

# **Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes**

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## **Volume 122**

# **Pathologies of Love in Classical Literature**

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Edited by  
Dimitrios Kanellakis

**DE GRUYTER**

## Preface

The present collection sprang from a conference held at Oxford in June 2018. The enthusiastic participation of the audience and the stimulating discussions on that occasion motivated us to pursue this publication. All the contributors to this volume are deeply indebted to the colleagues who also offered their inspiring insights and expertise on the literary and visual representation of the topic: Angus Bowie, Christopher Faraone, Eleni Pachoumi, Thomas Mannack, Jane Masségli, Amy Smith and Giacomo Fedeli. As the convenor, I am grateful to all the speakers for kindly accepting my invitation and for our excellent collaboration. Warm thanks are also due to everyone who supported the realisation of the conference: Emilia Savva, Paul Madden, Charles Crowther, Armand D'Angour, Stephen Harrison, Stephen Heyworth, Bill Allan, Malcom Davies, Gregory Kantor, Christopher Metcalf and Maria Stamatopoulou. The Board of the Faculty of Classics, the Craven Committee, The Queen's College, University College, Corpus Christi College and the Classical Association kindly offered generous funding and use of their facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred while the papers were being edited, has created an unfortunate yet significant context for this volume. When conceiving the title of the conference, I could not have imagined how relevant 'pathology' would become two years later, nor how bitterly literal the notion of 'pathology of love' would sound today. Having to practise 'social distancing' and 'self-isolation', to 'work from home' and 'study via synchronous e-learning platforms' essentially means that to meet the people we love is to put our health, or theirs, at risk. Love has somehow been equated to illness. At the same time, health experts have warned about the mental impact of those social restrictions, and the financial impact of the lockdown on the global economy will only cause further anxiety, depression, and isolation from beloved ones. This is not to start our book with a pessimistic tone – if anything, this collaborative project is a confident statement on the joy of working together – but to say that our current experience allows us to better perceive several of the paradoxes entailed in the notion of the 'pathology of love': it feels like a deadlock and a vicious circle in which the roles of victim and violator are not always discernible, and individual desires clash with social and political ethics. Moreover, we should remember that the ancient people were more vulnerable to epidemics – already recorded in the prologue of the *Iliad*, the first piece of western literature – and, therefore, disease as *a common experience* and *a public discourse* was a phenomenon more frequent than, but as vivid as, COVID-19 is for us today. For example, that the plague of 430 BCE killed at least a quarter of the

Athenian population means that we cannot interpret the nosologic imagery of the authors of the time related to *erôs*, or to any other concept, solely in terms of poetic tradition. Such vocabulary would inevitably elicit the readers' and spectators' emotional response, evoke their living memories and anxieties, and create a community of compassion. If the modern world is accustomed to reading ancient literature as monuments of timeless and universal wisdom, aesthetic magnitude, and historical knowledge, our contemporary pandemic is perhaps a reminder for us to also engage emotionally with our predecessors: to feel empathy for them and the human race as a whole. (At the same time, thinking outside the anthropocentric box of Classics, let us not forget other living beings: all the livestock and wildlife species whose exploitation is linked to corona-viruses, and those species used in the production and testing of our vaccines.)

DK

Athens, March 2021

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# Dimitrios Kanellakis

## Introduction

*I have carefully collected whatever I have been able to learn of the story of poor Werther, and here present it to you ... To his spirit and character you cannot refuse your admiration and love: to his fate you will not deny your tears.*

*And thou, good soul, who sufferest the same distress as he endured once, draw comfort from his sorrows; and let this little book be thy friend, if, owing to fortune or through thine own fault, thou canst not find a dearer companion.*

— Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774:  
Preface [transl. R.D. Boylan]

Love and death are among the most prominent – arguably, the two most prominent – themes of literature across time and cultures. As a topic for investigation, the ‘pathology of love’ perfectly combines the two, as it connects *erôs* with disease, and synecdochically (or metaphorically) with death. Therefore, without exaggeration, the pathology of love could serve as an ideal standpoint for retelling the history of literature. The peak point in such a historiographical narrative would probably be the Romantic and Decadent movements of the nineteenth century, although most elements of this literary tradition derive from Greco-Roman antiquity.<sup>1</sup> Of course, as the contributors rightly emphasise (Thumiger: 24, Calame: 50), what we call *erôs* in the Greco-Roman context is not a transhistorical category; however, it is precisely the ‘gaps, discontinuities, and fragility’ of such cultural concepts, even within their contemporary frame, that provide us with ‘a useful tool to think with’ today (Hubbard: 84). In this volume there are indeed notable gaps in what a chronological history of the pathology of love in classical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Wack 1990 on the Middle Ages; Wells 2007 and Dawson 2008 on early modern English and Italian literature; Dye 2004 on Goethe; Small 1996 and Gilbert 1997 on the Victorian novel; Labbe 2000 and Béres Rogers 2019: 91–118 on Romanticism; Sobol 2009 on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian literature. The reverse enquiry, i.e. what we might call ‘the erotics of pathology’, is pursued by Susan Sontag in her 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she explores various metaphors historically attached to tuberculosis and cancer (most important, their identification with death itself) through the popular mythology that has been built around these diseases. Of all metaphors, ‘the most striking similarity between the myths of TB and of cancer is that both are, or were, understood as diseases of passion. [...With the Romantics,] TB was conceived as a variant of the disease of love. [...] As once TB was thought to come from too much passion, afflicting the reckless and sensual, today many people believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, inhibited, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger.’ (20–1). ‘Having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction. Cancer is considered to be de-sexualizing’ (13).

antiquity would present, such as the Homeric epics or Hellenistic poetry. (This introduction, as well as the appendix, aim to compensate for most gaps, suggesting further reading.) Instead, this book aspires to put forward, through appropriate case studies, a methodology for constructing such a history of literature. It does so, by visiting medical sources to understand ‘pathology’ in its synchronic epistemic dimension, acknowledging that medical authors have exercised an influence on literature and vice versa (Thumiger); by tracing how the poetic expression of the theme corresponds, potentially, to a pragmatic realisation, as far as the performative genres are concerned (Calame); by exploring what a given society considers a socio-pathological *erôs*, according to its moral and political standards, and how literature portrays that (Valtadorou, Hubbard); by deducing the narrative patterns of the experience of love, from ‘infection’ to ‘symptomatology’, from ‘acute’ to ‘chronic condition’, and so on (Sanders); by comparing the different manifestations of the theme within a single author’s oeuvre to synthesise his/her poetic biography or programme (Michalopoulos) and by resorting to textual criticism to treat ill-preserved passages towards that purpose (Valtadorou, Thorsen); finally, by reading this key theme as a gauge of generic compliance or innovation (Konstantakos). The following sketch of a literary history of the pathology of love in Ancient Greece and Rome aims to help the reader contextualise the respective case studies.

## A Long Love-Story Short

In her 1995 monograph *In Pandora’s Jar: Lovesickness in Early Greek Poetry*, the only book-long treatment of the topic before our volume, Monica Cyrino explored the development of erotic malady in archaic literature. She argued that the Homeric epics introduced a repertoire of imagery and vocabulary connecting *erôs* to suffering, if only implicitly; subsequently, Hesiod specified that vocabulary as distinctly pathological; and finally, the lyric poets elaborated on the hexameter tradition by shifting from martial and mythological narrative to personal experience and by explicitly equating love with illness. Here I shall only cherry-pick the most characteristic manifestations of the theme, adding some of the more recent bibliography and extending the chronological scope to include Greek and Latin literature up to the imperial period. It should go without saying that my intention is not to reduce complex interpretative issues of individual works and passages to something simple and presumably obvious, but – what is more pertinent to an