CHAPTER 5

Voice Pathologies and the ‘Hippocratic Triangle’

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Hippocratic authors frequently utilise silence, babbling, lisping and other verbal signs to diagnose a variety of physical illnesses and predict their course. This chapter examines these ‘voice pathologies’ and evaluates their impact on the dialogue between patients and Hippocratic physicians. In short, Hippocratic authors treat patients’ voices in two dissonant ways. On the one hand, physicians promote some form of discourse, implicitly relying on patients to report internal sensations resulting from illnesses. On the other hand, they develop extensive techniques to diminish and downplay this reliance. As a result, Hippocratic authors treat patients’ mouths not so much as the loci of potential subjective expression, but as orifices secreting verbal discharges. They weaken the distinction between the (sonic) effluvia of the mouth and those of other bodily outlets, thus bringing verbal output into close conceptual proximity with other types of discharge. Words come to be scrutinised for their quantity, quality and consistency as though they were quasi-excreta of the mouth.

λέγειν τὰ προγενόμενα, γινώσκειν τὰ παρεόντα, προλέγειν τὰ ἐσόμενα· μελετᾶν ταῦτα. ἀσκεῖν περὶ τὰ νοσήματα δύο, ὄφελεν ἡ μὴ βλάπτειν. ἡ τέχνη διὰ τριῶν, τὸ νόσημα καὶ ὁ νοσέων καὶ ὁ ἰητρός· ὁ ἰητρὸς ὑπηρέτης τῆς τέχνης· ὑπεναντιοῦσθαι τῷ νοσήματι τὸν νοσέοντα μετὰ τοῦ ἰητροῦ.

Announce what has happened, discern what is happening and foretell what will happen; attend to these things. Practice two things concerning diseases: help or do no harm. The art consists of three parts: the disease, the diseased and the physician; the physician is the servant of the art; the diseased fights against the disease with the physician (Hipp., Epid. 1.5, L. 2.634.6–636.4 = Kühlewein 189, 24–190, 6).1

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1 Introduction

The famous ‘Hippocratic triangle’ outlined above establishes the three main components that comprise the art of medicine: the disease, the diseased and the physician. Yet, even construing these three elements as a ‘triangle’ implicitly invokes the idea of equilateral angles and shared status. In fact, many scholars interpret this passage as though it were granting all but equivalent agency to both a physician and his patient, constructing them as two subjective agents allied together in combating the disease. Scholars then tend to assume that this type of partnership extends throughout the Hippocratic corpus. Jouanna, for instance, speaks about a “conversation” whereby the physician initiated a dialogue “for the purpose of collecting information about the diagnosis or prognosis of the illness, or possibly about the course of treatment.” Likewise, Nutton insists that the doctor’s success in treating the disease was just as dependent on the patient’s cooperation as an “informant” as it was on the patient’s compliance with the doctor’s advice. Despite these claims, however, the case studies in Epidemics present patients who are consistently unreliable partners in dialogue, report very little information and are often incapacitated by fevers. To be sure, their verbal emissions are recorded, but mainly insofar as they babble and produce nonsense—or simply remain speechless. In short, patients in this text are constructed primarily as sick bodies emitting verbiage, not as interlocutors contributing speech. As a consequence, if the above passage of the Epidemics were in fact suggesting a triangle, it would need to be deeply acute, rather than equilateral.

Difficulties surrounding the medical use of patient voices are not unique to the Epidemics. Across the corpus, Hippocratic authors frequently utilise silence, babbling, lisping and other verbal signs—what I call the ‘voice pathologies’—to diagnose a variety of physical illnesses and predict their course. In this paper, I propose to examine the use of these voice pathologies as litmus to test the potential for dialogue between patient and physician and to examine

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4 Cf. Hipp., Progn. 1 (L. 2.112.1–3 = Alexanderson 194, 1–3), which reflects a similar type of asymmetry, insofar as in this passage it is the physician alone who “fights against” (ἀνταγωνίσασθαι) the disease with his art.