

## BOOK REVIEW

*Experiencing Pain in Imperial Greek Culture*. By DANIEL KING. Oxford, UK: Oxford Classical Monographs: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xi +291. Hardback \$85.00. ISBN 9780198810513.

Does the body have a history such that it experiences pain and consequent suffering differently in different epochs? Does pain constitute a neurological constant, subject to accurate measurement? Are neurologists' debates fruitful, or is pain an intractably subjective phenomenon? King treats an important subject at one intersection of the senses and self-presentation. This monograph, modified from King's dissertation, exhibits a high degree of abstraction about an elementary hominid experience. King begins with cameos from Lessing and Winckelmann's sentimental responses both to Sophokles' lost play *Laokoon* and the silent frozen howler of Hellenistic marble. The Trojan priest, the dust-cover's image, provides the icon of agony. King, however, proceeds to interrogate literature while side-stepping visual art. E.g., the thirty-four page bibliography ignores Nigel Spivey's ambitious and expansive *Enduring Creation. Art, Pain, and Fortitude* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2001), in which he argues that Laokoon got no sympathy from ancient Greeks, since he had earned his punishment. While Spivey explores through the ages Aristotle's worthy question, how does terrible pain like Philoktetes' offer pleasure to viewers and hearers, King casts a wide generic net, although he focuses exclusively on the *literary* responses of imperial Greeks. He examines medical, philosophical, novelistic (Akhilleus Tatios, but slighting Heliodoros), ekphrastic and rhetorical categories, as well as others, in order to offer a nuanced dissection of cultures of pain (3), which he says is "a remarkably understudied area" (37). Recovery from bodily damage through medical intervention was, of course, less common in 118 CE than 2018 (*abebaios hē althexis* writes Aretaios).

The book has three main sections: the imperial Greek medical diagnosis and therapeutic treatment of patients in pain (*ponos, algos, odunē*); the representation of pain in sufferers' texts; and the representation of others' traumas and pain,

among them Philostratos' allegedly "prurient" gaze in *ekphrasis*, emotional conflict in Akhilleus Tatios and trauma in two of Plutarch's *Moralia*.

Aretaios of Kappadokia (Chapter 2) is not on many Classicists' bookshelves, but neither is much of Galen (Chapter 3), of greater fame (and surviving bulk). Medical texts provide rich sources of pain discourse (33) and the construction of medical authority. Certainly, inscriptions, charms and votive offerings offer alternative or complementary responses—think of Ailios Aristeides' apparent hypochondria and his efforts to relieve discomfort (Chapter 7). Doctors listen to patients describing their pain and employ pain descriptions in diagnosis and treatment—a bedside rapport (or lack of it) that medical anthropologists now identify as a "social process" (41). Aretaios wrote that patients, too, must be steadfast and heroic during their treatment and its unpredictable outcome. Both patient and doctor (as well as other onlookers) suffer when dealing with incurable conditions like tetanus. King's approach and style are rather dry, perhaps befitting clinical texts flourishing nosological catalogues.

"Sore feet and tragedy in Plutarch and Lucian" (Chapter 6) offers more enticement than instruction. Plutarch's *Impossibility of Living Pleasurably according to Epikouros* observes that life offers more pain than pleasure. Mythic Philoktetes and hypochondriac Aristeides provide examples, the former furnishing a heroic paradigm of "pain experience" (121). Lucian's *Podagra*, an operetta-ish tragic burlesque that I had successfully eluded, is his only surviving (if genuine) verse composition. The paratragedy (?) features a chorus of gout-afflicted "initiates" and an eponymous goddess "on stage." The symptoms are all there, as well as in Fronto and Marcus Aurelius' *corpora*. Gout teaches us to groan (*polystenaktos*) and shout, a low rhetorical bar.

Ailios Aristeides, alias "the vainglorious and self-obsessed hypochondriac," was a victim, not a therapist. His heroic and chronic suffering, recorded in the *Hieroi Logoi* or *Holy Narratives*, present him as a detached but anatomically informed observer of his never identified maladies. As his autobiographical case-studies constitute thank-offerings to Asklepios comparable to the clay models of eyes, hands, etc. at Pergamon (his "hang out"), god is his doctor. The mortal doctors were stymied and the patient's impatient screams trumped any feeble medical discourse (144, Chapter 7). King's "cagey" Ailios believes that the god's clear dreams did him more good than mortal diagnostics. The hopeless Ailios "undermines" his own accounts, however, by recognizing their "incredibility" (*apista*: 49.40K, cf. Philostr. *VAp.* 3.45). King does not supply adequate motive for this paradox of sinking one's own loquacious ship. Here, he might have noticed Heli-

odoros (*Aith.* 4.5-7; cf. 3.7) where the doctor Akesinos (pun) and cagey Kalasiris discover Charikleia's puzzling fatal sickness—love.

Philostratos' *Imagines* is obviously meta-. The painting *ekphraseis* "picture" love, birth, death, landscapes, etc. Urbane Greeks like to talk, Philostratos asserts, and describing images proves one's culture or *paideia*. As King admits, Philostratos rarely describes pain ("flag" is his word, 177), but he argues that one can easily imagine it as present when the Greek describes the deaths of Menoikeus, Antilokhos, and Pantheia (suicide), two handsome men and one lovely woman. So, he infers pain from the rhetor's verbal celebration of painterly skill. King discusses the rhetor's gaze more than pain and wounds (Chapter 10). The "prurience" bubbles up for the "erotic fetishizing gaze" at suicidal Pantheia's body. Philostratos writes that she, when drawing her dagger from her breast, is not altered in form and "indeed she does not seem to feel pain," but... a serene pleasure. Well, then, where is pain? The traumatized, pierced person offers the safe viewer/reader a distanced enjoyment. Actually, ancient artists, observing aesthetic decorum in the graphic arts, usually shied away from delineating the ugly but inevitable physiognomic distortions enforced by pain. King supplements Philostratos interpreting the representation of Xenophon's fable: no one here endures the pain of lethal penetration, a neat trick.

Chapter 11, entitled "Viewing and Emotional Conflict in Akhilleus Tatios," disappoints students of the novel. Kleitophon, the klutzy narrator-lover (and often a spectator) presents a somewhat "flip," when not impercipient, tone. He cannot voice well the beautiful Leukippe's spectacular victimizations. Seeing trumps feeling. Kleitophon's lively description of the visceral torture suffered in the painted tableau of mythical Prometheus (3.8.1-7) is as impassioned as his vivid descriptions of his "intended" Leukippe's perceived disembowelment, stem to stern with leaping innards. Later he narrates whippings, bruises and scars, and near-rape (3.15, 5.17.6-7; cf. 5.19.2: his later, flushed recognition of her abuse). The "hero" briefly describes himself as upset—although he had not recognized the manacled, grimy and shaven-headed slave woman as his wife-to-be (8.19.2: inversion of Odyssean recognition?). Is Tatios mocking Kleitophon's emotional constipation or inviting us to smile at his immature comprehension? This chapter, too, presents less about pain than it does about describing it.

Plutarch returns in a chapter (Chapter 12) concerning his essay about "Flesh Eating." The trauma, humans' inhuman treatment of animals, emphasizes others' perception of pain, not the isolation that pain produces. Plutarch argues

that the sight of pain and torture should lead us to think about inflicting unnecessary pain merely for the consuming enjoyment of human stomachs (think of making liver *patés*). The evil pleasure desensitizes humans to the distressing processes of the torturing, maiming, dismembering and killing of animals. Animals vocalize, but, as Cato said, “the belly has no ears” (*Mor.* 996d). The inarticulate can still feel. Spectacles of violence allegedly “saturated the [imperial] cultural fabric” (223). Plutarch shocks us by detailing the unjust abuse of animals and bringing up the human flesh taboo, cannibalism.

King examines a wide swath of largely lesser known texts. One expects, however, a discussion of pain itself: physical, sexual, mental, emotional, metaphorical, etc. The book dissects Greek imperial discourses about pain, its vocabulary and rhetoric, but not the persons suffering pains in ancient texts and life. Indeed, the book discusses literary “gaze” registering others’ pain rather than “experiencing [one’s own] pain.” Results disappoint students of ancient emotions and sensations.

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