the noun νομα as “spreading ulcers”; thus, any meaning of “to graze” or “to feed on” has disappeared from this modern interpretation. However, if we look at earlier interpretations, we observe that Littré, whilst being less consistent, translates two of the four occurrences of νομα as “gnawing ulcers,” thus trying to preserve the etymological sense. If we go back even further to the sixteenth century, Foes, in his Oeconomia Hippocratis s.v.,

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25 The connection of the name of the disease νομη with the middle voice νέμεσθαι is found as early as in Galen: see De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus 8, ch. 4 (12.179,6 K. νομάς ἀπὸ τοῦ νέμεσθαι).

defines νεμέω as “ulcer ... proserpendo depascentia,” “ulcers that feed whilst spreading.” This definition seems excellent, because it subordinates the secondary sense of “to spread” to the etymological sense of “to graze.” Indeed, we would be wrong to remove the original meaning of νέμωμα from its technical uses when it concerns ulcers, or an affliction more generally. It is clear, for example, that in chapter 10 of Ulcers, which has served as the basis for our discussion, the verb νέμωμα means “to graze,” and not the secondary sense of “to spread,” not only because of the vocabulary of devouring that accompanies it, but above all because it is modified by the intensifying adverb ἰσχυρότατα. The doctor fears the destructive character of the ulcer that grazes. Thus, the author of Prorrhetic 2, ch. 13 (9.36,6 ff. L.) says that within the category of ulcers which he calls νομαί, or rather ἐλκεα ὅσα νέμεται, the most dangerous are those in which the principles of corruption (αἱ σπειδέντες) are situated most deeply.27

Of course, the meaning of “to graze” does not exclude the secondary sense of “to spread”; since the action of grazing implies that the animal spreads and that the eaten surface is extended, we can understand how the secondary sense of “to spread” was able to develop and even erase, in certain contexts, the original meaning. Even within the Hippocratic Corpus, we find an example where the original meaning of νέμωμα is erased, concerning the anatomy of the route of the blood vessels.28 However, there are two principal uses of the word in which the first meaning was retained throughout the history of Greek, and these concern the two most formidable destructive forces: fire and disease. In book XXIII of Homer’s Iliad, line 177, the verb νέμομαι is used alongside the verb ἔσθιο (181) to describe the fire of the funeral pyre.

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27 H. Dönt, Die Terminologie von Geschwür, Geschwulst und Anschwellung im Corpus Hippocraticum (see above, n. 7), p. 86, correctly notes that νέμωμαι and νομαί in the Hippocratic Corpus preserve their meaning of “to graze, devour”; cf. also F. Heinimann, Nomos und Physis. (see above, n. 26), p. 60. For other uses of νέμωμα in the Hippocratic Corpus regarding devouring ulcers, see Diseases of Women 1, ch. 66, 8.140,11 L., νέμεται (sc. ἔλκεα); Dentition, ch. 30, 8.548,14 ff. L.: ἔλκεα ... νέμεται; ch. 31, ibid., 548,16: τὰ νεμόμενα ἔλκεα; ch. 32, ibid., 548,18: τὰ ... νεμόμενα ἔλκεα; Use of Liquids, ch. 3, 6.126,14 L.: τὰ νεμόμενα (sc. ἔλκεα). The expression νεμόμενα ἔλκεα can be compared with ἐσθιόμενα ἔλκεα (the middle voice of ἔσθιο; see footnote 23).

28 On the uses of νέμωμαι in anatomy, see Nature of Bones, ch. 13 (9.184,14 L.): ἡ βάρχαια φλέψ ἢ νεμομένη παρά τὴν ἄκρυνθων, “the primitive vessel, which extends along the spine”; cf. also ibid., ch. 16, ch. 17 and ch. 18. cf. also ὅπονεμομένη in ch. 12, ibid., 184,9. It is difficult to determine the fundamental meaning that explains this derived use: does it refer to distribution or to grazing? It is possible that the vessel was known primitively as a living being that takes its nourishment from the place where it finds itself; compare the use of νέμωμαι with regard to glands in the treatise Glands, ch. 5, 8.560,9 L.
that devours Patroclus’ body. This representation of devouring fire is still very much alive in the fifth century. For example, in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, the metaphor of biting is used not only concerning diseases, as we have seen, but also concerning the ritual fire that devours the corpse.\(^{29}\) The first meaning of νέμομαι is also well attested in the fifth century: it is no accident that Herodotus uses the verb νέμομαι both for a fire (5.101) and the devouring ulcer of Atossa (3.133).\(^{30}\)

The disease’s action may even be compared to that of a fire, to the extent that it manifests itself in the form of an inflammation. We should not forget that the term πῦρ can mean both fever and fire. This representation of disease allows us to understand a passage from *Epidemics* 3, where ἐπινέμομαι is used. In the second annual constitution which it describes (*Epidemics* 3.2, 4, 3.72, 3–5 L.), the author says that erysipelas occurred: μεγάλαι φλεγμοναί ἐγίνοντο καὶ τὸ ἔρυσιπελας πολὺ ταχύ πάντοθεν ἐπενέμετο, “great inflammations followed and erysipelas very quickly ἐπενέμετο all over.”

How should we translate this verb? Following LSJ, the *Index Hippocraticus* translated it as “procedo,” ‘to proceed’.\(^{31}\) This translation obscures the deeper meaning of the passage. Erysipelas, which is already a disease that is etymologically inflammatory (literally, ‘a disease that makes the skin redden’), and which, moreover, is accompanied here by large inflammations, is a disease that devours everything, like a violent fire, and progresses quickly. Littré translated this more accurately than modern editions, when he said: “rapidly the erysipelas extends its ravages all over.” Indeed, to understand

\(^{29}\) *Choe*. 325 πυρὸς μαλακά γνάθος, “the raging, gnawing fire”; compare also the same metaphor in *Prometheus*, 368: πῦρος ... ἀγρίας γνάθος.

\(^{30}\) The relationship between the two passages of Herodotus was noted by H. Stein, *Herodotos*, I (Berlin, 1883), p. 142 ad 3.133: “ἐνέμετο πρὸς ὄλθεν ‘frass weiter um sich’; öfters vom Feuer (V, 101, 9).” However, the translation of E. Legrand (*Hérodote* III, (C.U.F) (Paris, 2003), p. 167) “(l’abcès) gagna de proche en proche” is too weak. First of all, Atossa’s abscess, once burst, passes into the category of devouring ulcers. The verb νέμομαι in Herodotus has the same meaning as in *Proorrhetic* 2, ch. 13, where it describes a category of ulcers. Even in Thucydides, the composite ἐπινέμομαι is used with reference to the Athenian ‘plague’ (2.54.5 ἐπενέματο δὲ ἀθήνας μὲν μάληστα, ἐπείτα δὲ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων χωρίων τὰ πολυανθρωπότατα), and although it has a less technical meaning than in Herodotus, it preserves the idea that the plague attacks everything in its path; compare the use of κατανέμωμαι with regards to the ‘plague’ of Athens that “devours the flower of youth” (translation from Flacelière) in Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 171 a. The verb νέμομαι (or its composites) and the noun νομῇ continued to be used after the Classical period for fire and disease. For example, in Diodorus of Sicily, the verb ἐπινέμομαι is used five times regarding fire (5.6.3; 14.51.3; 14.54.3; 17.26.5; 20.96.7) and twice regarding disease (3.29.6; 12.12.3).

\(^{31}\) J.-H. Kühn / U. Fleischer, *Index Hippocraticus*, Fasc. II (see above, n. 12), s.v. ἐπινέμομαι.
the force of the term ἐπινέμωμαι, we need only look to the description of the ravages left by the disease: “flesh, sinews and bones fell away in whole sections” (ibid., 72,6ff.: σαρκῶν καὶ νεύρων καὶ ὀστέων ἐκπτώσεις μεγάλαι). Despite the restraint of technical prose, the vocabulary still forcefully describes the effects of the disease. This analysis also allows us to understand better why Galen interprets “the wild inflammation,” the πῦρ ἄγριον of Epidemics 7, ch. 20, as erysipelas. Erysipelas is a wild affection that devours like fire or a wild beast. Returning to the comparison with tragedy, this description of erysipelas by the Hippocratic doctor in Epidemics 3 may remind us of Euripides’ descriptions, in the Medea, of the effects of the poisoned gifts on the body of the married youth. It refers to devouring fire (1187 παμφγού πυρός) and flesh that breaks loose from the bone under the effect of the invisible jaws of the poison (1200 ff. σάρκες δ’ ἀπ’ ὀστέων ... γναθής ... ἀπέρρεον). The distance between the playwright’s description, who uses pathos for amplification, and that of the scientist, who is describing a single disease amongst others, may appear large; but the image of the disease is fundamentally the same: this is a disease that, in the same way as a fire, devours the flesh, which detaches from the bone.

This comparative examination has shown that doctors in the Hippocratic Corpus preserved in their pathology a vocabulary associated with wildness and devouring, just like tragic authors. Of course, this vocabulary is not exactly the same in both genres, and its use is more limited in medicine than in tragedy. However, these are differences of degree, not of kind. What we gain from this comparison is that it shows that what can appear in tragedy as a simple poetic metaphor corresponds, in fact, to a technical usage, and that conversely the technical language of doctors preserved a metaphorical vocabulary whose original meaning risks being obscured if we have a too fragmented view of the language and a too rationalist view of the ideas.

Finally, the comparison allows us to make a contribution to the history of ideas by reconstructing the coherent intellectual representations that link the Hippocratic Corpus with Greek tragedy. Disease can, in its acute form, appear as an eruption of something wild, which threatens to devour a man’s flesh like a ferocious beast, or a fire compared to a ferocious beast, and it can eventually lead to the patient’s behaviour becoming like a wild beast. This representation of disease, which is exploited by the tragic authors to create fear, is also present in the Hippocratic Corpus, where fear is brought under control, because the technical language used by doctors to describe and characterise certain afflictions is inherited from a vocabulary with roots to a period before civilisation, which the Greeks of the classical period
themselves characterised by the fear of wild animals and those described as “wild.”

Medicine is one of the arts that put an end to this ‘wild’ period, as the author of *Ancient Medicine* brilliantly shows. However, disease remains, in the Greek imagination, present as a threat of wild forces in the civilised world, forces that are both formidable and difficult to combat since they are no longer outside of man, but within man.

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32 See, for example, Euripides, *Suppliants*, 201 ff.: ἐκ πεφυμένου / καὶ θηριώδους (s.c. βιότου) and Plato, *Protagoras*, 322 b: ἀπώλλυντο σῶν ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων.

33 The idea that disease risks being an outbreak of the wild in the civilised world is clearly presented in Euripides’ *Orestes*: the death of the mother which brought about in her son a wild disease (34) is, according to Tyndareus, a wild act (524 τὰ θηριώδες) that endangers the law (523 τὸ νόμῳ). Moreover, disease, considered as a wild outbreak, served as a model to show the outbreak of wild behaviour in people; see the passage in Polybius, *Histories* 1.81, 5–10, where he makes a comparison between bodies that are preyed on by ulcers, which “become wild” (81, 5 ἀποθηριωθέντες), and souls that are affected by disease, such that men end up “becoming wild” (81, 9 ἀποθηριωθέντες) and behave at the limits of human nature.