Medea’s Medulla and Other Loci of Love

Patrick Lee Miller

Where is love felt? The question admits of no universal answer: it depends who is feeling it. It also depends what sort of love is felt. If our greeting cards are to be believed, when we experience passionate, romantic love, we most often feel it in the heart. Medea feels it there too, according to Apollonius of Rhodes. Then again, he has her feel it all over; there is hardly a place on or within her body that does not register the passion. Notice only the most peculiar of these:

> *ἔνδοθι δ’ αἰεὶ*
> *τεῖρ’ ὀδύνη σμύχουσα διὰ χροός, ἀμφί τ’ ἀραιὰς*
> *ἶνας καὶ κεφαλῆς ὑπὸ νείατον ἰνίον ἄχρις,*
> *ἔνθ’ ἀλεγεινότατον δύνει ἄχος, ὁππότ’ ἀνίας*
> *ἀκάματοι πραπίδεσσιν ἐνισκίμψωσιν Ἔρωτες.*”[1]

The passage begins traditionally enough. Medea’s “grief, smouldering through her flesh” resembles the “fine fire” that so famously “steals beneath” Sappho’s.[2] The resemblance ends there, however. A most grievous pain now sinks in around Medea’s *ἀραιὰς ἶνας,* her thin nerves, and down *to* her *νείατον ἰνίον* – literally, her lowest occiput; more freely, the base of her skull. As other commentators have observed, we seem to have left the theater of love and entered instead a dissection hall.[3]

In due course we will have occasion to examine interpretations of this, the oddest symptom of love. For now, we should not miss the anatomical significance of the next two lines of this same passage. The *Erotes* do not hurl their sorrows indiscriminately. Here they have managed to strike Medea’s *πραπίδες*; in other passages they will afflict each of the mental organs named by the Greek language: the *θυμός* (284), the *κραδίη* (287) as well as the *κῆρ* (446), the *φρένες* (289), the *νόος* (447), and finally the *ψυχή* (1016). As if

---

[1] 3.761-765.
[2] 31. 9-10. “Flesh” translates *χρώς* both times.
[3] See the OCD, 126, but especially Zanker (1987, 125; 1979, 61) and Solmsen (1961, 196-196).

this mental assault were not enough, Medea will also demonstrate her affliction through bodily signs: by her *χροός*, *ἶνας,* and *ἰνίον*, as we have already seen, but also by her *παρειάς* (289), *οφθαλμῶν* (453), *οὔασι* (457), and *πόδεσσι* (1152). Medea has a very bad case of love, it would appear, and Apollonius proves a most attentive diagnostician. We can appreciate the significance of his case report more deeply by considering a sample of his rivals.

To this end I have chosen Sappho, Euripides, and Theocritus: *Fragment 31*, the *Hippolytus*, and *Idyll 2* respectively. Together they encompass not only the three major periods of Greek poetry (Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic), but also three of its major genres (lyric, tragedy, and idyll). When the *Argonautica* is added, we have a fourth (epic). For this reason it will not be possible – if ever it was desireable – to establish certain conclusions about the symptoms of love in a given period or genre as compared with the others. There are simply too many variables at work. Nevertheless, the breadth of the sample permits us to entertain a few plausible hypotheses: first, that Greek poetry began using medical thought more and more as both developed alongside one another; secondly, that the poets did not use this thought indiscriminately, but adapted it to the ends of their genres; and thirdly, that Apollonius made far and above the greatest such use and adaptation. All hypotheses aside, it will also be worthwhile to trace the symptoms of love that persist through changes in both genre and history.

We begin this survey, then, with Sappho's *fr. 31*, which is still considered the *locus classicus* for the symptoms of love. Among its greatest admirers was of course Pseudo-Longinus, who preserved it for posterity, saying immediately after he quotes it, "Lovers experience all this."[4] By my count, Sappho experiences nine symptoms:

---

[4] All quotations of Pseudo-Longinus are from *On Sublimity* 10.1-3, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, eds. Russell, D. A., and Winterbottom, M., 460-503. Oxford. 1972.

i. fluttering *kardia* (6) *καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν*
ii. speechlessness (7-8) *ὤς με φώναισ' οὐδ' ἒν ἔτ' εἴκει*
iii. fiery insides (9-10) *λέπτον δ' αὔτικα χρῷ πῦρ ὐπαδεδρόμηκεν*
iv. eyes fail (11) *ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἒν ὄρημμ'*
v. ringing ears (11-12) *ἐπιρρόμβεισι δ' ἄκουαι*
vi. sweat (13) *κὰδ δέ μ' ἴδρως κακχέεται*
vii. trembling all over (13-14) *τρόμος δὲ παῖσαν ἄγρει*
viii. pallor (14) *χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας ἔμμι*
ix. feeling dead (15-16) *τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὔτ[ᾳ]*

Plutarch first introduced this list into a medical context, when he told the story of Antiochus, whose illicit love for his step-mother, the queen Stratonice, was diagnosed by a physician who made use of "those tell-tale signs of which Sappho sings."[5] Another of this list's admirers was Jacques Ferrand, the seventeenth-century author of *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, who thought no less of its medical utility, claiming that Sappho was "as experienced," in the art of identifying its symptoms, "as our Greek, Latin, and Arab physicians in light of the fact that they mentioned no indisputable signs that this lady did not already know."[6]

What the ancient and medievals neglected, however, Ferrand and his generation would elaborate into a new illness, 'chlorosis.' Sydenham, for example, soon listed eleven symptoms of this disease of virgins, whose best cure was not surprisingly sex.[7] Of these eleven symptoms, only the first can be found in Sappho's list: pallor. Helen King recounts the convoluted history during which this symptom ("greener than grass," by a crude translation) moved into later medical literature by a confused synthesis with the Hippocratic *ΠΕΡΙ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΙΩΝ*. In the process, injustice was done both to medicine and literary criticism, not to mention young women. Sappho's 'greenness,' according to humoral medicine and its symptomatology, was mistaken for a symptom of envy. Recent scholarship has exposed this error.[8] Besides a spurious interpretation of her poetry, the

[5] Plutarch, *Vita Demetri*, ed. K. Ziegler. Leipzig. 1960. Quoted in Ferrand 1990, 50.
[6] Ferrand 1990, 41, which cites Chapter XIV of the *Treatise*.
[7] King 1998, 188-189.
[8] See Race 1983.

confusion of Sappho and Hippocratic medicine also fostered a new disease, from which unmarried girls would mysteriously suffer for nearly four-hundred years.

The mystery here is the precise relationship between medicine, culture, and poetry. King argues that the confusion of misread poetry and speculative medicine created a new diagnosis. The real mystery, however, is that girls obliged and seemed to suffer accordingly. After all, the sociology of medicine has by now trained us to see the metaphors of a culture, and thus even of its poetry, at work in its medicine.[9] But the example of chlorosis – like hysteria, which has recently been more thoroughly investigated[10] – shows a reverse influence. Medical theories seem to affect our perceptions of ourselves, and thus our embodied experience – to the extent that they create new as well as cure old ailments. This point will become paramount when we return to Medea's peculiar symptom of love, her pain in the neck.

But not before we note a few features of Sappho's symptoms. Like Medea and our other victims of love, she is afflicted psychosomatically. In all four of our poets, in fact, it will be difficult to distinguish purely mental from purely physical symptoms. Such is the nature of love – at least of the passionate variety in question here. At all times it is a mental condition inseparable from its bodily manifestations. But this seems particularly true in Greek poetry, whose vocabulary for the mind was somatic, and even split between several different bodily regions, from the time of Homer onward.[11] These provisos notwithstanding, Sappho registers most of her symptoms in places without much mental significance. The exception is the first, where her *καρδία* is made to flutter. The last, while it may be physical in some way, is located nowhere specific. After these two, the others

[9] See, e.g., Martin 1987.
[10] Veith 1965, Bollas 2000. Similarly, psychiatrists have observed the differences between the 'shell-shock' experienced by today's veterans as compared with that of Freud's patients. Battlefield conditions have changed, to be sure; but not enough to alone account for the appearance of new symptoms and the disappearance of old ones. Some cultural influence seems also to be at work. It may be significant that the illnesses of love and war, suffered sometimes as badges of identity by women and men, are most susceptible to cultural influence.
[11] This phenomenon misled Snell 1953 into arguing that the Homeric heroes had no concept of the mind. This mistake has since been corrected by Claus 1981 and Bremmer 1983, among others.

are more squarely located in the body. Three places are named – *χρῷ, ὀππάτεσσι, ἄκουαι*; the others can be inferred – her throat, her skin, and her muscles. It is the corporeality of these symptoms that distinguishes *fr. 31*. Pseudo-Longinus thus admired "the way in which she brings everything together – mind and body."

Part of Sappho's appeal seems also to have been the universality of her symptoms. Who has not experienced a fine fire in the flesh, a fluttering heart, a little sweat? For all its drama, then, there is nothing serious about her condition. It is not until Euripides' Phaedra that love afflicts someone in the strictly medical sense. Here is her case-report:

i. bed-ridden (131; 179-180) *τειρομέναν νοσερᾷ κοίτᾳ δέμας*
ii. hiding (132-133) *λεπτὰ δὲ φάρη ξάνθαν κεφαλὰν σκιάζειν*
iii. loss of appetite (136; 274-275) *ἀβρωσίᾳ*
iv. pallor (174-175) *τί δεδήληται δέμας ἀλλόχροον βασιλείας*
v. distraction, restlessness (184-5; 203-204) *τὸ δ' ἀπὸν φίλτερον ἡγῇ*
vi. weakness of limbs (199) *λέλυμαι μελέων σύνδεσμα φίλων*
vii. oppressed by clothing (201) *βαρύ μοι κεφαλᾶς ἐπίκρανον ἔχειν*
viii. delirium, madness (214; 232) *μανίας ἔποχον ῥιπτουσα λόγον…παράφρων*
ix. shame (244) *αἰδούμεθα γὰρ τὰ λελεγμένα μοι*
x. tears (245) *κατ' ὄσσων δάκρυ μοι βαίνει*
xi. suicidal thought (248-249) *ἀλλὰ κρατεῖ μὴ γιγνώσκοντ' ἀπολέσθαι*
xii. insomnia (375) *ποτ' ἄλλως νυκτὸς ἐν μακρῷ χρόνῳ θνητῶν ἐφρόντισ'*
xiii. suicide (779) *κρεμαστοῖς ἐν βρόχοις ἠρτημένη*

This is not a case easily handled by the family physician; a referral is, as they say, indicated. The only symptom Phaedra shares with Sappho is her pallor. Otherwise, her sickness appears altogether new.

It is difficult to know exactly what is happening around Sappho, but the circumstances are very likely less grave. Her love for another woman was probably illicit, but this transgression would have paled in comparison with a queen's passion for her step-son. At any rate, Sappho expresses no regrets, whereas most of Phaedra's symptoms are mixed with the shame and self-reproach that eventually produce her suicide. Generic differences may have played a role here. Tragedy, on the one hand, would necessarily

have brought an illicit passion to (self-)destructive ends; witness Oedipus. Lyric poetry, on the other, would have avoided such ends; for even when it introduces pain, as in Sappho *fr. 31*, it is never worse than bitter-sweet. Careful to remember these different circumstances and genres, then, we may contrast Phaedra's new symptoms with the old and find in them a severity that exceeds the requirements of both her circumstances and her genre.

While we may easily imagine Sappho losing her appetite, growing weak in the limbs, weeping a little, or even becoming restless, it is only the most melancholic lover who would take to his bed, hide from view, rave, think of suicide, and then committ it. Such symptoms read less like poetry, even tragic poetry, than a typical case from Hippocrates' *Epidemics*, of which the first and the third were written about twenty years later.[12] In more than one of her symptoms, furthermore, Phaedra resembles the victims of the plague, which was still present in Athens in 428 when the *Hippolytus* was first produced. Most particularly, she feels oppressed by the very head-dress that she had used earlier to hide herself; now she longs to cast it off. According to Thucydides, a plague victim "could not bear to have on him clothing or linen even of the very lightest description."[13] Thucydides himself shows many important parallels with the Hippocratic writers.[14] Euripides here shows parallels with both. Even if her symptoms signify no single disorder, their severity and medical precedents turn Phaedra's love into lovesickness in a technical sense.

Theocritus takes this lovesickness one step further. Quoting Buchholz, Giuseppe Giangrande calls *Idyll 2* the *locus classicus* of "medizinische Genauigkeit".[15] This is false, as we'll see when we come to Apollonius, whose medical precision far excels that of the others. Despite taking second place, though, Theocritus does specify the symptoms

---

[12] Jouanna 1999, 388: "They are traditionally dated from about 410."
[13] 2.49.5. I owe this comparison to Kenneth Reckford.
[14] These parallels were the subject of my 2002 M.A. thesis, *The Body and The Body Politic: Disease in Hippocrates and Thucydides*. UNC, Chapel Hill.
[15] Giangrande 1990, 121.

of love with more medical precision than Euripides. Indeed, Giangrande argues that Simaetha suffers the symptoms of consumption, at least as it was diagnosed by the Hippocratics and Galen.[16] Before considering the argument for this precise diagnosis, we would do well to examine her whole case-history:

i. madness (82) *ἔμανην*
ii. *thumos* on fire (82) *μοι πυρὶ θυμὸς ἰάφθη*
iii. beauty fades (83) *τὸ δὲ κάλλος ἐτάκετο*
iv. distraction (83-84) *οὐκέτι πομπᾶς τήνας ἐφρασάμαν*
v. disorientation (84-85) *οὐδ' ὡς πάλιν οἴκαδ' ἀπῆνθον ἔγνων*
vi. fever (85) *τις καπυρὰ νόσος*
vii. bed-ridden (86) *κείμαν δ' ἐν κλιντῆρι δέκ' ἄματα καὶ δέκα νύκτας*
viii. pallor (88) *μευ χρὼς μὲν ὁμοῖος ἐγίνετο πολλάκι θάψῳ*
ix. hair loss (89) *ἔρρευν δ' ἐκ κεφαλᾶς πᾶσαι τρίχες*
x. emaciation (loss of appetite) (89-90) *αὐτα δὲ λοιπά ὀστί' ἔτ' ἧς καὶ δέρμα*
xi. obsessive thoughts (96) *πᾶσαν ἔχει με τάλαιναν ὁ Μύνδιος*
xii. cold as snow (106) *πᾶσα μὲν ἐψύχθην χιόνος πλέον*
xiii. sweat (106-107) *ἐκ δὲ μετώπω ἱδρώς μευ κοχύδεσκεν*
xiv. speechlessness (108) *οὐδέ τι φωνῆσαι δυνάμαν*
xv. (regression to infancy) (108-109) *οὐδ' ὅσσον ἐν ὕπνῳ κνυζεῦνται φωνεῦντα*
xvi. rigor of the body (110) *ἐπάγην δαγῦδι καλὸν χρόα πάντοθεν ἴσα*

Should an initial diagnosis be required from us, we could say that Simaetha suffers from a combination of the maladies suffered by Sappho and Phaedra. The only symptom experienced by all three is pallor. But along with Sappho alone Simaetha experiences an internal fire, sweat, and speechlessness. With Phaedra, alternatively, she takes to her bed, sharing madness, distraction, and emaciation. According to this diagnosis, then, we can imagine Theocritus – the learned Hellenistic poet, acutely aware of his predecessors – crafting a hybrid lovesickness with which to afflict his character, a lovesickness that incorporates the symptoms of the tradition.

The flaw in this fancy, like the flaw in its diagnosis, is that Simaetha also exhibits some unprecedented symptoms: her beauty fades, she is disoriented and feverish, she loses her hair, has obsessive thoughts, turns cold as snow, and tenses up. Whether or not

[16] Giangrande 1991, 84 n.33.

she additionally regresses to infancy depends on the extent of correspondence in her own metaphor for her speechlessness, a metaphor in which she compares herself to a whimpering baby. At any rate, there is as much novelty as precedent in her symptoms. It is more advisable, therefore, to imagine Theocritus borrowing evenly from both Archaic and Classical love poetry, but then supplementing Simaetha's love with these new symptoms.

Giangrande traces some of them forward into Roman love elegy, especially Ovid.[17] More relevant to our purposes, he traces some back to Galen and Hippocrates, showing how Theocritus "sfoggia le proprie conoscenze nel campo della medicina."[18] For instance, according to Giangrande, three of Simaetha's symptoms are those of consumption, or *φθίσις:* fever, hair-loss, and emaciation. Beginning with the most unusual, a Hippocratic does report that consumptives lose their hair. As Giangrande notices, *Aphorisms* 12 says as much: *ὁκόσοισι φθισιῶσιν αἱ τρίχες ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς ῥέουσιν.*[19] He does not notice, however, that hair-loss is equally a symptom of other conditions. For instance, varicose veins, *κιρσοί*, cause patients to lose their hair.[20] These patients also sweat, a symptom which Simaetha shares with Sappho.

By itself, therefore, hair-loss does not signal consumption. In order to bolster his diagnosis, Giangrande refers to a passage of Galen, from his commentaries on the *Aphorisms*:[21]

> *Ἣν ἰδίως ὀνομάζουσιν οἱ Ἕλληνες καὶ μάλιστ᾽ αὐτῶν οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι φθόην, ταύτην νῦν ὁ Ἱπποκράτης ὠνόμασε φθίσιν, ἐπὶ πνεύμονος ἑλκώσεσιν ἀνιάτοις, γιγνομένης ἅπαντος τοῦ σώματος ἰσχνότητος μετὰ πυρετοῦ λεπτοῦ. τὸ δὲ ῥύσις ἤτοι κατὰ τῆς τῶν τριχῶν ἐκπτώσεως ἢ κατὰ τῆς ὑγρᾶς διαχωρήσεως εἴρηκεν, ἀμφότερα γὰρ εἴωθε γίνεσθαι, ἐσχάτως ἐχόντων τῶν φθινότων, τὸ μὲν ἐπὶ ξηρότητι, τὸ δ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἀρρωστίᾳ δυνάμεως.*

---

[17] Giangrande 1991, 83-84; 1990, 121-123.
[18] Giangrande 1991, 84 n.33.
[19] Littré 1836 IV, 536.
[20] Littré 1836 V, 78: *μάδησις τριχῶν*
[21] Kühn 1829, XVIII 1, 116.

Giangrande hopes to demonstrate the medical savvy of Theocritus by adducing this passage of Galen, who wrote four-hundred years later. In order to escape the charge of anachronism, therefore, he *highlights* the reference to Hippocrates. To be precise, Galen mentions only the name that Hippocrates gave to the illness, *φθίσις*, not his diagnostic criteria – although the work from which it is drawn is a commentary on Hippocrates, and the inference is warranted. In any case, the passage does mention the three symptoms Giangrande emphasizes from Simaetha's case-report: fever, emaciation, and hair-loss. What it does not mention, though, are all her other symptoms. Her loss of beauty, for instance, mirrors a symptom in the Hippocratic corpus – *προσώπου διαφθορή* – that is not ascribed to consumption.[22] Neither does Giangrande notice that Simaetha does not suffer many of the other symptoms that Hippocrates himself attributes to consumption.

In sixth case of *Epidemics III*, for example, Hippocrates introduces the daughter of Euryanax, a *παρθένος* no less. At the end of the report we read that she has *τι καὶ συγγενικὸν φθινῶδες*. She becomes feverish (*πῦρ ἔλαβεν*), and also loses her appetite. Indeed, as her case progresses, just like Simaetha she experiences sweating, distraction of mind, and rigor of the body. But the apparence of similarity remains only if we ignore the symptoms that quickly develop: thin, scanty, and discolored urine; a sore on the buttocks that later suppurates; irritating stools; and eventually death. We are a long way, in short, from the charming romance of *Idyll 2*.

Nevertheless, Giangrande writes that "la consunzione per amore era un *topos* letterario."[23] While this was true of the nineteenth-century,[24] especially in its Italian operas, the observation is genuinely anachronistic when applied to Theocritus and Hellenistic poetry.[25] And it may have been this very operatic prejudice that misled

[22] Littré 1836 V, 628.
[23] Giangrande 1991, 84 n. 33.
[24] See Sontag 2001
[25] In order to defend it, Giangrande refers us to I. Rumpel, *Lex. Theocr.*, Leipzig 1879, s.v. *τάκω* 2. The entry there provides *macresco, absumor, pereo* as translations, and adds "animi affectibus, maxime amore," along with several Theocritean passages. These instances of emaciation may be caused by love, but there is

Giangrande into privileging a diagnosis of consumption for Simaetha. After all, as we have seen, she suffers from only a few of its symptoms, exhibiting also those of other conditions.

Fortunately, there is no reason to expect that she suffers from a single malady. Giangrande's principal error, therefore, was to quarry a precise diagnosis from this confused case-report. True enough, Theocritus seems to be acquainted with something like the Hippocratean symptomatology, but he is not presenting, as Giangrande would have it, a consistent illness. Instead, he appears to be supplementing the symptoms of Sappho and Phaedra with an assortment of new symptoms, chosen not for their medical verisimilitude but instead for their role in an idyll. Hair-loss, for instance, is very likely chosen less for its consumptive associations than for its symbol as a loss of beauty.[26] In *Idyll 2* it symbolizes Simaetha's loss of innocence and therefore youthful bloom; her seduction has aged her, not made her consumptive. In this way, Theocritus has given his character a complex and symbolic, if not wholly accurate, affliction.

Apollonius takes this approach to medicine and love as far as poetry will allow. As Graham Zanker has written, "Apollonius' interest in the psychology of love is not paralleled."[27] He self-consciously made love the centre-piece of his epic, and his extraordinary attention to Medea's affliction makes most sense against the background of this purpose. Moreover, its significance becomes even clearer against the additional background of the afflictions we have so far surveyed. As with Sappho, Phaedra, and Simaetha, then, we begin our diagnosis of Medea with a detailed list of her symptoms, some of which occur multiple times:

---

no further connection with consumption, as Giangrande implies. Loss of appetite is more likely the cause the cause.

[26] Brown 1984, 38: "Loss of hair is an extreme form of the loss of ἄνθος." Again, 38 n.10: "Hair was emblematic of a woman's beauty."

[27] Zanker 1979, 69 n.48.

i. speechlessness (of *thumos*) (284) *τὴν δ' ἀμφασίη λάβε θυμόν*
ii. flame under the *kardia* (286-7) *βέλος δ' ἐνεδαίετο κούρῃ νέρθεν ὑπὸ κραδίῃ*
iii. pounding *phrenes* (289, 755-60) *οἱ ἄηντο στηθέων ἐκ πυκιναὶ καμάτῳ φρένες*
iv. memory departs (289-290) *οὐδέ τιν' ἄλλην μνῆστιν ἔχεν*
v. *thumos* melts (290, 1009, 1019-1020, 1131) *γλυκερῇ δὲ κατείβετο θυμὸν ἀνίῃ*
vi. coiling about the *kardia*, of flame (296-297) *τοῖος ὑπὸ κραδίῃ εἰλυμένος αἴθετο*
vii. pale cheeks (297-298) *ἁπαλὰς δὲ μετετρωπᾶτο παρειὰς ἐς χλόον*
viii. alternately blushing (298) *ἄλλοτ' ἔρευθος*
ix. distraction (298) *ἀκηδείῃσι νόοιο*
x. *kêr* smoulders with pain (446) *κῆρ ἄχεϊ σμύχουσα*
xi. *nous* flies (447) *νόος δὲ οἱ ἠΰτ' ὄνειρος ἑρπύζων πεπότητο*
xii. obsessive visions (453) *προπρὸ δ' ἄρ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἔτι οἱ ἰνδάλλετο πάντα*
xiii. his voice rings in her ears (457-8) *ἐν οὔασι δ' αἰὲν ὀρωρει αὐδή*
xiv. anxiety of the *noûs* (471) *ἐόλητο νόον μελεδήμασι κούρη*
xv. fear dream (618, 633) *ὀλοοὶ ἐρέθεσκον ὄνειροι*
xvi. trembling *phrenes* (638) *φρένες ἠερέθονται*
xvii. writhing in pain (655) *λέκτροισιν πρηνὴς ἐνικάππεσεν εἱλιχθεῖσα*
xviii. leaping *thumos* (724) *τῇ δ' ἔντοσθεν ἀνέπτατο χάρματι θυμός*
xix. mist in the eyes (725-726; 962-963) *κὰδ δέ μιν ἀχλὺς εἷλεν ἰαινομένεν*
xx. hot blush (725, 963) *φοινίχθη δ' ἄμυδις καλὸν χρόα*
xxi. insomnia (751) *οὐ Μήδειαν ἐπὶ γλυκερὸς λάβεν ὕπνος*
xxii. obsessive thoughts (752) *πολλὰ γὰρ Αἰσονίδαο πόθῳ μελεδήματ' ἔγειρεν*
xxiii. weeping (761, 804-805, 1064-1065) *δάκρυ δ' ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἐλέῳ ῥέεν*
xxiv. pain smouldering through her flesh (762-765) *τεῖρ' ὀδύνη σμύχουσα διὰ χροός*
    a. around the thin nerves (762-763) *ἀμφί τ' ἀραιὰς ἶνας*
    b. in the base of the skull (762-763) *κεφαλῆς ὑπὸ νείατον ἰνίον*
xxv. shame (797) *τί δ' οὐκ ἐμὸν ἔσσεται αἶσχος;*
xxvi. suicidal thought (866-7) *ἵετο…φάρμακα λέξασθαι θυμοφθόρα, τόφρα πάσαιτο*
xxvii. *kardia* falls (962) *ἐκ δ' ἄρα οἱ κραδίη στηθέων πέσεν*
xxviii. weakness (964-965) *γούνατα δ' οὔτ' ὀπίσω οὔτε προπάροιθεν ἀεῖραι ἔσθενεν*
xxix. desire to surrender her *psuchê* (1015-1016) *ἀρύσασα ψυχὴν*
xxx. pangs in *kardia* (1103) *τῆς δ'ἀλεγεινόταται κραδίην ἐρέθεσκον ἀνῖαι*
xxxi. *psuchê* flies (1151) *ψυχὴ γὰρ νεφέεσσι μεταχρονίη πεπότητο*
xxxii. automatic movement (1152) *αὐτομάτοις δὲ πόδεσσι θοῆς ἐπεβήσατ' ἀπήνης*
xxxiii. racing thoughts (1157) *ἡ δὲ παλιντροπίῃσιν ἀμήχανος*
xxxiv. oblivious (1157) *οὔτε τι μύθων ἔκλυεν*
xxxv. reticent (1158) *οὔτ' αὐδῆσαι ἀνειρομένη λελίητο*
xxxvi. glassy eyes (1161) *ὑγρὰ δ' ἐνὶ βλεφάροις ἔχεν ὄμματα*

We have already noticed the comprehensive list of loci – both mental, physical, and often both – where Medea feels her love. Now that we have surveyed Apollonius' rivals, this list should appear even more extraordinary: not only for its extent, but also for

the ways in which it incorporates the others.'[28] The only symptom shared by all the lovers is pallor. With Sappho alone, Medea suffers ringing in her ears, although instead of a general malfunction, it is Jason's voice that rings here. Medea also experiences the infusion of fire into her body. But whereas the fine fire stole beneath Sappho's flesh, Medea's moves under her *κραδίη*, later coiling around it. In one passage, her *φρένες* pound in her chest; in another they tremble. Both recall Sappho's fluttering heart. In still another passage, it is her *θυμός* instead that gets excited. If Apollonius has Sappho in mind, then, we can imagine him adopting her symptoms, but making them more specific and elaborate. This is a pattern we find at work in his adaptation of Euripides as well.

With Phaedra alone, Medea experiences distraction, insomnia, weeping, shame, suicidal thoughts, weakness, and reticence. Most of these symptoms are attributable to the similarity of their situations. Like Phaedra, after all, Medea endures an illicit love – not for her step-son, but for the man her father, the king, perceives as his challenger. Indeed, the dream she experiences before capitulating to her passion for Jason (3.616-632) anticipates that her surrender will entail betrayal of both father and mother. If Apollonius has Phaedra in mind, then, we can imagine him adopting these very symptoms. But as with his adaptation of Sappho, the imitation does not come without variation. In her particular dilemma, Medea writhes on her bed in pain, suffers anxiety in her *νόος*, and, as we have seen, feels pain in the nerves and base of her skull. Once again, the symptoms have been either elaborated, exaggerated, or precisely located.

This is least noticeable in Apollonius' correspondence with his older contemporary, Theocritus. Along with Simaetha alone, Medea experiences obsessive visions and thoughts; but there is no appreciable difference between the two authors on

---

[28] Zanker 1979, 59 n.21, observes only a few of these symptoms, adding at the end of his own list that "there is far more detail of this kind in this passage than in the Nausicaa episode in Od. 6, which seems to be Apollonius' model." Nausicaa, however, experiences no specific symptoms of love. While the appearance of Jason on the shores of Colchis bears some resemblance to *Odyssey 6*, the correspondence of Medea's love with the exempla of love we have canvassed should persuade us to seek Apollonius' model not so much in Homer, *pace* Zanker, as in later authors – at least when it comes to his love-story.

this point. However, along with both Simaetha and Sappho, Medea experiences speechlessness. Not content with a vague symptom like this, Apollonius characteristically locates Medea's precisely, in her *θυμός*.

Beyond these parallels, and the others already mentioned, Medea exhibits many new symptoms. Indeed, adding all the various symptoms of the three other lovers together does not even total the thirty-six she suffers. The difference, and then some, is made up by her wholly new afflictions: amnesia, a frequently melting *θυμός,* hot blushing, a *νόος* that feels anxious and later flies*,* a fear dream,[29] eyes that keep misting over, a desire to surrender her *ψυχή*, automated movement, racing thoughts, glassy eyes, and last, but hardly least, the oddest of innovations, those symptoms with which we began: the *ἀραιὰς ἶνας* and *νεíατον ἰνíον.* The other symptoms can be understood as incorporations, adaptations, variations, exaggerations, elaborations, or localizations of the precedents. But how can these fine nerves and this occiput be explained?

In his thorough investigation of Greek philosophy's discovery of the nerves,[30] Friedrich Solmsen tendered a very persuasive explanation. After centuries of debate between philosophers over the locus of the 'command center' (*τὸ ἡγεμονικόν*) of the body – with Plato leading those who believed it to be in the heart, and Aristotle the leader of those favoring the brain – Herophilus of Alexandria (330-260) performed definitive dissections that proved it to be in the brain.[31] He also exposed the system of fine nerves that led directly to its base. Solmsen identifies the precise terminus of these nerves as the 'fourth ventricle,' or 'cavity' of the cerebellum. In truth, it is not of the cerebellum, which has no ventricles, but instead of the brain-stem. Nowadays we know this part as the *medulla oblongata*; Herophilus appropriately called it the *κάλαμος, and* distinguished it,

[29] Zanker 1979, 60 n.23a, finds in this symptom the influence of the late fourth-century Hippocratic treatise *On Dreams*.
[30] Solmsen 1961, especially 195-197.
[31] Solmsen 1961, 194 n.45, says of the date of these dissections: "All that we can honestly say about the time of Herophilus' discoveries is that they fall within the former half of the third century." In other words, just before Apollonius wrote the *Argonautica*.

as we do, from both the cerebellum (*παρενκέφαλις*) and the cerebrum (*ἐνκέφαλις*).[32] Here, he argued, was the seat of sensation: in the occiput.[33]

Apollonius seems to have incorporated this anatomical discovery into his epic, imagining naturally enough that it would be in the seat of sensation where a lover would most feel her love pangs. In this way, he updates his epic model in a typically Hellenistic fashion: he not only makes love its center-piece, he even recounts this love in the language of the latest science. While some commentators have bristled at the anatomical terms,[34] Solmsen and Zanker see instead an artful play between *ἶνας* and *ἰνίον*, as if Apollonius were making an alliterative, etymological argument for the legitimacy of Herophilus' discoveries. Despite their aesthetic disgagreements, however, commentators agree that Apollonius is here playing the *poeta docta*, especially learned in medicine, a role Zanker exposes him playing elsewhere.[35]

The cultural reality behind the allusion to Herophilus seems to be forever lost. But on this insoluble problem Solmsen rightly reminds us of the mutual influence of medicine and love that we discussed earlier, in connection with 'chlorosis.' "One may suspect that once the discoveries had become known," he writes, "not a few people persuaded themselves that they 'felt' the pain where the new theories – rightly or wrongly understood – taught that it was reported."[36] It may be that Apollonius was describing no poet's fancy, but rather the Alexandrian equivalent of hysteria. In this spirit, if we return to the wandering womb of the Hippocratic *ΠΕΡΙ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΙΩΝ*, and add an insight of Ann Ellis Hanson, we can develop another, complementary explanation of Medea's peculiar symptom.

---

[32] Staden 1989, 155-161.
[33] Solmsen 1961, 192.
[34] Solmsen 1961, 197 n.64, mentions Mooney 1912 in this connection, who objected to the "physical particularity" of the passage.
[35] Zanker 1987, 113, 124-125. Other examples he adduces are Heracles' physical symptoms when Hylas is lost (1.1253-1260), and Mopsus' death by snakebite (4.1502-2536).
[36] Solmsen 1961, 196.

The Hippocratics likened the womb to an upside down jug, an anlogy from which we still derive our anatomical terms for its regions: *σταθμός* or *πυθμήν* became *fundus*; *στόμα, os*; *αὐχήν, cervix.* In sum, the top of the womb was its 'bottom,' the bottom its 'mouth,' and its passage from the one to the other its 'neck.'[37] These quotidian terms encouraged otherwise incomprehensible parallels between a woman's 'upper neck' and her 'lower neck.' For example, the wandering womb described in the Hippocratic treatise *Nature of Woman* receives an aroma therapy in which a womb that has wandered too high in the thorax is enticed back down to its proper place by application of sweet-smelling things to the mouth of the 'lower-neck,' while foul-smelling things are applied to the patient's nostrils, at the tip of her 'upper-neck.' When a womb has wandered too far down, by contrast, the order of smells is reversed – as was, it was assumed, the movement of the womb.[38]

Similarly, Hippocratic physicians tested a woman's fertility by making sure that her womb was open, ascertaining this through a simple test: garlic was inserted into her 'lower neck'; a day later, her breath was supposed to smell of it, since breath emerges from the 'upper neck.'[39] Thus, the two necks were thought to be connected through hidden, internal passage-ways. The openness of these passage-ways, and of the womb's lower neck in particular, was of crucial importance, especially to *παρθένοι*. For when the cervix remained closed, especially at menarche, the surplus of menstrual blood that would build up – or so it was assumed – backed up into the heart, which was the seat of sensation according to the Hippocratics. The result? *ὁκόταν οὖν ταῦτα πληρωθέωσιν, ἐμωρώθη ἡ καρδίη· εἶτα ἐκ τῆς μωρώσιος νάρκη· εἶτ' ἐκ τῆς νάρκης παράνοια ἔλαθεν.*[40] By logical steps, then, a closed womb threatened *paranoia*. The symptoms catalogued in this passage from *ΠΕΡΙ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΙΩΝ* resemble some of those we have seen in Simaetha

[37] Hanson 1990, 317
[38] Littré 1853, VII 314. Cited in Longrigg 1998, 196.
[39] Littré 1853, III 214, VIII 416. Cited in Longrigg 1998, 197.
[40] Littré 1853, VIII 466. Cited in Longrigg 1998, 24.

and Medea: shivering, fever, and night-terrors. To these are eventually added murderous inclinations, from which Medea will notoriously suffer.

By Apollonius' time, this nosology had been discredited by the same Herophilus, some of whose other dissections revealed the network of viscera that held the womb firmly in place.[41] Popular nosology is nevertheless stubborn, as beliefs about the common-cold in our own day demonstrate. It is at least possible, then, that something like this disease of virgins, as popularly imagined, is in the background of Medea's affliction. These peculiar pains in her neck, her 'upper neck' to be precise, may be associated with other pains in her 'lower neck'. Medea may be suffering these displaced pains as a conversion-disorder, not unlike the hysterics of the nineteenth-century. These other pains – shared with all virgins, according to the Hippocratics, and perhaps more so with those in love – augur some of the very symptoms she suffers now and will suffer soon enough.

This is not to diagnose Medea straightforwardly with the disease of virgins, the way Giangrande diagnosed Simaetha with consumption. Neither does it rule out Solmsen's more direct observations about Herophilus. After all, Apollonius may very well be demonstrating his medical erudition both ways, fashioning a symptom that is at once *au courant* and antiquated, recondite and popular. Like most psychosomatic symptoms, and like most poetic metaphors, Medea's peculiar pain in the neck may be over-determined, signifying many things at once. Isn't this what we have seen Apollonius doing with Medea's symptoms of love all along: adopting the signs of his tradition, and adapting them to his new idiom, that of his own Hellenistic epic? As I hope to have shown, there is as much reason to see him manipulating his medical traditions as adapting the traditions of Greek poetry.

---

[41] Longrigg 1998, 197, which cites: Galen, *On the dissection of the uterus* 5 (II.895-6K = *CMG V 2.1, pp.42-4 Nickel* = *Herophilus* Fr. 114 von Staden).

Bibliography

Bollas, C. 2000. *Hysteria*. New York.

Bremmer, J. 1983. *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*. Princeton.

Brown, C. 1984. “Ruined by Lust: Anacreon, Fr. 44 Gentili (432 *PMG*).” *CQ* 34: 37-42.

Brown, P. G. McC. 1993. “Love and Marriage in Greek New Comedy.” *CQ* 43:189-205.

Ciavolella, M. 1976. *La ‘Malattia D’Amore’ dall’Antichità al Medioevo*. 15-49. Rome.

Claus, D. B. 1981. *Toward the Soul: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Ψυχή Before Plato.* New Haven, CN.

Ferrand, J. 1990 (1623). *A Treatise on Lovesickness*. Translation and Introduction by D. Beecher and M. Ciavolella. Syracuse.

Giangrande, G. 1990. “Symptoms of Love in Theocritus and Ovid.” *AMal* 13: 121-123.

_____. 1991. “*Topoi* Ellenistici Nell’*Ars Amatoria*,” in *Cultura, Poesia, Ideologia Nell’Opera di Ovidio*, edd. Gallo, I. And Nicastri, L. 61-98. Naples.

Hanson, A. E. 1990. “The Medical Writers’ Woman.” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. D.M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler, and F.I. Zeitlin, 309-338. Princeton.

Jouanna, J. 1999 (1992). *Hippocrates*. Tr. by M.B. DeBevoise. Baltimore.

King, H. 1998. *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Greece*. 188-204. NY.

Kühn, C. G. 1829. *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia*. Paris.

Littré, E. 1853. *Oeuvres Complètes d’Hippocrate*. Paris.

Longrigg, J. 1998. *Greek Medicine: From the Heroic to the Hellenistic Age*. Trowbridge, England.

Martin, E. 1987. The Woman in the Body : A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction. Boston.

Natzel, S. A. *Κλέα γυναικῶν: Frauen in den ‘Argonautika’ des Apollonios Rhodios*. 41-84. Trier.

Race, W. H. 1983. “‘That Man’ in Sappho fr. 31 L-P,” *CA* 2:92-101

Rumpel, I. 1961 (1879). *Lexicon Theocriteum*. Darmstadt.

Snell, Bruno. 1953. *The Discovery of the Mind*. Tr. by T. G. Rosenmeyer. Cambridge, MA.

Solmsen, F. 1961. “Greek Philosophy and the Discovery of the Nerves.” *MH* 18: 150-197.

Sontag, S. 2001. Illness as Metaphor. New York.

Standen, H. von. 1989. *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria*. Cambridge.

Veith, I. 1965. *Hysteria: The History of a Disease*. Chicago.

Wack, M. F. 1990. *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries*. Philadelphia.

Zanker, G. 1979. “The Love Theme in Apollonius Rhodius’ Argonautica.” *WS* 13: 52-75.

_____. 1987. *Realism in Alexandrian Poetry*. 113-131. Wolfeboro, NH.

Zeitlin, F. I. 2002. “Reflections on Erotic Desire in Archaic and Classical Greece,” in *Constructions of the Classical Body*, ed. Porter, J. I., 50-76. Ann Arbor, MI.