

Handout, Seminar 4, Cosmology, Magic and Divination

Extract from *On the Sacred Disease in Hippocratic Writings*, ed. G.E.R. Lloyd. London: Penguin Books, 1978. Trans. J. Chadwick and W. N. Mann

1. I do not believe that the 'Sacred Disease' is any more divine or sacred than any other disease but, on the contrary, has specific characteristics and a definite cause. Nevertheless, because it is completely different from other diseases, it has been regarded as a divine visitation by those who, being only human, view it with ignorance and astonishment. This theory of divine origin, though supported by the difficulty of understanding the malady, is weakened by the simplicity of the cure, consisting merely of ritual purification and incantation. If remarkable features in a malady were evidence of divine visitation, then there would be many 'sacred diseases,' as I shall show. Quotidian, tertian and quartan fevers are among other diseases no less remarkable and portentous and yet no one regards them as having a divine origin. I do not believe that those diseases have any less claim to be caused by a god than the so-called 'sacred' disease but they are not the objects of popular wonder. Again, no less remarkably, I have seen men go mad and become delirious for no obvious reason and do many strange things. I have seen many cases of people groaning and shouting in their sleep, some who choke; others jump from their bed and run outside and remain out of their mind till they wake, when they are as healthy and sane as they were before, although perhaps rather pale and weak. These things are not isolated events but frequent occurrences. There are many other remarkable afflictions of various sorts, but it would take too long to describe them in detail.

2. It is my opinion that those who first called this disease 'sacred' were the sort of people we now call witch-doctors, faith-healers, quacks and charlatans. These are exactly the people who pretend to be very pious and to be particularly wise. By invoking a divine element they were able to screen their own failure to give suitable treatment and so called this a 'sacred' malady to conceal their ignorance of its nature. By picking their phrases carefully, prescribing purifications and incantations along with abstinence from baths and from many foods unsuitable for the sick, they ensured that their therapeutic measures were safe for themselves. The following fish were forbidden as being the most harmful: mullet, black-tail, hammer and eel. Goat, venison, pork and dog were considered most likely among meats to upset the stomach. Of fowls: cock, turtle-dove and buzzard and those which are considered very rich were forbidden; white mint, garlic and onion were excluded from the diet because over-flavoured food is not good for a sick man. Further, their patients were forbidden to wear black because it is a sign of death, to use goat skin blankets or to wear goat skins, nor were they allowed to put one foot on the other or one hand on the other; and all these things were regarded as preventative measures against the disease. These prohibitions are added on account of the divine element in the malady, suggesting that these practitioners had special knowledge. They also employ other pretexts so that, if the patient be cured, their reputation for cleverness is enhanced while, if he dies, they can excuse themselves by explaining that the gods are to blame while they themselves did nothing wrong; that they did not prescribe the taking of any medicine whether liquid or solid, nor any baths which might have been responsible.
I suppose none of the inhabitants of the interior of Libya can possibly be healthy seeing that they sleep on goat skins and eat goat meat. In fact, they possess neither blanket, garment nor shoe that is not made of goat skin, because goats are the only animals they keep. If contact with or eating of this animal causes and exacerbates the

disease while abstinence from it cures the disease, then diet is alone the factor which decides the onset of the disease and its cure. No god can be blamed and the purifications are useless and the idea of divine intervention comes to nought.

3. It seems, then, that those who attempt to cure disease by this sort of treatment do not really consider the maladies thus treated of sacred or of divine origin. If the disease can be cured by purification and similar treatment then what is to prevent its being brought on by like devices? The man who can get rid of a disease by his magic could equally well bring it on; again there is nothing divine about this but a human element is involved. By such claims and trickery, these practitioners pretend a deeper knowledge than is given to others; with their prescriptions of 'sanctifications' and 'purifications,' their patter about divine visitation and possession by devils, they seek to deceive. And yet I believe that all these professions of piety are really more like impiety and a denial of the existence of the gods, and all their religion and talk of divine visitation is an impious fraud which I shall proceed to expose.

4. If these people claim to know how to draw down the moon, cause an eclipse of the sun, make storms and fine weather, rain and drought, to make the sea too rough for sailing or the land infertile, and all the rest of their nonsense, then, whether they claim to be able to do it by magic or by some other method, they seem to be impious rogues. Either they do not believe in the existence of the gods or they believe that the gods are powerless or would not refrain from the most dastardly acts. Surely conduct such as this must render them hateful to the gods. If a man were to draw down the moon or cause an eclipse of the sun, or make storms or fine weather by magic and sacrifices, I should not call any of these things a divine visitation but a human one, because the divine power has been overcome and forced into subjection by the human will. But perhaps these claims are not true and it is men in search of a living who invent all these fancy tales about this particular disease and all the others too. They make a different god responsible for each of the different forms of the complaint.

If the sufferer acts like a goat, and if he roars, or has convulsions involving the right side, they say the Mother of the Gods is responsible. If he utters a higher-pitched and louder cry, they say he is like a horse and blame Poseidon. If the sufferer should be incontinent of faeces, as sometimes happens under the stress of an attack, Enodia is the name. If the stools are more frequent and thin like those of birds, it is Apollo Nomius; if he foam at the mouth and kick out his feet, Ares is to blame. If he suffers at night from fear and panic, from attacks of insanity, or if he jumps out of bed and runs outside, they talk of attacks of Hecate and the assaults of the Heroes. *In using purifications and spells they perform what I consider a most irreligious and impious act, for, in treating sufferers from this disease by purification with blood and like things, they behave as if the sufferers were ritually unclean, the victims of divine vengeance or of human magic or had done something sacrilegious. It would have been better if they had done the opposite and taken the sick into the temples, there, by sacrifice and prayer, to make supplication to the gods; instead they simply purify them and do none of these things. Charms are buried in the ground, thrown into the sea or carried off into the mountains where no one may touch them or tread on them. If a god really be responsible, surely these things should be taken into the temples as offerings.* [Addey's italics]

Personally I believe that human bodies cannot be polluted by a god; the basest object by the most pure. But if the human body is polluted by some other agency or is harmed in some way, then the presence of a god would be more likely to purify and sanctify it than pollute it.