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Hippocrates Aphorisms V

Aphoristic texts have a long history in the Mediterranean world. The seven-book Aphorisms of the Corpus Hippocraticum was venerated for centuries as one of the finest products of the "great Hippocrates," serving, according to Galen, as the best introduction for beginners. Aphorisms continued to be seen as a source of the eternal verities of medicine, beginning with its provocative "Life is short, but the art is long," and, so long as biographical explanations satisfied readers of the Corpus, it was fashionable to conclude, as did Émile Littré, that "Aphorisms occupied Hippocrates throughout his lifetime" (IV 439). More recent scholars have suggested that Aphorisms often presents us with reworkings into gnomic format of materials from other treatises in our present Corpus. Ludwig Edelstein argued that Airs, Waters, Places 10 was generalized into the weather prognoses at Aphorisms III 11-14. Amneris Roselli demonstrated that Humors 12-16 was likewise gnomicized into Aphorisms III 1-7, but she also observed that sections 5 & 6 of Epidemics II, themselves generalizing, reflected similarities in topic with Aphorisms V & VII. Explicit signs of borrowing, such as repetitions, misunderstandings, and so forth were, however, absent. She explained this as due to the fact that when the excerptor of Aphorisms was at work on Epidemics II, these sections had not yet achieved the form they now exhibit.

Migration of the same (or quite similar) materials into two or more treatises is a phenomenon commonly met within the Corpus. Reuse, revision, recontextualization testify to the fact that particular medical materials remain in current usage, still of interest to practitioners. The gynecological information in Aphorisms is largely isolated in Book V, yet it overlaps only occasionally with the large treatises on female maladies (Diseases of Women 1 & 2, Nature of Women), but rather shares more with the shorter, and demonstrably later, specialized monograph Barren Women. The writers of Aphorisms V also appear to have drawn on Diseases 1 and Epidemics 2 & 6, although it seems equally possible that a single source, now lost, had previously combined this set on female conditions and diseases. After juxtaposing the 'fecundity' tests in Barren Women 214 and Aphorisms V 59, I examine Aphorisms V 62-63, the latter of which is without parallel in the Corpus. I conclude by arguing that my observations tell more about the methods and intentions of the authors of Aphorisms than they do about the multi-layered Hippocratic gynecology.