CHAPTER 4

Case History as Minority Report in the Hippocratic Epidemics

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Instead of being self-evident depictions of sickness, ancient medical texts were narratives created from certain points of view and for intended purposes. As a guide for the physician travelling to an unfamiliar community of people, the treatise Airs, Waters, Places anticipated “communal” conditions resulting from seasonal changes, while admitting the possibility of “personal” sickness due to individual lifestyles. Even with its geographical situatedness, Epidemics continued to prioritise population narratives, subsuming sickness within the experiences of the anonymous majority whenever possible. In both its constitutions and case histories, however, patients whose conditions deviated from majority expectations were identified for forensic purposes, so that case histories functioned as minority reports rather than exemplars of how sickness behaved. Such reports guarded against surprising deviations from the rules of prognosis, which could present a threat to the physician’s credibility and livelihood as a consequence.

Why is there a patient in the medical text? Are patient identities really necessary in medical writing? Large portions of the Hippocratic corpus, in fact, do a coherent job describing the human body without identifying it with any historical patient. The treatise Regimen in Acute Diseases, as we will see, employs the invented persona of a patient for the sake of illustrating how sickness behaves, while avoiding the capricious experiences of actual patients who do not always fall sick in the manner they are expected to.1

This point should give us pause to think about the complexity of using real patients as exemplars in medical writing. In the precise nosological schemes of the Hippocratic Epidemics, for example, where events such as crises,

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1 Acut. 46 (L. 2.320.5–324.4 = Joly 56.3–18). The author of Regimen in Acute Diseases acknowledged that the same sickness could manifest itself differently in different regimens and complained about the practice of attaching a new name to every variation of the same sickness. See Acut. 3 (L. 2.228.2–6 = Joly 37.7–10).
paroxysms, and intermissions are assigned to fixed days, and where their occurrences on even or odd days carry predictive significance, it may not have been that difficult to find patients who broke the rule in one way or another.²

We know today that different patients can respond differently to the same disease, whether due to their individual genetics, immunity histories, allergies, nutrition, or psychological states. To be sure, the notion of the patient as variable is not completely foreign to the Hippocratic writings, though we typically encounter patient groups (e.g. athletes, the elderly, women, and children) rather than named and identified individuals. Perhaps more so than other texts, the fourteen case histories of Epidemics 1 show us how personal narratives can perform important roles in supplementing, or even contradicting, systematised accounts about the behaviour of sickness.

1 Place, Time, and Patient

Modern medical authors have credited the treatises of Airs, Waters, Places and Epidemics 1 and 3 for making the early distinction between ‘epidemic’ and ‘endemic’ disease.³ These writings date to the second half of the fifth century BC, and they were considered authentic Hippocratic works in Erotian’s Glossary.⁴ The modern impression of Airs, Waters, Places may have been influenced by the words ‘endemic’ and ‘epidemic’ in W. H. S. Jones’ accessible English translation, though, in what may be a typo, ‘endemic’ is curiously used for the Greek expression ἐπιδημεῖ in one instance.⁵ Many have noted the ambiguity of the term ἐπιδημεῖς itself, which could have referred not only to

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⁴ περὶ τῶν καὶ ὥρῶν (line 11) and ἐπιδημίαι ζ´ (line 18) in Nachmanson, E. (1918). Erotiani vocum Hippocraticarum collectio cum fragmentis, 9.

⁵ See Jones’ translation “endemic” (p. 77) for ἐπιδημεῖ at Aer. 4 (L. 2.20.4 = Jouanna 193.6–7). It is tempting to understand ἐπιδημεῖ here as an error for ἐπιχώρια, which appears in a similar context in Aer. 3 (L. 2.18.1–2 = Jouanna 190.13–14). The reading ἐπιχώρια, however, does not appear as a variant for ἐπιδημεῖ (Aer. 4) in attested manuscripts.