CHAPTER THREE

HIPPOCRATIC RECIPES BETWEEN HOME REMEDIES AND
HAUTE MÉDECINE

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the compilers of those Hippocratic treatises which include recipes had written sources at their disposal. I speculated that the writing down of the recipes now preserved in the Hippocratic Corpus may have started as early as the sixth century BC. In this chapter, I turn to the question of the oral sources available to those who wrote down these recipes.

Those recipes in the gynaecological treatises represent the vast majority (more than 80%) of the recipes recorded in the Hippocratic Corpus. For most scholars this discrepancy between the gynaecological and ‘non-gynaecological’ treatises of the Corpus in their number of recipes is not a mere coincidence, as argued, for instance, by Iain Lonie:

If we exclude diet, therapy in Hippocratic texts reduces to a few simpleformulae for purges and emetics. The one exception to this generalization is offered by the gynaecological texts... This apparent contrast between the gynaecological texts and other texts dealing with internal diseases may not be accidental. The gynaecological texts deal with a distinct social group, which may originally have been serviced by a distinct medical personnel, the midwives... Other, less tangible, considerations are consistent with the possibility that before the application of literacy to medicine internal medicine hardly existed in Greece.

I have suggested in Chapter Two that there were non-gynaecological Pharmakitides circulating at the time when the author of Affections was active (probably the beginning of the fourth century BC). The gender issues raised by the high number of recipes in the gynaecological treatises of the Hippocratic Corpus must nevertheless be discussed.

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1 There are 285 recipes in non-gynaecological treatises and 1551 recipes in total; that is, 18.37% of the recipes are non-gynaecological.
Lonie’s explanation in terms of a distinct social group with its own healers is commonly held. Since the publication of Aline Rousselle’s article ‘Images médicales du corps: observation féminine et idéologie masculine: le corps de la femme d’après les médecins grecs’ in 1980, the recipes of the Hippocratic gynaecological treatises have been frequently interpreted as ‘home remedies’, transmitted orally by mothers to daughters for generations before assuming written form.3

For Rousselle, the role of the male doctor in the Hippocratic gynaecological treatises was only to ‘write down’ a medical knowledge that was based on women’s accurate observations of their own bodies.4 With regards to recipes, Rousselle imagined the Greek woman as a “cuisinière à son fourneau, preparing in her kitchen, potions, infusions, pessaries, and injections according to the recipes given by the midwife, the physician or tradition.”5 The French scholar therefore raised the possibility that some of the recipes originated outside of the female tradition and that a certain level of interaction between men and women was possible in the field of pharmacology.

Several scholars followed Rousselle in considering the Hippocratic gynaecological recipes as female knowledge written down by male doctors.6 Most scholars, however, adopted a more nuanced picture of the respective roles of men and women in the creation of the Hippocratic gynaecologies. The treatises absorbed female knowledge, but male physicians did not merely write it down—they transformed it in the process.

Ann Hanson, one of the main proponents of this hypothesis, argued that the role of the Hippocratic male physicians was to organise these home remedies and traditional concepts into “a coherent anatomy, physiology, and pathology”.7

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3 See also Rousselle (1983) chapter 2. Manuli’s article ‘Fisiologia e patologia del femminile negli scritti ippocratici dell’ antica ginecologia greca’, also published in 1980, reached the exact opposite conclusion, i.e. that Hippocratic gynaecology was a male science in which the relationship between male doctor and female patient reflected the links of subordination between female and male in Greek society. See also Manuli (1983) 154–162.

4 See also Rousselle (1983) 38–40.

5 Rousselle (1980) 1096. See also (1983) 53 (treatments for amenorrhea); 62 (abortive recipes).

6 See McLaren (1990), especially p. 28; Riddle (1992), especially pp. 81–82.

7 Hanson (1990) 310. See also (1989b) 40–41; (1991a); (1992a); (1992b). Hanson has since changed her position and given up the notion of ‘home remedies’. See below. See also Dean-Jones (1995) 47; Demand (1994); (1998); Andò (1999); (2000).