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 metaphorical 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).

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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 ἄγριος, ‘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.: ἄγρια γνάθοις /λειχήνας). In Sophocles, the expression ἄγρια 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: θρόσκει δ’ αὖ ... ἄγρια /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.: ἄγρια /νόσω). Finally, in Euripides’ Orestes, performed the year after Sophocles’ Philoctetes, the same expression ἄγρια 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” (ἄγρια ... 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 ἄγριω, from ἄγριος, that is used in the passive perfect to describe the wild aspect of the hero, either in its simple form ἡγριώσατι 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