THE TYPOLOGY AND AETIOLOGY OF MADNESS IN ANCIENT GREEK MEDICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL WRITING

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In order to approach the vast problem of understanding how different types of insanity were classified and explained by physicians and philosophers in ancient Greece, it seems appropriate to begin with an explanation of my method. This study does not take as its basis the abundant secondary literature, but rather engages directly with a selection of fundamental texts in the chronological order of their composition to bring out as far as possible what was constant and what changed in the classification and explanation of manifestations of insanity.

The examination of two texts from the Hippocratic corpus (one from On the Sacred Disease, the other from On Regimen) according to this method will show that the typology of insanity was binary: two opposite excesses are defined relative to a median equilibrium. At one extreme is a type of madness that, from its low-energy nature, we might call a depressive madness. At the other is what we might qualify as a hyperactive madness. But while the semiotics of these two types of madness are comparable in the two treatises, the aetiology differs from one treatise to the other.

What became of this binary typology and aetiology in the later history of medicine and philosophy? To answer this question, I chose from the realm of philosophy Plato’s Timaeus, the fundamental text regarding illnesses of the soul. This text will be the focus of the second section. From the medical world, it seemed logical to select a writer who was a close reader of both Hippocrates and Plato, namely Galen, and he will be the focus of the third section.

Two deeper questions are related to our principal question about the typology and aetiology of insanity. The first pertains to origin, and the second to form. Origin, or the entry of madness into the roster of illnesses of the soul, is one of the central questions of our discussion: when and how did the soul begin to play an important role in the history of insanity? Form, on the other hand, concerns the problem of the denomination of the two types

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of insanity: by what terms were the two types of insanity originally designated, and how did the vocabulary evolve? These questions will be implicitly present throughout. But some preliminary linguistic considerations are necessary in order to clear away some of the thicket of madness terminology. These considerations will serve as Ariadne’s thread in the semantic labyrinth. The vocabulary of insanity, like its aetiology, is characterized by a bipolarity. The first type includes terms positively designating madness, particularly words of the μανία family, which, at least initially, could signify all sorts of insanity. In the course of this paper, we will also meet μωρία and, more importantly, μώρωσις, which are used to designate a particular type of insanity.1 The other type consists of compound words. These compounds are themselves divided into two classes: the negative compounds (ἀ-pra-vative) refer to loss of thought, while the ‘distancing’ compounds (παρα- or, less frequently, ἐκ-) mark distance by comparison with normality and refer to derangement of thought. Thought is, in this case, expressed by words from both the φρήν family (negative compounds: ἄφρων, ἄφρονέω, ἀφροσύνη; ‘distancing’ compounds: παράφρων, παραφρονέω, παραφροσύνη, and more rarely ἔκφρων, ἔκφρονεω and ἔκφροσύνη) and the νοῦς family (ἄνους, ἄνοια, more rarely παράνους and ἔκνους). We must also take diachronic change into account. For example, the νοῦς family compounds appear later than those in the φρήν family.2 These facts about the formation of the vocabulary of insanity will allow us to assess better the choices made by the Hippocratic writers, Plato, and Galen, and the overall evolution of the relevant vocabulary.

1. Binary Insanity in the Hippocratic Corpus: Typology and Aetiology

1.1. On the Sacred Disease

In his monograph on epilepsy, the Hippocratic author of On the Sacred Disease includes an important excursus on the physiological explanation of thought (ch. 14–17 Jouanna = ch. 17–20 Jones):3 he demonstrates, for the first time in the surviving texts, the role of the brain in perception, feeling, and

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1 The term μώρωσις, an action noun formed from the denominative verb μωρόομαι, though well attested by Galen, is not mentioned in Pierre Chantraine’s DELG (2009), where one would expect it s.v. μωρός.

2 In the Hippocratic Corpus, negative compounds from the νοῦς family (ἄνους, ἄνοια) are not used; they do appear, however, in Plato’s Timaeus.

3 The text cited is that of Jouanna 2003. I refer to the introduction and to the notes of this edition for a general presentation of the treatise and for commentary.