

INTRODUCTION

I have translated the first book of Hippocrates' treatise *Gynikéōn Prōton* as there is no complete English translation of the work available. Ann Ellis Hanson of Yale University has translated *Diseases of Women Books I, II and III* (the latter also called *Barren Women*) and these translations are ready now for publication.ⁱ I have put footnotes to explain the different herbs used as there is a great interest in alternative medicine today. I do not advise any personal experiments by the reader as the measurements used by the Greeks cannot be accurately equated with modern measurements.

Hippocrates of Cos was thought to have been born c. 460 BC. In Plato's *Protagoras* Hippocrates is mentioned by name as a physician.ⁱⁱ However, it is not believed that he wrote all the treatises which make up the Hippocratic Corpus. These works are approximately seventy in number and it is only recently that most available manuscripts have been translated into English. The original manuscripts were written in the Ionic dialect, for this was the dialect used for medical writings, although the Doric dialect was used in Cosⁱⁱⁱ. Émile Littré, a French philosopher/physician, translated all the available manuscripts into French in the mid-nineteenth century. These manuscripts included those dealing with women's diseases and sterility. The strict morality of Victorian English Greek scholars obviously prevented these texts from being translated^{iv} into English. For the sake of convenience, the term 'Hippocrates' will mean all writers of the Corpus.

Hippocrates recorded facts, as he saw them, using abstract reasoning in his 'diagnoses'. He noted improvements or deteriorations in his patients and his only attempt at philosophy was in the recording of 'critical' days, mainly in *Epidemics*. He believed that every disease had a cause and was not caused by divine intervention; in other words he was a Greek rationalist. In *The Sacred Disease* those doctors who believed that the disease was as a result of divine intervention were

ⁱ E-mail from Ann Ellis Hanson dated 2 October 2001.

ⁱⁱ Jouanna.1999:5

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean-Jones. 1999:6 n.17

^{iv} Dean-Jones takes a different view - that 19th century scholars were more concerned in which theories coincided with the theories of the day and concentrated on 'those treatises they considered more rational.' (Dean-Jones. 1999:1-2)

roundly condemned, by Hippocrates, as charlatans and quacks. In *Airs, Waters, Places* and *Epidemics* Hippocrates noted that the climate, environment and lifestyle caused certain illnesses and complaints.

The *Hippocratic Oath* is the work most commonly ascribed to Hippocrates. It has not been proved that Hippocrates composed the Hippocratic Oath as there are contradictions contained therein which seem to have been influenced by the Pythagoreans. In the *Oath* the physician is forbidden to give an abortive pessary and yet there is no prohibition in the gynaecological treatises.

Interest in the gynaecological treatises of Hippocrates started in the late 1970's and a number of articles and books have been written on the different aspects of treatments. Hippocrates wrote the treatises to instruct his fellow doctors. He warned them against cutting unnecessarily and in *Diseases of Women* instructs them on how to remove a dead foetus. He worked purely on observation and experience, as dissecting was not performed on humans or animals. This naturally limited his knowledge of anatomy, although sometimes Hippocrates was uncannily correct. At other times, as in the case of the 'wandering womb', his theories were totally incorrect. The womb is a fixed organ but Hippocrates describes how it rushes upwards in search of moisture. In later years Socrates dissected animals and extrapolated his findings to humans. Of course, he was not correct in a number of instances because he was more a philosopher than a medical man. Noting that a pig had two compartments to its womb, Socrates surmised that it was the same for a woman. Even Hippocrates talks about the right side and the left side of the womb and the Greek for 'womb' – υJstevra (*hystera*) is usually written in the plural. Hippocrates did know that a woman had separate 'entrances' in the genitalia – a vagina and a urethra. This is proved by the fact that a pessary could remain in place without interrupting the flow of urine. Socrates assumed that because the male had one orifice for both micturition and the perpetuation of the species, the same applied to the female. The word for 'embryo' and 'foetus' in the Hippocratic writings is the same 'το; e[mbruon' (*to embryon*), so there is no differentiation between an embryo of up to eight weeks and a foetus of more than eight weeks. Herophilus of Alexandria first carried out human dissections in Egypt in the second century BC.^v

^v Von Staden.1989

Gynaecological subjects covered in *Diseases of Women*, Book I, are many. Hippocrates observes in other treatises, e.g. *Epidemics*, the importance of menstruation in the health of a woman. In *Places of Man*.⁴⁷ it is recorded that the womb causes all illness in women. In *Diseases of Women* Hippocrates includes treatment for women who fail to menstruate, those who menstruate for a long period, prolapsed womb, infertility, miscarriages, stillborn babies and difficult births. Vapour baths are often given as part of the treatment. There are two types – the one similar to a sauna where the woman is covered with a cloth and steamed, the other where a reed, placed in embers, is inserted into the vagina to purify the uterus. Occasionally the treatments caused sterility and Hippocrates often ends a description with ‘even though the woman becomes healthy, she will be sterile’. Vomiting and fasting were also part of the therapy. Succussion – to shake the child out of the womb – was continued into medieval times in Europe. Instead of shaking the bed as described by Hippocrates in Chapter 69, women who could not expel the foetus were strapped to a ladder, which was banged up and down.

Many herbal treatments were used and honey and wine were common ingredients mixed with herbs. Today honey is still used as an antiseptic, particularly for skin ulcers. Hypericum, or St John’s Wort, was used by Hippocrates to treat depression in women and today it is an alternative remedy for depression and premenstrual tension. Pomegranate was also used and this is because its rind, having a high tannin content, was effective as an astringent. Pennyroyal was used to cleanse the uterus after childbirth if the cleansing did not happen naturally (Chapter 37) and to draw down the menses (Chapter 74) but as an aid to conception (Chapter 75).

Metals such as copper and lead were used. The literal translation of the Greek *ajrguvreon* *a[nqo~* (*argyreon anthos*) is ‘silver flower’ but is taken to mean ‘lead oxide’. I tried, unsuccessfully, to discover whether ‘silver flowers’ formed on lead if vinegar (to form the oxide) was used. Copper particles were used as an aid to conception. Riddle states that available documents show that *misy* (a copper compound) was used in the sixth century AD as a contraceptive, and today copper is used in intrauterine devices (IUD) to prevent conception.^{vi}

^{vi} Riddle.1994:75

Insects and animals, both from land and sea, were ingredients in the treatments. The blister-beetle, or cantharis, was used after pulling off its head, wings and legs; the crushed testicles of a sea-turtle were also included in certain mixtures. The gall of an ox, the fur from a hare, cow-dung and hawk's droppings were all thought to have healing properties. Castoreum, taken from the preputial follicles of the beaver, was 'once thought to be a powerful anti-spasmodic. This belief, now rejected, apparently owes its origin to the Hippocratic writings in which castoreum was supposed to have a special affinity for the uterus – and hence, to be useful in uterine complications generally.^{vii}

The last thirty chapters of *Diseases of Women I* are mainly short notes on remedies. Chapters 92-109 deal with complaints which are not peculiar to women, such as a remedy for a sore throat in Chapter 97. *Diseases of Women II* continues with chapter 110.

TEXTS

The text which I have used for translation is from Littré's work in *Hippocrates Opera Omnia, Vol. VIII*. I also downloaded the Greek text used by Littré from the TLG® (Thesaurus Lingua Graeca) Compact Disc developed by Silver Mountain Software, University of California, Irvine. This text is in a poor format and I was unable to justify the right-hand margin. A specific change I made to the Greek text was the removal of the spiriti above the rhos in words such as *katarrhvgnutai*. Littré (and the CD) has *katarjrJhvgnutai*. The texts used by Littré are:

Manuscripts (Taken from page 8 of *Hippocrates Opera Omnia, Vol. VIII*)

2146 = C, 2254 = D, 2144 = F, 2141 = G, 2142 = H, 2140 = I, 2143 = J, 2145 = K, Cod. Serv. ap. Foes = L, 2332 = X, Imp. Cornar. ap. Mack = K', Cod. Fevr. ap. Foes = Q', Cod. Vindob. = q¹.

^{vii} Stannard.1961:506

ABBREVIATIONS

COD The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (Seventh Edition). Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984 (reprint).

LSJ Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement. H G Liddell and R Scott. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1996.

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