The Greek word *miasma*, which still survives in English, was described by Émile Littré, the editor of Hippocrates who is best known for his *Dictionnaire de la langue française* as a ‘medical term’. He gives it the following meaning: “Fumes that originate from organic substances and which, spreading through the air and attaching themselves to certain bodies, exercise a pernicious influence on animals. In particular, unpleasant smells that originate from certain contagious diseases. Variolous and pestilential miasmas.”

However, the Greek word *miasma* was not originally a medical term. Derived from the verb *miaino*, which means ‘to stain’ (for example with purple, and hence, by analogy, with blood), the noun *miasma* is first found in connection with the stain of blood spilt in a crime.1 This is the meaning of its oldest uses, which appear in Greek tragedy.2 Thus, *miasma* belonged firstly to a religious and legal, rather than medical, context. However, from the fifth century we begin to find the term *miasma* connected with disease in both tragic literature and in the first medical texts found in the Hippocratic Corpus, although its use is relatively rare.

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My aim in this paper is firstly to draw on those passages from the classical period where the Greek noun *miasma* (and sometimes the verb *miaino*, from which the noun is derived) appears in connection with disease, in order to study the role played by *miasma* and its relationship with contagion and air. We will see that there are two distinct models of use of *miasma* in connection with disease: one in religious medicine, where *miasma* is naturally connected with the notion of contagion, and the other in rational medicine, where *miasma* is connected with the air. My aim will then be to examine the survival, in rational medicine after Hippocrates, of the term *miasma*, rather than miasmatic theory as a whole.

*Miasma*'s connection with disease, whether an individual or general disease, is quite easily explained within the context of religious medicine. We will use two examples here: first, epilepsy, an individual disease; then *loimos*, a general disease.

Since an epileptic fit is very sudden and striking, the condition was naturally attributed to the patient’s violent possession by a god. From this perspective, the treatment recommended was of a magico-religious nature, comprising spells and purifications, as well as dietary prohibitions. The Hippocratic treatise *The Sacred Disease* is the most useful witness we possess on the treatment of epilepsy by magico-religious medicine, although it is presented in a polemical context, for the Hippocratic doctor contrasts the magico-religious conception with a rational one. Whilst criticising treatment by purifications, the Hippocratic medical writer denounces the connection that his adversaries, supporters of religious medicine, establish between the condition and *miasma* (ch. 1):

They make use of purifications (χαθαρµο/uni1FD6σι) and incantations and, it seems to me, carry out a very sacrilegious and impious action. Indeed, they purify those gripped by the disease with blood and other similar things like those used in the case of those people who bear a stain (µ/uni1F77ασµα), or cursed criminals, or those who have been enchanted or have committed a sacrilegious act; they should do the opposite, sacrifice and pray, take the patients to the temples to supplicate the gods. In fact, they do none of these things, but perform purifications; and sometimes they conceal the purificatory objects in the earth, sometimes they throw them into the sea, sometimes they carry them

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3 The corresponding Latin term to *miasma* is *infectio*. Extremely useful is M. Grmek, “Les vicissitudes des notions d’infection, de contagion et de germe dans la médecine antique,” in G. Sabbah (ed.), *Textes médicaux latins antiques*, (Centre Jean Palerne, Mémoires 5) (Saint-Étienne, 1984), pp. 53–69.