INTRODUCTION
UNDER THE SPELL OF THE PHARMAKON

Alone I have created remedies (pharmak’) against forgetfulness: by establishing consonants, vowels and syllables, I have invented letters for men to learn.

Euripides, Palamedes frr. 1–3 (Jouan and van Looy)¹

In Euripides’ Palamedes, the hero boasts about having invented writing as a pharmakon, a drug, against forgetfulness. Euripides uses the word pharmakon in its positive meaning, in the sense of a healing drug. However, pharmakon also meant ‘poison’ in ancient Greek.² Thus, the positive analogy offered by Euripides between writing and pharmakon could easily be turned on its head, as Plato did in a famous passage of the Phaedrus, putting the following words into the mouth of Thamous, the Egyptian king:

For this <sc. the art of writing> will cause forgetfulness in the minds of those who have learned, because they will neglect their memory. Having put their trust in writing, they will recall to memory things from outside, by means of external marks; not from inside themselves, by themselves. You have invented a pharmakon not for memory, but for reminding.³

For Plato, writing is an almost poisonous pharmakon, which causes forgetfulness, by inciting people to neglect their memory. Plato was particularly suspicious of the use of writing in the transmission of technical knowledge, in fields such as music or medicine.⁴ These technai could only be acquired through actual practice and through the use of memory, not through books. Reading had created a generation of pedants who believed they knew everything, but mastered nothing.

¹ If not stated otherwise, translations are mine.
² For a study of the notion of pharmakon in ancient Greek, see Artelt (1968).
³ Plato, Phdr. 275a. For a study of the notion of pharmakon in Plato, see Derrida (1972), in particular p. 112: "Il faut en effet savoir que Platon suspecte le pharmakon en général, même quand il s’agit de drogues utilisées à des fins exclusivement thérapeutiques, même si elles sont maniées avec de bonnes intentions, et même si elles sont comme telles efficaces. Il n’y a pas de remède inoffensif, le pharmakon ne peut jamais être simplement bénéfique.”
⁴ Plato, Phdr. 268c. See p. 246 for a discussion of this text.
When writing this study, I have always kept Plato’s words in mind. The recipes included in the Hippocratic Corpus are one of the most extensive sources for the study of ancient pharmacology; but as written artefacts, they are only one aspect of the transmission of pharmacological knowledge in the classical world. Many aspects of this transmission, such as gestures and oral words, are irretrievably lost. In the present book, I have attempted to examine the written Hippocratic recipes, whilst assessing the extent and nature of the lost elements in the transmission of ancient pharmacological knowledge.

It is worth noting that, in opposition to other ancient languages, such as Chinese, there is no equivalent of the word ‘recipe’ in ancient Greek. In the absence of a Greek definition of what a recipe is, I have used a slightly-modified version of Jack Goody’s definition: “The recipe is a written formula for mixing ingredients for culinary, medical or magical purposes; it lists the items required for making preparations.”

The Hippocratic Corpus, a heterogeneous collection of texts in Ionic Greek, does not include any work devoted to pharmacy per se. Nevertheless, the Hippocratic Corpus contains over 1,500 recipes. The majority of these recipes are concentrated in the gynaecological treatises (Diseases of Women I and II, Barren Women and Superfetation), but recipes are also found in the nosological treatises (Diseases II and III; Internal Affections) and in the surgical treatises (Fistulas; Haemorrhoids; and Ulcers). The Hippocratic treatises including recipes were produced in the second half of the fifth century BC, or the first half of the fourth century, but they certainly include earlier material.

Until the early 1980s, the collections of recipes included in the Hippocratic treatises suffered from scholarly neglect. Studies were devoted to the Hippocratic materia medica and to the theoretical systems guiding the administration of drugs in Hippocratic medicine; but the formal characteristics of the recipes, and their role in the transmission of pharmacological knowledge did not attract scholarly attention. There is one significant exception to this rule: the important study of Dietlinde Goltz (Studien zur altorientalischen und griechischen

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5 Goody (1977) 137.
7 I have counted 1551 recipes in the Hippocratic Corpus.