

Facing Sickness: Medical Topics in Greco-Roman Literature

In December 2013, a two year old boy died in a small village in Guinea in western Africa. He is believed to have been the first case in what now is the world's largest outbreak of the Ebola virus in recorded history (Baize, 2014). In August 2014 the World Health Organization termed it a public health emergency of international concern. Daily articles appear on the spread of the disease through the region and the attempts by researchers to create an effective treatment (Anon., 2014: "Ebola Crisis", "Clashes"). Physical contagions are not the only diseases that our society wrestles with, we often condemn what we perceive as a vice with the language of sickness: the American Psychological association only declassified homosexuality as a disease thirty one years ago and politicians around the world even now often invoke the imagery of disease to condemn it (Naqvi, 2011).

The Greeks and Romans lived in a society where there were no vaccines, no antibacterial medications, no anesthesia. Every day they grappled with disease and the chaos and grief it can cause within a society. As our panelists will show, the way in which the Greeks and Romans dealt with medical trauma in their literature can at times be remarkably similar to our own.

Panelist #1 offers the reader new insight into the meaning of two fragments of Archilochus, arguing that if we view his writings in the context of humoral theory, a medical theory which was likely to be known by both the poet and his audience, we can reach a new and deeper understanding of the texts. Panelist #2 will continue the discussion of medical imagery, particularly the imagery of disease, by comparing the roles that diseases and demons play in Vergil's *Aeneid*. Panelist #3 will further the discussion of disease in Roman poetry by arguing through the language of the poem that homosexuality in Juvenal's second satire is described as symptomatic of the disease that is Domitian. Panelist #4 will conclude the panel with a new

treatment of Socrates' *Philoctetes*, arguing that Sophocles' focus on isolation instead of disease makes this play ideal for use as a therapeutic tool for patients who have suffered the isolating effects of contagious diseases.

Although all of our panelists discuss different authors in different periods, each shows the influence of sickness on and the importance of discussing it by the Greeks and Romans. Given the rising panic among the world's population concerning not only real diseases but metaphoric diseases as well, the time is ripe to call on the ancients to help us with our own understanding of how to grapple with sickness.

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