CHAPTER FIVE

FERTILITY AND SEX: THE SYMBOLISM ATTACHED TO SOME INGREDIENTS OF THE HIPPOCRATIC GYNAECOLOGICAL RECIPES

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the exotic and luxury ingredients included in the Hippocratic collections of recipes. In this chapter, I turn to the more readily available ingredients of the remedies, concentrating almost exclusively on the Hippocratic gynaecological recipes, which constitute, as pointed out in Chapter Three, more than 80% of the recipes recorded in the Corpus. I will examine the connotations attached to these ingredients in order to understand how the Hippocratic gynaecological treatments were meant to restore women to health.

The first chapter of Diseases of Women I highlights some of the most important principles of Hippocratic gynaecology:

I say that woman is *spongier* in flesh and *softer* than man. And being such, the body of a woman draws *fluid* from the belly faster and in *greater quantity* than that of a man… Thus, because a woman is *looser* <than man>, she attracts fluid in greater quantity and faster from her belly to her body than a man does. And for woman who has *softer flesh* <than man>, when her body is full of blood, if it <sc. the blood> does not go away on its own accord, because the flesh is full and heated, pain results. For woman has *warmer* blood and, because of it, she is *warmer* than man.1

The Hippocratic gynaecological compilers believed that women absorbed more fluid from their diet than men because of their spongy flesh.2 As a result, women were wetter and hotter than men. Diseases of women were due to an incapacity to process fluids resulting from their diet (phlegm, bile, but above all blood). Like other Hippocratic writers, the compilers of gynaecological texts conceived of diseases as

---

2 On women’s blood and diet, see King (1995c).
imbalances of the qualities of the body (wet and dry; hot and cold; soft and hard; etc.), which have to be treated by means of opposites. Contrary to other Hippocratic writers, however, the gynaecologists did not state this principle of cures by means of opposites explicitly. This principle has to be deduced from the way in which the recipes are formulated. For instance, the following treatment, recommended in *Superfetation*, is clearly softening and moistening:

<For> a woman who desires to become pregnant and to bear children and who is able to have children, whether she is without children or whether she has conceived in the past, when the mouth <of the womb> is hard . . . During that time, let her drink this: let her cut into small pieces pine twigs, as oily as possible, and boil them in sweet, sweet-smelling white wine, as pleasant as possible, together with chopped seed of celery, seed of Ethiopian cumin and frankincense, as good as possible. Let her drink this whilst fasting, in a quantity that seems sufficient, and for a number of days that seems sufficient. And let her eat boiled puppies and octopuses in sweet boiled wine.

The Hippocratic writer here recommends to the woman a full regimen, including both foods and drinks. The ingredients of her pine-branch drink, like her foods, have to be boiled (καθε ψόσα, ἐ θά, ἐ θόν) in order to become softer, and thus better counteract the hardness of the mouth of the womb. Similarly, the wine she must drink must be sweet and pleasant, adding to the softening properties of the regimen. Finally, the foods she eats must be those known for their softening or loosening faculties: in the catalogue of foods in *Regimen* II, one learns that the meat of puppies is moistening, laxative, and diuretic, that juice of octopuses is laxative, and that celery is diuretic. It is interesting to

---

3 This principle is expressed clearly at VM 13 (133.8–13 Jouanna; 1.598.4–7 L.). On this text, see Lloyd (1966) 21.
4 *Superf.* 29 (86.1–2 and 88.1–6 Lienau; 8.494.4–5 and 496.12–17 L.). This treatment has a parallel at Steril. 217 (8.418.1–2 and 420.6–12 L.), on which see p. 128. On the use of softening treatments in the Hippocratic Corpus, see Skoda (2003) 79–86.
5 Dogs: *Vit.* 2.46 (46.13–15 Joly; 6.546.14–16 L.). On the moistening properties of