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Erotic Experience in the Cures of Asklepios & the Hippocratics

A recent article by David Morris, Professor of Biomedical Ethics and Humanities at the University of Virginia (“Un-forgetting Asclepius: An Erotics of Illness,” *New Literary History* 2007), argues that western medicine has gone the way of Hippocrates rather than Asklepios: it is rational, cold, sterile, and its practitioners emotionally detached from their patients. Asklepios, by contrast, represents a type of medicine that accommodates and even encourages desire, particularly sexual desire, among its patients. The principal aim of Morris’ article is to discuss the efficacy of “erotic” medicine; a patient who is in touch with his or her sexual desires is likelier to have a more positive experience with illness, he argues.

In laying out his arguments, Morris is careful to defend his use of Asklepios and Hippocrates as representatives of two divergent approaches to healing in the modern world. Morris traces a dichotomy between Asklepios and Hippocrates that developed over time. Both healers, he contends, had early ties to eros, but Asklepios “maintained an underground and official connection with eros,” whereas Hippocrates shed those connections as the centuries passed.

This paper will use Morris’ arguments as a starting point from which to reexamine the role of sexual desire in the cures of Asklepios in the classical period and to compare that evidence to Hippocratic medicine of the time. While Morris is indeed right that links between Asklepios and the mythological figure Eros existed early in the history of the cult (e.g., Eryximachos’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*; a painting of Eros in Asklepios’ sanctuary at Epidauros, Paus.2.27.3), I believe Morris is overstating his case regarding the role that sexual desire played in the records of Asklepios’ cures at any point in time, but particularly in the classical period. Morris himself singles out only one example from all of the god’s cures to demonstrate sexual desire, and, as I will argue, the example is misleading.

The primary evidence for cures of Asklepios in the classical period is the healing inscriptions, or *iamata*, from Epidauros. The sole ailment Morris adduces for sexual desire appears in these same narratives: women who are unable to conceive. Morris states, “Barren women traveled to Epidauros so that Asklepios could impregnate them.” His statement may suggest that women came to Epidauros to have sex with the god, but this is neither explicit nor even implied in the *iamata*, as I will demonstrate. Moreover, sex itself (although whether this necessarily entails sexual desire is open to question, as Morris acknowledges) seems a logical component of any therapy at the time for women wishing to conceive. Be that as it may, the *iamata* allude to sex in only one of the four instances of women who visit Asklepios in order to conceive.

Another narrative, recording an entirely different ailment, provides the surest indication of sexual desire in an Asklepiian cure. A man suffering from a stone in

his penis dreams that he is having sex with a handsome boy; he ejaculates in his sleep and thereby expels the stone (*IG IV*² 1 121.104-106). Here sexual arousal is a means to ejaculation, which apparently is thought to be the efficient cause of pushing the stone out of the penis. The *iamata* preserve one other instance of this ailment: Asklepios treats a boy suffering stone, but it is not clear here that the stone is removed; instead, it seems Asklepios may simply have stopped the boy's pain (*IG IV*² 1 121.6871). In this latter instance it is remarkable that the patient is a boy rather than a man, which may explain the difference in treatment.

Overall, there is very little evidence for sexual desire in Asklepios' cures, which seems consistent also with the Hippocratic evidence. This in no way diminishes Morris' arguments about erotic medicine, but it does force us to question whether we might better describe healing encounters with Asklepios as characterized by emotion broadly writ than by sexual desire per se.