

Searching for the Cure to Lovesickness: The Interplay of Eros and Illness

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Eros and illness have a long and rich history together. From Western classical thought to postmodern global literature, sickness and eroticism have been paralleled, connected, and interrogated together. Lovesickness, a term which should by virtue of its existence alert us to this long tradition, is but one aspect of the interplay of the pair. Hereon in, I will use examples from throughout history to reveal the long tapestry of literature that collocates eros and illness.

The state of being ill precludes a certain level of intimacy that can easily become eroticised. The relationship between doctor and patient, between the sick person and their caregiver, is rife with erotic implication. There is something undeniably intimate about being cared for. In a clinical, hospital setting, medical doctors see sides of ourselves that often we do not allow others in our lives – even our most cherished loved ones – to come close to. There is an inherent vulnerability to being examined; to revealing weakness; to asking for help and receiving it. Moreover, the doctor/patient dichotomy is not the only aspect of illness that can be viewed through an erotic lens; at-home caregivers, visitors, even researchers with little to no patient contact all contribute to the erotic medical tradition, and have their lives touched by eros in turn.

David Morris's *Eros and Illness* is something of a foundational text on this subject and has proved invaluable to my research. Within, Morris calls attention to the longstanding connection between eros and illness, noting the 'unofficial connection' between eros and the legendary Asklepios, ancient Greek god of medicine.¹ Morris writes: 'the second-century Greek doctor Pausanias reports that the magnificent Asklepieion at Epidauros included in its rotunda a picture of Eros,' archaeologically linking the two. Furthermore, 'it is a physician, Eryximachus, who in Plato's *Symposium* proposes eros as the evening's sole topic.'²

Indeed, in the *Symposium* Eryximachus declares 'it's from medicine, my own area of expertise, that I've realised how great and wonderful a god Love [*Eros*] is, and how his

¹ David B. Morris, *Eros and Illness* (London: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 64.

² Morris, p. 64

power extends to all aspects of human and divine life.³ He claims that ‘medicine [...] is wholly governed by this god,’ not least because according to him, medicine ‘in essence, is knowledge of the forms of bodily love [*somatos erotikon*] as regards filling and emptying.’ (p. 22). Eryximachus tells us that it was Asklepios, ‘our ancestor’ who mastered these processes and ‘established the art of medicine’ through his expertise in handling the eros of the body. Not only does this provide important background to the long connection between eros and illness, but it also draws attention to something else very significant: ideas of imbalance. The ‘filling and emptying’ that Eryximachus references are medical processes integral to ancient Greek medical theory. As popularised by Hippocrates’ theory of the four humours, an essential task of medicine was keeping the body in balance. Eryximachus lists the ‘antagonistic elements’ that cause illness: ‘opposites such as cold and hot, bitter and sweet, dry and wet, and so on.’ It is the duty of the physician to impose ‘love and concord’ between these elements, as Asklepios is celebrated for doing in the same passage.

Already medical eros is becoming complicated. Sappho famously wrote that eros is *glaukupikron* – sweetbitter, to use Anne Carson’s translation.⁴ Perhaps a dual-sided, even binarized image of eros – good and bad, sweet and bitter, right and wrong – may form, but Eryximachus’ laudation of eros as mediator between oppositions challenges this, implying that eros may be more multitudinous than we might think.

When analysing ancient poetry, it becomes immediately apparent that we are faced with a ‘long tradition that describes love through a physiology of fever, chills, indigestion, apnea, sleep disorder, and obsession.’⁵ We will attempt to unravel this long tradition now, through this presents a difficult task due to the many-sided nature of eros and, as will become clear, the way that every individual’s personal, social, political, cultural and economic circumstances change the ways in which eros – to personify the concept – behaves. Nonetheless, Sappho is always a good place to start when thinking about love. We will analyse the Lesbian muse’s Fragment 48, then move on to Latin erotic elegy, aptly named and of course crucial to this subject. To begin, Anne Carson writes:

Eros comes out of nowhere [...] to invest the lover, to deprive his body of vital organs and material substance, to enfeeble his mind and distort its thinking, to replace normal conditions of health and sanity with disease and madness.⁶

³ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. by Christopher Gill and H. D. P Lee (Penguin Classics, 1999), p. 21.

⁴ Anne Carson, *Eros The Bittersweet*, 6th edn (Dalkey Archive Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁵ David B. Morris, ‘Un-forgetting Asclepius: an Erotics of Illness’, *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), p. 426.

⁶ Carson, *Eros*, p. 148.

If illness, as the Greeks thought, is caused by imbalance, then madness certainly fits right in. Sappho's fragment 48 provides an early insight into the realm of eros and madness. 'You came and I was crazy for you / and you cooled my mind that burned with longing'.⁷ This fragment differs from many other erotic poems in that the lover seems to manage some semblance of relief from the pain of eros. As eros 'burned' the speaker's mind, the object of erotic desire provided the cure, cooling it. Carson translates the fragment as 'I was crazy for you', deliberately choosing a lexicon of madness that echoes the fragment's temperamental hot/cold imagery. Certainly, poets often 'imagine desire to be a sensation of heat and an action of melting.'⁸ In the poetics of intense emotion, heat can signify desire, madness, frenzy, and anger. In terms of physiology, too, illness often comes with a fever which can have adverse effects on the sick person's mental state.

This is not a way of erotic thinking that is restricted to the Western canon. Helen Fisher quotes Ono No Komachi, a 9th century Japanese female poet:

I lie awake, hot
the growing fires of passion
bursting, blazing in my heart ⁹

This language of heat is quintessentially erotic as well as intensely physical and symptomatic. Illness and eros can mimic each other perfectly. Carson quotes Lysias in Plato's *Phaedrus*: 'For indeed lovers themselves admit that they are sick not sane, and know they are not in their right minds, but they are not able to control themselves.'¹⁰ It is undeniable that eros is equated with illness, and not just in vague terms. Eros has the potential of a very powerful illness, one that can rob the afflicted of all sense and control.

Latin erotic elegy is integral to the study of eros and illness. The three poets that I will briefly explore are Propertius, Tibullus and Sulpicia. Sextus Propertius, who has been called the greatest elegiac poet of ancient Rome, was born somewhere between 55 and 43 BCE.¹¹ He introduces eros as an illness in the very first poem of his *Monobiblos*, a book of elegies dedicated to his beloved, Cynthia:

⁷ Sappho, fr.48, in *If not, Winter* trans. Anne Carson (London: Virago, 2003) p.101.

⁸ Carson, *Eros*, p. 115.

⁹ Helen Fisher, "The Madness of the Gods", *Poetry Magazine*, (Poetry Foundation: 2011) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69631/the-madness-of-the-gods>> [Accessed 28 April 2021].

¹⁰ Carson, *Eros*, p. 149.

¹¹ Georg Hans Luck, "Sextus Propertius", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2019) <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sextus-Propertius>> [Accessed 24 April 2021].

And you, friends, who (too late) call back the fallen,
Seek remedies for a heart diseased.
Bravely will I suffer knife and cautery,
Given liberty to speak as anger bids.¹²

The medical lexicon is immediately present and irrefutable. On the third line here, Ruth Caston writes that '[t]o undergo knife and cautery is reminiscent of the philosophical language for removing a harmful passion. [...] from a philosopher's perspective, when the lover-poet says he will endure this "operation" so long as he can vent his anger, he is like an alcoholic asking for just one more drink before he enters the clinic.'¹³ Not only does this highlight the medical nature of Propertius' words, but the reference to 'anger' is also significant in its implication of extreme emotion, signifying imbalance. Propertius is desperate to find a cure for his lovesickness. Throughout the corpus of the text, he appeals variously to magic, to his friends, and to the idea of physical separation from Cynthia, but he is ultimately unsuccessful: eros prevails.

The second Roman poet I will highlight is Tibullus, another erotic elegist who was younger than Propertius but, like him, was writing in the last two-thirds of the first century BCE. The first book of his poems addresses Delia, the woman he is in love with, who is of higher social status than him. Poem two of book one begins, 'Fill up my glass again! The anodyne / For this poor lover's pain is sleep—and wine.'¹⁴ Eros is immediately introduced as an affliction requiring of an 'anodyne' or painkiller. The speaker tries to dull the pain of love by drowning his sorrows or else languishing in depression and attempting to sleep it away. These remedies are closer to emotional crutches than real curative substances, but his search for a cure does not end with them. Indeed, later in the poem the illness metaphor is intensified even further where Tibullus writes, 'This sorceress claimed that she could cure me too; / Her charms and herbs could set me free—of you.' (I.2.62-3). The reference to herbs situates us more firmly in the lexicon of illness, and we can see that, like Propertius, Tibullus also appealed to magic in his desperation. Figuratively speaking, Eros is the material that compromises the chains tethering Tibullus to Delia; he wants so desperately to be 'set free' but Eros does not break under charms or herbs.

¹² Sextus Propertius, *Propertius: The Poems*, ed. Guy Lee and R. O. A. M. Lyne (Oxford University Press, 2009), Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, 1 Jul. 2015. Web. 1 Jul. 2015.

¹³ Ruth Rothaus Caston, 'Love As Illness: Poets And Philosophers On Romantic Love', *The Classical Journal* 101 (2006), p. 288.

¹⁴ Tibullus, trans. by Rachel Hadas, ed. by Diane J. Rayor, *Latin Lyric and Elegiac Poetry* (Routledge, 2018), p. 41. I.2.1-2.

In the fifth poem of his first book, Tibullus begins by mourning the loss of his relationship with Delia, who has left him and is now occupied with another man. Tibullus asks, 'When you lay/Fever-racked, who else snatched you away/From death?' (I.5.9-11). Here, he references a time when he cared for Delia through an illness of hers, suggesting he even saved her life. This is a construction of erotic desire through the lens of the caregiver, as opposed to a construction that figures eros as a type of illness itself. Tibullus feels as though he deserves Delia's love, given how he tended to her in her fevered state. 'Everything I've done has been in vain,' he bemoans; 'Another tastes the fruits of all my pain.' (I.5.17-18). In this poem, eros and illness are connected, but not the same. In calling his tending to her a 'pain,' Tibullus reveals an aspect of eros that Propertius lightly touched on in his willingness to be "operated" upon if he can vent his anger afterwards, but this seems more personal. Tibullus feels cheated; even after he has nursed Delia through so much, she chose another man instead.

The final poet we will examine is Sulpicia, the only extant female Roman elegist, who we find in the third book of poems of Tibullus. Her work, in which she names herself, 'Sulpicia, daughter of Servius,'¹⁵ comprise poems 13-18 of Tibullus book three. Poem 17 is most relevant for our purposes:

Are you, Cerinthus, piously concerned for your girl
now that a fever torments my ailing body?

I wouldn't even want to overcome this awful illness
unless I thought you wanted that too.

What good would it do me to overcome an illness, if you
endure my suffering with absolute indifference?

(III. 18)

Here, eros is constructed through the lens of a woman angry that her beloved seems to be indifferent to her suffering. This depiction of eros and illness differs from previous as the illness that the speaker is suffering is not metaphorical. Well— not at first glance, anyway. There are certainly figurative implications here; the fever that 'torments [Sulpicia's] ailing body' is both physical and metaphorical; she is not only physically sick but also lovesick. She explicitly connects Cerinthus' desire with the remedy to her illness: it is as though she *could* recover herself, but eros prevents it. Cerinthus' attention is the catalyst that eros requires to

¹⁵ Sulpicia, trans. by Elizabeth Young, ed. by Diane J. Rayor, *Latin Lyric and Elegiac Poetry*, (Routledge, 2018), pp. 95-96. III.16.3-4.

allow Sulpicia to get better. It is as though we are seeing the other side of the coin depicted in Tibullus' description of nursing his lover; here we see things from the perspective of the sickbed, but, tragically, there is no relief for Sulpicia. Her love is unavailable; Cerinthus is preoccupied with another girlfriend.

Altogether then, Latin erotic elegy upholds and develops Sappho's images of erotic illness. All three Latin erotic elegists are, in their own ways, lovesick. Propertius' lovesickness is situated in metaphor, as he views himself as infected by erotic desire. Tibullus and Sulpicia, conversely, reference real illnesses that, respectively, the poet's beloved or the poet herself suffered. These references strengthen the association of eros with illness by showing the two operating in the same realm, perhaps feeding one another.

We move on now from Latin elegy into the realm of philosophy. Also written in the first century BCE, the *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) of Lucretius is a foundational text. He uses images of heat and pain that are by now very familiar to us.

For this same love it is the one sole thing
Of which, the more we have, the fiercer burns
The breast with fell desire.¹⁶

Desire 'burns', again, but more worrying is that the more the lovers gain, the more they are left wanting. As Anne Carson puts it, 'the Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' 'lack,' and 'desire for that which is missing.'¹⁷ Eros is fundamentally about lacking. Lucretius writes, 'The thirsty man in slumber seeks / To drink, and water is ne'er granted him.' This vivid image of thirst recalls the mythological Tantalus, doomed to stand in a pool of water under a fruit tree, never able to quench his thirst or sate his hunger. One wonders if perhaps relief will come at the moment of erotic climax; if desire will be sated? But no, instead '[t]here come a brief pause in the raging heat- / But then a madness just the same returns / And that old fury visits them again'. Eros cycles, devouring. Lucretius is infected along with our elegists.

An important aspect of eros that is implied by the pain of lacking is the melancholy that follows it. In terms of poetry, I can think of none other than Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* that most clearly propagate melancholia and eros. 'Melancholia', literally 'black bile', linguistically communicates classical ideas of and

¹⁶ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. by William Ellery, Leonard. E. P. Dutton (1916)
<<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0550.phi001.perseus-eng1:4.1073-4.1120>>.

¹⁷ Carson, *Eros*, p. 10.

approaches to sickness in terms of the Hippocratic tradition and the theory of the four humours. This is a theory grounded in concepts of balance and imbalance. Poetically, imbalances are not only indicative of the state of the self, physically and mentally, but can also be applied in a wider metaphorical sense to the state of the social and political context of the work. As Susan Sontag writes,

The classical formulations which analogize a political disorder to an illness [...] presuppose the classical medical (and political) idea of balance. Illness comes from imbalance. Treatment is aimed at restoring the right balance- in political terms, the right hierarchy.¹⁸

Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems* are rich in images of dying light, vast bodies of water, death, and decay, all of which conspire to communicate an abiding melancholia.¹⁹ In XVIII, images of the sea vividly illustrate the loss of love. 'Here is the port' situates the speaker in a place of eternal waiting that echoes the dull ache of longing for someone. 'Sometimes I get up early and my soul is wet.' As we have seen, in the erotic tradition, cold and wet oppose the bright heat of passionate desire. Eros' grasp is no less strong on Neruda's speaker than on, say, Lucretius, but it takes on a different, colder form, one which leaves the lover limp and alone. The lack– the reach for that which is missing– is huge. 'My life grows tired, hungry to no purpose. / I love what I do not have. You are so far.' Neruda's simple, bare poetry speaks to the yawning hunger of eros, made all the worse by the absence of the beloved; the imbalance, the missing half.²⁰ This state of eros is at extreme odds with the hot, feverish eros that we have encountered thus far. Neruda's melancholia speaks to an aspect of lovesickness that seems unbearably huge and sad, much like the sea over which the speaker gazes.

A brighter aspect of eros can be found within the works of self-described 'Black, Lesbian, Mother, Warrior, Poet' Audre Lorde.²¹ In 1980 she wrote about her own erotic experience with breast cancer, mastectomy surgery, and the beginning of recovery in *The Cancer Journals*. 'Support will always have a special and vividly erotic set of image/meanings for me now,' she says of the care she received and the women around her who supported her. 'Perhaps I can say this all more simply; I say the love of women healed

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), pp. 76-77.

¹⁹ Pablo Neruda, 'Twenty Love Poems and a Song Of Despair', trans. by W. S. Merwin, <<https://archive.org/details/TwentyLovePoemsAndASongOfDespair-PabloNeruda/>> [Accessed 3/12/2020].

²⁰ Neruda's Communist background certainly prompts questions of whether the imbalance and instability in *Twenty Love Poems* belies wider anxieties over political instabilities.

²¹ "Audre Lorde", Poetry Foundation <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>> [Accessed 3/12/2020].

me.²² Lorde evinces a tender, romantic interpretation of eros that, while certainly physical, reaches beyond the bodily and becomes something altogether more transcendent. However, in tandem with the wealth of love and warmth Lorde received from the women in her life, visiting and supporting her, her actual experience with hospitalisation is de-eroticised in the extreme. She describes the hospital space, an 'erotically blank environment within whose undifferentiated and undemanding and infantilizing walls I could continue to be emotionally vacant.'²³ Moments of sexual eroticism seem to be few and far between, and exceptions to the norm.

[O]ne day when I found I could finally masturbate again, [I made] love to myself for hours at a time. The flame was dim and flickering, but it was a welcome relief to the long coldness.²⁴

The lexicon of the heat of eros contrasts with the deep cold of the hospital, a cold associated with illness that situates the hospital environment at odds with the erotic 'flame'. Indeed, Lorde goes on to say that 'the very bland whiteness [of the hospital] which I railed against and hated so, was also a kind of protection, a welcome insulation within which I could continue to non-feel.' Given that eros is chiefly concerned with feeling, and feeling in the *extreme*, this clinical environment certainly seems to discourage eros from flourishing. Furthermore, Lorde's experience of eros came up in opposition against other, socially normative, constructions of eros that were simply incongruous with her life. She describes how nurses continually tried to force her to wear a prosthetic breast after her mastectomy, even becoming angry with her when she refused to do so, because she was allegedly 'bad for the morale of the office.'²⁵ Through it all, erotic desire is framed in heteronormative terms that simply do not apply to Lorde: on discussions she had with a woman from the organization Reach For Recovery, Lorde writes,

As a 44-year-old Black Lesbian Feminist, I knew there were very few role models around for me in this situation, but my primary concerns two days after mastectomy were hardly about what man I could capture in the future, whether or not my old boyfriend would still find me attractive enough [...]²⁶

Lorde's experience of eros demonstrates an important truth: that just as one's experience with being ill and all the trappings that come with it – seeking medical treatment, standards of care, obstacles to receiving care, etc – are inextricably tied to one's identity, so

²²Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Penguin Books, 2020), p.54.

²³ Lorde, p. 54

²⁴ Lorde, p. 32.

²⁵ Lorde, p. 61

²⁶ Lorde, p. 65.

too does one's experience of eros change. However, despite the opposition and struggles she faced, the final page of *The Cancer Journals* provides a powerful and hopeful resolution of eros. Lorde wrote,

Right after surgery I had a sense that I would never be able to bear missing that great well of sexual pleasure that I connected with my right breast. That sense has completely passed away, as I have come to realize that that well of feeling was within me. I alone own my feelings.²⁷

When Lorde was in turmoil over the trauma of being diagnosed and making the difficult decision to undergo surgery, then, after her surgery, the trauma of existing in an invariably hostile, cold, and lonely hospital environment, her experience of eros was also in turmoil. After coming to terms with her metamorphosis into a new self, Lorde reconciled her fears around her new erotic life. This culminates in her powerful declaration that 'I can never lose that feeling [of sexual pleasure] because I own it, because it comes out of myself. I can attach it anywhere I want to, because my feelings are a part of me, my sorrow and my joy.'²⁸ Thus, Lorde's autobiographical text presents an experience of eros as being closely connected to one's sense of self.

It is at this point that I would like to highlight more philosophical constructions of eros in illness. To do this, let us direct our attention to the *pharmakon*, that ancient Greek word that means both poison and cure. Largely a medical term, it is usually translated into English as 'drug'. We saw at the beginning of this essay that eros provided the cure to Sappho's woes, 'cool'ing her burning mind, like the medicine that the Latin elegists searched for hopelessly. Can eros cure its own illness?

To look deeper into eros as a *pharmakon*, let us cast our minds to what is probably the most famous symbol of erotic desire: the kiss. The kiss as an antidote, often a powerful enough antidote to counteract death itself, is a common theme in romance: we need only look to fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and the kiss which rouses the princess from her hundred-year slumber, or *Snow White*, where the eponymous protagonist, struck dead by a poisoned apple, is miraculously brought back by a kiss from her prince. Indeed, in *Eros and Illness*, Morris draws attention to the story of Cupid and Psyche, a common ending of which is that Psyche falls down dead, lovesick and heartbroken after breaking a promise not to look upon her husband Cupid's visage, only to be revived by Cupid with a kiss.²⁹ But the

²⁷ Lorde, p. 87.

²⁸ Lorde, p. 87.

²⁹ Morris, *Eros and Illness*, p. 36.

kiss, the active symbol of eros, is not always purely healing, and eros is not always the saviour figure or the *deus ex machina* that conquers tragedy.

Eros as poison can be communicated perhaps most appropriately by the Bard himself in Romeo's fateful last words: 'Thus, with a kiss, I die.'³⁰ As Tanya Pollard points out, *Romeo and Juliet* is rife with implications of *pharmakon*. At first, the object of the sleeping potion represents a symbol of hope that the two eponymous lovers will succeed in their plan and live happily ever after, but the 'play's resolution as tragedy' is finalised when the potion is replaced by poison.³¹ Furthermore, eros is equated with poison from the beginning of the play, where Benvolio attempts to counsel Romeo to give up on his unrequited love for Rosaline, referring to his desire as 'rank poison' (1.2.50). The physicalities of eros that we have already explored seem to support the concept of a poisonous or at least damaging facet to eros, given the fact that it seems to be depicted so often in symptomatic terms as we saw in the images of heat and fever, or even the weakening, all-consuming melancholia that took over Neruda's speaker. Erotic tradition is not always concerned with eros as a force for good; in fact, the overwhelming sentiment, over many hundreds of years of literature, seems to be of eros as a largely neutral force that, much like a disease itself, is only intent on infecting as many people as possible regardless of what they *do* with it.

Returning to more physiological terms, scholarship on the erotics of illness focuses heavily on three illnesses in particular: Tuberculosis, cancer, and AIDS. In terms of the eroticisation of the aesthetics of illness, none is more infamous than TB. Carolyn A. Day writes:

Between 1780 and 1850 there was a growing correspondence between tuberculosis and [the] concepts of beauty and fashion. The symptoms were not only compatible with popular ideals of beauty, but the dominant presentation of tuberculosis was that of a disease characterized by attractive aesthetics.³²

The flushed cheeks, pale skin and thinness categorised by 'consumption', became recognisable 'hallmarks of beauty' in this period characterised by rapid social change.³³ The romanticisation and sexualisation of the symptoms of an often-fatal disease demonstrate the

³⁰ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Stanley Wells and T. J. B. Spencer (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2015), V. 3. 120.

³¹ Tanya Pollard, "A Thing Like Death": Sleeping Potions and Poisons in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003), p. 96.

³² Carolyn A. Day, *Consumptive Chic: A History Of Beauty, Fashion, And Disease* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 2.

³³ Day, p. 3.

socially driven core of eros. Eros is not a force that functions outside of the societies and cultures that it affects. Indeed, it is the participants of these societies which create eros and its myths, and thus eros is defined and manipulated by the governing social order, as well as on a private, personal basis. As it was, patients of tuberculosis were highly eroticised for their illness. It is reminiscent of Lucretius' lines, 'In such uncertain state they waste away / With unseen wound'.³⁴ In these richly connotative words, 'waste away' almost seems to anticipate the arrival of consumption, and in 'unseen wound', the erotics of it.

Similarly to many STDs, HIV/AIDS is subject to sexualisation and eroticisation, often simply just by virtue of it being able to be transmitted through sexual contact, though that is of course not the only method of transmission. Moreover, AIDS itself has been tied inescapably to illness through its categorisation as a "gay disease", a stigma which further builds from the early classification of homosexuality as variably a "disease" and "mental illness" itself. Rampant homophobia has a history of hypersexualising gay men in order to dehumanise them or otherwise imply that they are sexual predators; we need only remember the censorship of the 1934 Hays Code which prohibited homosexual content in films, but not in such terms. Instead, homosexuality was reduced to sex, and a corrupted version of sex at that: 'Sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden.' This prohibition lasted until October 1961.³⁵

Though 1961 saw the prohibition of homosexuality in film come to an end, governmentally mandated homophobic sentiments persisted. One particularly potent example of this is the 1961 propaganda film *Boys Beware* which labels gay men as sexual predators and was produced in collaboration with the Inglewood, California police department.³⁶ In terms of the HIV/AIDS crisis specifically, Ronald Reagan is infamous for his response- or rather, lack thereof- to the epidemic. The 2015 documentary film *When AIDS Was Funny* by Scott Calonico, which debuted on *Vanity Fair*, uses never-before-heard audio tapes from press conferences to show the administration's disturbing in-action and disregard for the lives of the gay community.³⁷ Furthermore, much of the discourse around 'normalising homosexuality' is often framed in terms of hyper-sexualisation and fears of infection, i.e. "A turned B gay," and oblique or direct references to AIDS, which was originally

³⁴ Lucretius, 1073-1120.

³⁵ Chon Noriega "'Something's Missing Here!': Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934-1962", *Cinema Journal*, 30 (1990), p. 22.

³⁶ *Boys Beware*, dir. by Sid Davis (Sidney Davis Productions, 1961). <https://archive.org/details/boys_beware> [Accessed 1 July 2021].

³⁷ Richard Lawson, 'The Reagan Administration's Unearthed Response to the AIDS Crisis is Chilling', *Vanity Fair*, 1 December 2015, <<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/11/reagan-administration-response-to-aids-crisis>> [Accessed 2 July 2021].

termed 'Gay-Related Immune Deficiency' (GRID). This homophobic rhetoric has created a lasting, negative legacy of connection with both eroticisation and illness in social attitudes towards the gay community. Like syphilis before it, the peak of the AIDS panic in the 1980s created a climate of fear around sex. As Susan Sontag puts it in *Aids and its Metaphors*, 'fear of sexuality is the new, disease-sponsored register of the universe of fear in which everyone now lives.'³⁸ Moreover, Sontag develops her study into a mimesis theory, where political and social disorder – particularly the perceived threat of communism in post-Vietnam war 1980s America – are mimicked in the discourses of illness. These ideas are particularly relevant where Sontag develops:

'Denunciations of the "gay plague" are part of a much larger complaint [...] a now-familiar diatribe against the "soft" West, with its hedonism, its vulgar sexy music, its indulgence in drugs, its disabled family life, which have sapped the will to stand up to communism.'³⁹

Under the Reagan administration, in a hostile political climate, while predominantly working-class Black people were affected by AIDS, the climate of fear and disgust surrounding the epidemic caused lasting and irreparable damage. Furthermore, in contrast to the way that Tuberculosis was romanticised, eros and illness came to odds in the 1980s where aesthetic standards, operating on a capitalist basis, reject the "ugly" truth of illness. In the essay that preceded *Eros and Illness*, Morris posits that 'it may be that heterosexual norms reinforce medical norms in separating eros and illness, at least in public, much as early public health posters sought to represent HIV/AIDS patients as debilitated and unattractive'.⁴⁰

David Bergman's 'In the Waiting Room' documents a man waiting for results 'as part/of a study on the life cycle/of an adult homosexual.'⁴¹ During one of his regular six-month check-ups, he tells us, he is sitting in the waiting room when he witnesses a man 'clad in jeans' who has evidently 'become/the person I feared that I might be': he is going to die from AIDS. The speaker dwells on this unnamed man in the eighth stanza:

And I hated him for having brought
his death so near that I could touch it,

³⁸ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), p. 73.

³⁹ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ David B. Morris, 'Un-forgetting Asclepius: an Erotics of Illness', *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), p. 438.

⁴¹ David Bergman, 'In the Waiting Room', in *Poetry Magazine*, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=149&issue=3&page=14>> [Accessed 12 February 2021].

and the room seemed to fill with the dread
odor of his dying, and I sat amazed:
for with his neat beard and curly hair
and the whiteness of his freckled face,
he might be taken for my lover.

One feels the presence of both illness and eros very powerfully here. Eros acts as a force that seems to counteract the 'dread odor' of sickness that brings, inevitably, death; though the speaker begins the stanza filled with hate he soon sits 'amazed', as if frozen by the power of eros, thinking of his lover. Then, when the man and his doctor move away, leaving the room, the speaker can still hear their quiet voices, which he likens to 'the hushed tones of lovers careful / not to wake the disapproving crowd.' Now the erotic relationship is no longer tangentially between the speaker and the anonymous man, but between the doctor and patient, demonstrating the close intimacy possible in a medical setting that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

Desire in Bergman's poem is not necessarily framed in terms of beauty but in terms of memory – the speaker's nostalgia for his lover – and quiet intimacy. Nevertheless, beauty is at least implicit in the transposition of the speaker's lover onto the 'man in denim,' as well as the way that the second half of the eighth stanza dwells on his physical aspects, which are not at all made out to be unappealing.

Beauty and sickness, as we have touched on briefly, can variably be at odds or not, in cases where physical symptoms of illness correspond to normative standards of beauty. David Morris quotes the 'bodily tribute' of Jennifer Glaser who said of her boyfriend, diagnosed with leukaemia: "Cancer works very hard [...] to make life unsexy." Glaser and her boyfriend reclaim eros as something created interpersonally, even privately, between them and their love for each other during illness. "We flirted, canoodled, talked about sex, and had sex when he was sick because, well, sex wasn't death," she writes. "It was the antithesis of death."⁴² In a display of the multitudinous nature of eros, here it combats death, holding it at bay. If the candid celebration of the body, especially the sick body, could be normalised, perhaps it would serve to dispel some mythologies of illness, fears that larger society – particularly the repressed Western world – would benefit from. Of course, eros is not one-sided. Morris nods to the dangers or difficulties of attempts to reclaim and redefine eros, pointing out that, while we continue to live in a capitalist society, 'the erotic and the

⁴² Morris, p. 437-8.

beautiful are fatally contaminated by repressive ideologies and by free-market stereotypes.⁴³

Interestingly, in recent online culture, there has been and continues to be a lasting fascination with the dynamics between a sick or injured person and the one caring for them that can be traced in the realm of fan fiction. The genre 'hurt/comfort' involves 'the physical pain or emotional distress of one character, who is cared for by another...'⁴⁴ In works of this genre, 'injury, sickness or other kind[s] of hurt allow an exploration of the characters and their relationship[s].' The 'hurt/comfort' tag itself is 5th most popular out of the 200 most popular descriptive tags in use on the widely used fan fiction website, Archive Of Our Own.⁴⁵ The archive- a place for writers to post work, generally fan fiction, online for free- has been running since 2007 and, as of April 2020, has 'about 2.5 million registered users and almost 6 million works in over 36,700 fandoms.'⁴⁶ Evidently, there is a strong interest in this specific relationship dynamic and its erotic implications. In a book dedicated to exploring different aspects of fandom, Mirna Cicioni analysed the specifics of this genre and concluded that 'nurturance [...] is eroticized' leading to (and perhaps because of its inherent quality of) 'intimacy'.⁴⁷ Perhaps it is not surprising that a community that has its foundations in writing love stories would be preoccupied with a genre that so thoroughly embodies the dynamic interplay between eros and illness.

On looking back on the sexual economy of 1970s America, Sontag wrote, 'after two decades of sexual spending, of sexual speculation, of sexual inflation, we are in the early stages of a sexual depression.'⁴⁸ Today, living through a global pandemic, it is possible to witness similar attitudes and experiences. Social distancing and masks limit physical touch. There are erotic implications rife in quarantine situations amidst sexual frustration of being locked down, possibly apart from significant other/s or conversely, *with* significant other/s in various stages of relationships. In online youth culture, social discourse has shifted towards the erotics of the pandemic and its trappings. Rather than retrieving more poetry, I believe the general erotic mood of this past year can be captured in the immortal words of Twitter

⁴³ Morris, p. 437-8.

⁴⁴ 'Hurt/Comfort – Fanlore', Fanlore.Org, 2020 <<https://fanlore.org/w/index.php?title=Hurt/Comfort&oldid=1691845>> [Accessed 5 December 2020].

⁴⁵ See 'Tags', Archiveofourown.org <<https://archiveofourown.org/tags>> [Accessed 17 July 2021]

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive rundown of all statistics see: "AO3 Statistics 2020: A Look Behind the Scenes", Archiveofourown.org, 10 May 2020 <https://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts/15931> [Accessed 17 July 2021].

⁴⁷ Mirna Cicioni, 'Male Pair-Bonds And Female Desire In Fan Slash Writing', in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture And Identity* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1998), pp. 163-4.

⁴⁸ Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, p.76

user offlinemalek: 'day 5 of quarantine: just grabbed my own ass.'⁴⁹ For people not fortunate enough to be stuck isolating with a romantic/sexual partner, 'sexual depression' is a good term for the cultural erotic milieu.

At the time of writing, it is May of 2021, and we are just beginning to emerge from another lockdown. Vaccinations have begun to be rolled out, slowly, perhaps, but offering hope – especially hope for the future of erotic contact. Recently I met up with someone on a socially distanced date and we spent a good twenty minutes of it bemoaning the fact that we couldn't kiss each other. The prospect of vaccination has many people eagerly anticipating an end to the frustration of the past year. To quote another Twitter user, 'All my friends get a kiss on these lips when we all get the vaccine.'⁵⁰

'When we're both vaccinated,' 'when I get my second dose.' When, when, when. If, as Anne Carson says, eros is about 'The Reach,' the space between the afflicted and the object of desire that 'must be maintained or desire ends' then this is a very erotically charged time indeed.⁵¹ However, as we know by now, sociopolitical and socioeconomic context is intrinsic to the experience of eros. The COVID-19 pandemic can be characterised in these terms by the disturbing spike in anti-Asian racism and hate crimes due to racist reactions to the originating country of the virus.⁵² Furthermore, in terms of 'sexual depression,' class is a significant deciding factor in the experience of the current pandemic. Lisa Bowleg highlights parallels between the HIV/AIDS epidemic in that 'deadly viruses spotlight fissures of structural inequality.'⁵³ She writes,

COVID-19 reveals disproportionate risk and impact based on structured inequality at intersections of racial/ethnic minority status and class, as well as occupation. Many of the riskiest and most stressful frontline jobs now deemed essential offer low pay and are occupied by people at the most marginalized intersections: racial/ethnic minorities, women, and undocumented workers. These intersections contrast starkly with those of the predominantly White, middle-class, and rich people who hire, legislate, and direct the

⁴⁹ Malek M [day 5 of quarantine: just grabbed my own ass] (@offlinemalek, 20/3/2020).

⁵⁰ Ava Palazzolo [All my friends get a kiss on these lips when we all get the vaccine] (@AvaPalazzolo, 12/01/2021)

⁵¹ Anne Carson, *Eros*, p. 26.

⁵² Angela R. Gover, Shannon B. Harper, and Lynn Langton, 'Anti-Asian Hate Crime During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality', *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45 (2020), pp. 647-667 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>>.

⁵³ Lisa Bowleg, 'We're Not All in This Together: On COVID-19, Intersectionality, and Structural Inequality', *American Journal of Public Health* 110 (2020) <[doi:10.2105/AJPH.2020.305766](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305766)>

conditions under which the “essential”—or expendable, depending on your point of view—work and, in the COVID-19 era, live or die.⁵⁴

Furthermore, now that vaccines are available, people still need to be able to actually *get* them- to qualify for them, first of all, while shortages require stages of rollout, and then perhaps to be able to take time off work to go to their vaccination centre, which, if far away, may involve the need for a car or ability to get to public transport. Economic means have extreme influence over people’s opportunities to be vaccinated. What does this mean for eros? As we saw in Audre Lorde, one’s personal circumstances are integral to one’s erotic experiences. In these times, when obtaining vaccinations is not straightforward; when the alternatives to in-person communication and contact are overwhelmingly online, and therefore require internet access, mobile phone ownership and social media accounts; it is not a stretch to say that there is an element of erotic gatekeeping. It is as if the practical, physical, sexual side of eros- inherent in one’s ability to meet people and to form interpersonal relationships- is locked behind a paywall that is simply inaccessible to many.

There is another powerful aspect of medical eros – to use Morris’ term – that has already been present, subtextually, in this essay. It is time to bring it out of the subtext and into the text. Let us think about the role of empathy. The ‘love of women’ that saved Audre Lorde is undeniably a celebration of empathy and connection between women. Although C.S. Lewis sought to separate empathy (*storge*, or empathy-bond, as he termed it) and eros in *The Four Loves*,⁵⁵ it is my opinion that empathy, linked to intimacy, understanding and connection, comprises an important part of eros, and informs desire significantly. Furthermore, empathy in medicine has been an influential topic of conversation and discourse for many years.

A particular exploration of the importance of empathy in medicine that struck me was Oliver Sacks’ patient case studies on *encephalitis lethargica*, a disease which was epidemic in 1927. The disease is mainly characterised by a patient suddenly falling into a kind of slumber from which it was either very difficult or impossible to awake. Sacks, a physician studying victims of the disease, described it in his book *Awakenings*, which recounts case histories of patients afflicted by it:

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Geoffrey Bles, 1960), p. 50.

They would be conscious and aware – yet not fully awake; they would sit motionless and speechless all day in their chairs, totally lacking energy, impetus, initiative, motive, appetite, affect or desire; they registered what went on about them without active attention, and with profound indifference. They neither conveyed nor felt the feeling of life; they were as insubstantial as ghosts, and as passive as zombies.⁵⁶

Sacks is interesting as a medical figure because of his tradition of collecting patient case histories. By doing so, he – and others who read the texts – can gain insight into the patients' lives, medical histories and symptoms, which of course is integral in treating the patient, but furthermore, these histories can act as a method of bearing witness to the lives of patients who may not be able to do so themselves. In this way, they invoke empathy, encouraging one to care about patients as people, with all their rich internal lives, rather than simply figures in a study. In a lecture revisiting *Awakenings* and the 1990 film based on the book, Sacks testified to the importance of having empathy and understanding for his patients:

It also became very clear that this wasn't just a matter of chemistry, it wasn't just a matter of giving someone a drug, but of the sort of life which could be found or created for these patients. The things which mattered intensely to all of us – meaning, structure, freedom, spaciousness, relationships, work, play – these were exactly the things which were crucial for these patients and which could stabilize them if they were possible.⁵⁷

Today in the US medicine is essentially gatekept from poor, Black, and minority ethnic communities, extortionate healthcare insurance prices that leave many people choosing between living untreated, in unbearable pain, and not being able to afford rent. In the UK, the NHS is overwhelmed and underfunded, and nationalised healthcare does not prevent inequalities in both urban and rural deprived areas. Surely, nowadays, empathy is more crucial than ever.

Ultimately, eros cannot be separated from its political and social contexts, or equally the personal contexts of its authors. The experiences of each writer I have discussed are vastly different to any and all of the others. Furthermore, mediums of eros may have originated from Latin erotic elegy but they are certainly not limited to it. The incarnations in which Eros presents himself differ wildly, and the signs and symptoms of eros are constantly

⁵⁶ Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings*, (Pelican: 1991) p. 14.

⁵⁷ Oliver Sacks, 'Awakenings Revisited', *Sacred Heart University Review* 12 (*Sacred Heart University Review*, 2010), p. 1.

in flux. Maddeningly, eros appears both to *cause* illness and cure it, and sometimes both in the space of one event. Perhaps issues of categorisation arise as soon as one attempts to pin eros down in the first place. It remains, though, that the state of being ill invites an incredibly private, vulnerable facet of one's life to be examined and communicated. To paraphrase Eryximachus, love is felt and experienced differently in a healthy body and an unhealthy body (Sym. p. 21), but the differences do not end with physical symptoms. Each complexity of human identity and experience affects how eros is experienced in illness. To attempt to trace eros clearly and simply from person to person, hospital room to hospital room, time period to time period, is to attempt to fight a battle you have already lost. However, this I can say with certainty: eros and illness are lifelong friends, perhaps more.

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