6. "A WOMAN DOES NOT BECOME AMBIDEXTROUS":
GALEN AND THE CULTURE OF
SCIENTIFIC COMMENTARY

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A rich tradition of commentaries on ancient scientific and medical texts reaches from at least the seventh century BCE to the present. Most of the ancient commentaries have been lost, but a large body of extant evidence (see Part II below) provides detailed insights into the principles and practices of ancient commentators on such texts. The ample variety of surviving commentaries also invites reflection on the continuities and discontinuities between ancient and modern commentators. How similar or dissimilar are the ancients and the moderns, for example, with reference to the professional identity of the commentators, the formal and structural features of their commentaries, the intended readership, the social contexts of the production and use of commentaries, the roles of collectivities and individuals, the relation between oral exegesis in instructional contexts and written commentary, and the criteria of inclusion and exclusion of questions and subject matter? And why did so many pioneering ancient scientists write extensive commentaries on the texts of distant predecessors? Part I of this contribution explores some of these issues through a case study that focuses on the exegetical fate of a single sentence attributed to Hippocrates, while Part II tries to locate the results of the case study on a larger cultural, social, and scientific map, in part by taking up questions and perspectives to which the case study is not responsive.

I. "A woman does not become ambidextrous"

An instructive case study in the continuities and discontinuities between ancient and modern commentaries on medical and scientific texts is

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1 This contribution focuses on the Greco-Roman world, but there were extensive traditions of commentary in other ancient cultures. For example, cuneiform
provided by the interpretation of a famous Hippocratic aphorism: γυνὴ ἀμφιδέξιος οὐ γίνεται. There is a modern consensus that the sentence should be translated “a woman does not become ambidextrous.” In antiquity, however, there was no agreement on the interpretation of this aphorism. Furthermore, the unanimity of modern translators masks an almost universal, though often unspoken, bewilderment as to the meaning of the aphorism.

In the earliest surviving commentary on the Hippocratic Aphorisms——Galén’s extensive second-century work——the lemma consists of the entire aphorism. Galén rarely divides the Hippocratic text into lemmata smaller than a sentence; his lemmata often consist of even larger sense-units, corresponding to one or more modern paragraphs. Even when his comments focus on a single word, he sooner or later reinserts the interpreted word into larger units of meaning. The interpretative strategies adopted under this lemma are characteristic of Galén’s procedure. Recognizing that *amphidéxiōs* represents a more formidable challenge than the other words in the lemma, he makes four distinct exegetical moves to secure his interpretation of this far from uncommon word (but, as modern commentators would be quick to point out, within the Hippocratic Corpus the word occurs only here).

First, Galén tries to achieve semantic clarification by freely looking outward from the Hippocratic text:

Euripides called a blade that cuts from either side *amphidéxiōs* [two-edged], while Homer called Asteropaeus *peridéxiōs* because he used both hands alike. In the same way Aristophanes in his *Tagenitae* called a person who was left-handed [clumsy] on both sides *ampharisteros* [left-