Ariston’s Tragic Illness: Medical Language in Demosthenes 54

The extent to which medical knowledge permeated into ancient Greek public consciousness and popular discourse remains the subject of scholarly debate, yet Hippocratic allusions and intertexts have been identified in the literature of many genres, including comedy, tragedy, and oratory (Nutton 1992; Kosak 2004; Sternberg 2006; Das 2015; Totelin 2015). This omnipresence of medical language would suggest that audiences were expected to understand their referents, as the comedic, tragic, or rhetorical effects often rely upon an understanding of these references.

Demosthenes in particular appropriates medical language in his orations, typically doing so through elaborate metaphors that equate politics with disease or the body (Das 2015). In 54 Against Conon, however, Demosthenes gives a uniquely referential description of the condition that his speaker, Ariston, endured (Dem. 54.11-12). After describing Conon and his associates’ violent attack, Demosthenes recounts the illness that Ariston developed from this bodily trauma. Ariston’s symptoms serve as proof of Conon’s hybris in this case, underscoring an important connection between the two evidence-based technai of oratory and medicine (cf. Holmes 2007).

While Carey and Reid (1985) have suggested that this medical language was highly technical and served to impress the audience, who would have been unfamiliar with this terminology, it seems instead to serve a more important and more nuanced rhetorical function. Through an analysis of the medical language in this section of Against Conon (Dem. 54.11-12), I will show that Demosthenes’s references are too specific and intentional to be discounted as medical jargon intended to imbue the speaker with authority. Rather, the language creates productive, inter-genre dialogues between his description of Ariston’s suffering, suffering in the
Hippocratic corpus, and tragic descriptions of suffering. The references in this passage allude both to the conditions of apostasis and empyema, as described in Hippocratic treatises, and to the symptoms of Philoctetes, described by Sophocles in his Philoctetes. I argue that Demosthenes uses these allusions and dialogues to disgust his audience and, ultimately, to characterize Ariston as a man who passively endures unjust suffering and heroically overcomes a gruesome, dangerous illness. In order for this characterization to have been rhetorically effective, it must have been understood, at least in part, by the audience, suggesting that they would have had some working awareness of medical terminology and writings.

Bibliography


