



## The virus of syphilis in poetry: the case of Karyotakis

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### Abstract

Kostas Karyotakis (1896-1928) published three poetry collections: *The Suffering of People and Things* (1919), *Nepenthe* (1921) and *Elegies and Satires* (1927). A leading Greek poet, he influenced a significant number of poets, and this phenomenon became known as “Karyotakismos”. Quite autobiographical, his poetry shows his agony, concerns and fears. The pessimistic atmosphere and the biographical elements the reader sees in Karyotakis’ poems make his poetry distinct and it is still popular in our day. An important dimension of his poetry is the disease he had: syphilis. Karyotakis’ syphilis has been discussed extensively, nevertheless none of the previous analyses attempted to read it through the lens of the medical humanities. Such a reading shows that apart from the biographical elements one may detect, there is a deeper meaning: the voice of an individual who experiences the disease at a time when there was no cure, syphilitics were stigmatised, and people treated them as outcasts. Karyotakis uses his poetry to share his personal tragedy and trauma. He is a syphilitic who wants his voice to be heard and his poems are valuable material as pathographies and for the study of the history of medicine.

**Keywords:** Karyotakis; Medical humanities; Modern Greek poetry; Philyras; Poetry; Stigma; Syphilis.

### Introduction: the disease

Syphilis is a bacterial, sexually transmissible disease.[1] The early symptoms include small and painless sores or ulcers in the genital area and in other parts of the body, like the mouth; there may be rashes, tiredness,

headaches, joint pains and fever. If left untreated for a long time, it can spread to other parts of the body including the brain and can cause long-term problems. Currently, syphilis is a curable disease and is usually treated with antibiotics in oral or injectable form.[1] Some years

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ago, however, the case was very different.

Syphilis struck Europe and the rest of the world in the late fifteenth century. The symptoms caused horror to people, as the disease could invade the cardiovascular or nervous system and often resulted in paralysis, insanity and death. Syphilitic patients in the late stage of the disease were admitted to mental asylums, as they suffered from “general paralysis of the insane”. [2; pp. 57-73] In the 1700s, neurosyphilis or syphilis of the brain was the main reason for an “expanding wave of debilitating insanity that filled asylums and cut life short in a grotesque and frightening way”. [3; pp. xi, 9]

It was only in 1905, that the German researchers Fritz Schaudinn (1871-1906) and Erich Hoffmann (1868-1959) discovered the causative organism - it was called *Spirochaeta pallida* and subsequently *Treponema pallidum*. The first ever drug for the cure of this bacterial disease, arsphenamine, was announced years later in 1910 after the studies of the German medical scientist Paul Ehrlich (1854-1915) and his colleague Sahachiro Hata (1873-1938), a Japanese scientist. [2; pp. 57-73]

Another cure for syphilis emerged in the 1940s with the discovery of penicillin, an effective antibiotic for a number of bacterial diseases. By the end of the 1950s, penicillin replaced previous treatments and it is still the main medicine for the treatment of the disease. [2; pp. 67-71] Interestingly, the Russian Orthodox Church was against any form of treatment and saw the disease as “God’s punishment for the sin of lust”. [3; p. 131]

In the second half of the twentieth century, many countries adopted a more open policy towards syphilis with free

clinics, posters advocating prevention, and the provision of penicillin for those in need. Although the more recent HIV epidemic overshadowed syphilis, the latter still remains a persistent and lethal disease in certain parts of the world and constitutes the main cause of infertility. [2; pp. 70-71]

### Karyotakis’ syphilis

Along with the many anonymous victims of the disease, there were well-known cases also that caused speculation about the connection between “madness and creativity”. For example, authors like Charles Baudelaire (1821-1967) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) were rumoured to have contracted syphilis. As opposed to other diseases like cholera and tuberculosis where people of the era saw some “romantic connotations”, syphilis never gained this status. [3; pp. 91-92]

Research has shown that Karyotakis was syphilitic indeed, and in some of his writings the reader can detect elements of the disease. His family members considered the disease a disgrace to the family. [4] Although it is unclear when exactly Karyotakis contracted syphilis, it is certain that he had it by 1922, which is when he met the poet Maria Polydouri (1902-1930). [5; p. 207] In a letter Polydouri sent to Karyotakis in that year, syphilis was implied. [6; p. 94]

Karyotakis’ fear of neurosyphilis appears to be the main reason behind his decision to commit suicide in 1928. In addition, research shows that his psychological state was very poor and he suffered from clinical depression. [4] Although the poet’s death note indicates that syphilis and maybe hospitalisation was the reason for his suicide, his depression seems to be another reason.

The following discussion is augmented by quotations from the English translation of

the poet's suicide note and of his poems.[4,5]

### “Spirochaeta Pallida”

Critics have focused on certain Karyotakis' poems (such as “So young when we landed here” and “Invocation”) in an attempt to analyse the shade of syphilis in his poetry.[7] But, of course, it is the poem “Spirochaeta Pallida” that most overtly and clearly refers to syphilis and the reader can visualise the manifestations of the disease. The poem depicts the pathology of syphilis and how the patient experiences his condition.

The poem was initially published with the title “Song of Insanity” in a periodical in 1923, but later the poet changed the title to “Spirochaeta Pallida” and included it - with the new title - in his Elegies and Satires.[4] The title suggests the scientific name of the disease and specifically “the spiral shaped bacillus that causes syphilis”. [5; p. 207]

The poem consists of five four-line stanzas. From the beginning to the end the poem revolves around syphilis and the voice of the “poetic ego” is the voice of a suffering individual. The reader can identify symptoms of the disease. In the first stanza, the poet refers to “scientific books” which could be seen as an indication that Karyotakis probably read about the disease in books and different periodicals:

They were beautiful, on the whole, those  
scientific books,  
their blood red pictures, and that girl who  
giggled  
to herself while leafing uncertainly through  
them,  
beautiful too what her fleeting lips used to  
give us...

The “blood red pictures” allude to sores on the skin, a symptom of syphilis, from

pictures Karyotakis perhaps found in these sources.

In the second stanza, Karyotakis openly refers to “Madness”:

Like a lady, Madness tapped on our brow, so  
gently,  
with such insistence, that we opened up to let  
her  
come into our head, and then later she locked  
the door.  
Now our life has become an odd, age-old  
story.

The way “Madness tapped on [the syphilitics'] brow” suggests that they are possessed by her and cannot control their mind and body. This capitalised “Madness” suggests an anthropomorphic madness that appears “like a lady” and prevails in a battle of survival.

Consequently, as the poet explains in the next stanza:

Reason and feelings are luxuries for us, a  
burden  
that we freely bestow on everyone who is  
prudent.  
We maintain our impulsiveness, our child-like  
laughter,  
our instinct to commit ourselves to the hand  
of God.

As syphilitics are now possessed by this “Madness” which can control their mind and body, “reasons and feelings are luxuries”. Logic has no place in their lives and syphilitics only live with memories. This loss of “reason and feelings” is the result of the “Madness”, and together they give the reader the impression that these are symptoms of neurosyphilis.

In the last two stanzas, in a rather sarcastic manner, the poet explains how syphilis was seen by people in those days, through the image of God whose

“creation is like a freak show” and “a comedy”, and the image of “the hired girl” who “laughed enigmatically”. The reader can assume that the syphilitic experiences his condition not only as a shameful condition, but also as a reason for mockery; even in the eyes of the girl who is probably already infected, and “saw what was likely, the waiting abyss”.

### A “poetic correspondence” on syphilis

In 1920, Romos Philyras (1898-1942), another Greek poet, contracted syphilis too. Part of his work revolved around this adventure with his health. Philyras lost his senses and ended up in the psychiatric hospital in 1927, where he stayed until the end of his life in 1942.[8]

His poem “Fate Leads” (October of 1926) is one where Philyras explores new dimensions of the world.[9] In the poem, Philyras complains that “fate threw him to people” and he experienced “the mock, the abuse and the shame”, alluding to the way people saw syphilis back in those days. In the poet’s words “gone is the sceptre, the summit is lost” and “the works are wasted like velvet”, as now it seems that the disease overshadows his work and previous life. After he accuses the “pimp” who “leads him to the abyss”, the poet asks salvation from God.

Karyotakis’ poem “Admonition” should be read not just in connection to this poem of Philyras, but as a response to it. The poem is included in Karyotakis’ Elegies and Satires. “Admonition” has a counselling tone and atmosphere, which is identified through the use of second-person singular verbs and the repeated use of the pronoun “you”. The identity of the addressee is revealed only in the last stanza where Romos Philyras is

named.[5; pp. 205-7] Since 1912, Karyotakis had been reading Philyras’ poetry and when the latter was admitted in the psychiatric hospital, Karyotakis visited him.[6; pp. 22, 113]

In his poem, Karyotakis is compassionate towards Philyras’ concerns and seems to share the same anguish about people’s reactions:

When people want to cause you pain,  
they can do it in a thousand ways.  
Throw away your gun and fall down  
flat when you hear their sound.

Probably driven by the condition of his health, Karyotakis expresses his fears over his state, and that he may end up in the psychiatric hospital too, a shameful thing in those days.

Karyotakis’ concerns and fears, as regards the way people saw syphilis then, is even more obvious in the parallel he draws between people and wolves:

When you hear the quick steps  
of wolves, God help you!

In the last stanza of the poem, Karyotakis refers directly to Philyras:

Give up the sluts and pimp,  
your kin, Romos Philyras.  
When you fall into the grim pit,  
hold on to sceptre and to lyre.

As the reader can see, the “sluts” and the “pimp” allude to Philyras’ poem, but also to Karyotakis’ own “disdain for the quality of Greek society”. The “grim pit” is also an allusion to Philyras’ madness - a result of syphilis, while the “sceptre” should be read in connection to Philyras’ “well known practice of behaving like an imaginary Byzantine prince”. The “lyre” is symbol of poetry and together with the sceptre “symbolizes the hegemonic role of

poetry”.[5; pp. 205-7] In the last line of the poem Karyotakis advises Philyras not to give up, despite the malice and hostility of society towards syphilitics.

### Karyotakis' death

In 1928 Karyotakis committed suicide. His turbulent life included heartbreak after separations, the discredit of his work, and disagreements with colleagues higher in the hierarchy. In addition, he wrote in an era which was characterised by the decline of moral values and principles. All these factors perhaps led Karyotakis to depression. His poem “Imagined Suicide” could be read as a death rehearsal.

Karyotakis' suicide note sheds some light to the reasons of his last decision and how it was a result of more than one factor; syphilis was one of those. Towards the end of the note Karyotakis writes: “I was sick. Please, send a telegram to my uncle, Dimosthenis Karyotakis, so that he can predispose my family”.[4] Although the poet does not name the disease, he is very likely to mean syphilis.

### Conclusion

A reading of Karyotakis' poems through the lens of the medical humanities is helpful as it demonstrates the collateral damage of a disabling and fatal disease such as syphilis was in that era. Karyotakis not only expressed his fears and concerns over his health, but also his disappointment with the way people looked at syphilitics as outcasts; hospitalisation resulted in their stigmatisation as people of an inferior category. Karyotakis' poems, by informing about syphilis in the early decades of the 20th century, constitute an important historical learning resource.

The modern learner of medicine could also benefit in other ways from reading

these poems: these are first-person narratives by a patient and could be read as pathographies; the poems could help medical practitioners and medical students develop a more humane approach towards patients with contagious and sexually transmitted diseases, who deserve respect in the same way as any other person; through the poems healthcare providers can appreciate the thoughts, fears, anxieties and concerns of the “other side”, which is the patient. This may help improve communication between the practitioner and the patient, as they can work together in a more productive way and find a treatment according to individual needs.

At the time of the writing this article, humanity is experiencing a new threat: COVID-19. The pandemic has sharply changed people's everyday life and has reminded them of their fragility. Similar to syphilis in the past, people who contract COVID-19 have to isolate and to live in quarantine. Even today, quarantine is a stigma that points towards infected people. Karyotakis' poems show that the medical fraternity and society in general should adopt appropriate attitudes and behaviour towards people with contagious or other potentially stigmatizing diseases. There is a need for empathy and understanding so as not to marginalize groups of people.

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