

Arrhythmias in the History: Lovesickness

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KEYWORDS

• Lovesickness • Heart disease • Psychiatric disorders • Humoral disorders

KEY POINTS

- Lovesickness has been attested to in medical literature since classical times, and may still have a place in current medicine in psychiatry.
- The clinical use of pulse started with Galen, in the second century AD, who used it as a tool to diagnose disease and suggest possible treatments.
- Starting from the Middle Ages, lovesickness started to become a common subject also from an artistic point of view.
- The painter Jan Steen probably used Lovesickness to make fun of medical praxis of his times.

CLASSICAL TIMES

Lovesickness has been defined as “the most common form of heart disease.”¹

Lovesickness has been termed a real disorder, with a specific cause, pathogenesis, and cure: it has been attested to in medical literature since classical times, and may still have a place in current medicine in the frame of psychiatry and humoral disorders.

Although in different cultures there is a general agreement on the symptoms, including fever, agitation, loss of appetite, headache, rapid breathing, and palpitations, the treatments vary greatly in the various cultural contexts, from herbal remedies, to the prescription of sexual intercourse, to magical preparations.

The diagnosis was based on the Hippocratic semeiotic, which included anamnesis, observation, palpation, and succussion, but, starting from the fourth century BC, another criterion was developed: the description of pulse.

The protagonist of the story is the Prince Antiochus I Soter (324–261 BC), son of Apama and Seleucus I Nicanor, a military leader of the army of Alexander the Great and, after Alexander's death, founder of the Seleucid dynasty and of a mighty kingdom that extended from Syria to the river Indus.

When Antiochus was very young, he fell in love with Stratonices, daughter of Demetrius Polioctetes, his father's second wife.

Because of this unethical feeling, Antiochus got sick and he was healed after many years by Erasistratus, a famous physician of antiquity: Erasistratus has been identified with different historical personages, from the mathematician Leptine² to Philippus.³

Valerius Maximus² provided many details in his description: Antiochus fell in love with his stepmother (*infinito amore correptus*) and tried to hide this deep and immoral wound of his soul (*impium pectoris vulnus pia dissimulatione contegebat*).

The description of the disease is very detailed: the ailment attacked Antiochus body, and he was close to dying (*jacebat ipse in lectulo moribondo similis*).

The only possible treatment was the union with the woman he loved, and King Seleucus, who was anxious to save his son, had no hesitation and offered him his wife (*Qui carissimam sibi coniugem filio cedere non dubitabit*). Seleucus, at the same time, gave to his son his wife, his kingdom, and his power.

All the investigators^{2,3} agree that Erasistratus made his diagnosis by touching the pulse of the sick Antiochus: as Erasistratus felt Antiochus' wrist, he realized that the prince's pulse quickened

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and he became flushed when his stepmother Stratonice entered the room.

The attempt to measure pulse rate had been investigated in the same period by Herophilus (third century BC), who tried to compare the pulsation of blood vessels to musical rhythm, using a water clock that contained a specified amount of water for the natural pulse beats of each age group.⁴

However, the clinical use of pulse started with Galen, in the second century AD, who paid particular attention to an individual's pulse, monitoring it for abnormalities and using it as a tool to diagnose disease and suggest possible treatments.

For instance, using this system, Galen had detected that the little child Cyrillus had lied, because the wrist had become warmer and the pulse rate had accelerated: the discovery that the pulse has many variations, each variation carrying diagnostic or prognostic significance, led many investigators to try to describe the different movements of the blood in the radial artery.⁵

A situation similar to Antiochus' story is related about the young Prince Perdica, many centuries later, also concerning a medical reappraisal of the importance of the pulse.

In an undetermined moment of the late Roman period, Prince Perdica unintentionally became the victim of an incestuous love, which led him to death.

Perdica eventually killed himself, having suffered too much after having discovered that the woman he desperately loved was his mother.

The symptoms of Perdica's disease are consistent with those of Antiochus: insomnia, lack of appetite, hollowing of the eyes, anorexia, pallor, rapid pulse, jaundice.⁶

This kind of love, which developed into a real disease, was studied by the doctors, who suggested that this mental disorder should be classified as a variety of madness and a specific form of melancholy, because, in some cases, lycanthropy, flurries, stutter, and priapism may occur.

The Hippocratic-Galenic tradition had provided a basic humoral explanatory model: if love is unsatisfied, sorrow causes melancholy, caused by an excess of black bile.

MIDDLE AGES

In the Middle Ages, magic and temptations by demons were considered possible causes of lovesickness, but medical writings, based on the humoral approach to the disease, tried to explain it with the overheating of the vital spirit provoked by the object of desire, which, by inflaming the middle ventricle of the brain, the seat of the *virtus aestimativa* (faculty of estimation), caused dryness in the *virtus imaginativa* (faculty of imagination). The

image of the beloved therefore became imprinted in the patient's memory, causing obsession.

Starting from the second half of the twelfth century, the term hereos came into use,⁷ as a quasi-technical term to denote the disease of love.

The term, which was derived by a conflation of 2 distinct etymologic lines (love and hero), consistently denoted a pathologic version of love, shared by lovers whose sentiment was neither returned nor satisfied.

The first monograph in Western medicine on this subject was written by Arnaldo da Villanova (1240–1311): in his treatise *De amore heroico*, Arnaldo considered it not a disease (*morbis*), but a symptom (*accidens*), a peripheral presentation of a disease, derived from the modification of one of the 4 humors, which could easily degenerate into melancholy.⁷

During the Renaissance, lovesickness started to be considered not as a distinct disease but as a symptom, connected with a disorder, named in different ways: white fever, morbus virgineus, febris amatoria, characterized by pallor, amenorrhea, sadness, lack of appetite, palpitations. It was later named chlorosis, to underline a specific color of the skin, *ex albo ut plurimum virescente*.⁸

Lovesickness caused physical problems: erratic pulse, pallor, changes in appetite, and mood swings. The cure was usually marriage, which satisfied the needs of both the heart and the body.^{9,10}

To this passion, which is able to provoke consumption, anorexia nervosa was also connected.¹¹

MODERN ART

Lovesickness became a common subject in art during the seventeenth century, as in the pictures of the Dutch painter Jan Steen (1626–1679), who painted many scenes dedicated to this theme: the patient is always a young sick woman, suffering from lovesickness, and the doctor is shown while taking her pulse.¹²

At the heart of the matter there is usually a doctor visiting a patient. The doctor's clothing is outdated and looks more like theatrical costume from the *commedia dell'arte*. The physician seems out of date and out of touch with the condition of adolescent development.

The core subject of the painting is a weak young woman in a bed or chair, head resting on a cushion or table, while a doctor is taking her pulse. In the foreground there commonly are a ribbon dipped in urine, a blazing brazier, and a candle with chamber pot. The supposed illness is probably an unforeseen pregnancy, because the basin of coal with the burning thread was used by quack doctors in diagnosing pregnancy by reading the smoke, but, as an alternative, the unpleasant smell could

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