\*Report for the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies\*

The Healing Classics:

Medical Humanities and the Graeco-Roman Tradition

International Conference, King’s College London, 7-8 September 2022

‘A properly critical medical humanities is also a historically grounded medical humanities.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

What potential relevance does the experience of Graeco-Roman Antiquity have to the vastly expanding field of the Medical Humanities and their mission to ‘humanise’ today’s medical and healthcare practice, education and research? And again, how can the insights from the relatively young Medical Humanities enhance our understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman past, a past often still surprisingly relevant today?

In an attempt to critically and creatively approach these two complementary questions, the central aim of the international *Healing Classics* conference held at King’s College London, 7-8 September 2022, was to promote a constructive dialogue between the disciplines of the Classics/Classical Studies, on the one hand, and the Medical/Health Humanities, on the other, broadly defined. By turning to, and drawing inspiration from, ancient Greek and Roman sources (medical or otherwise), and by holding these materials against the light of historical and contemporary medicine/health-related beliefs, interests, disputes and practices, the conference intended to yield fresh insights into several important, at times indeed profoundly delicate and sensitive issues: such as the ideology of health, somatic health and psychological wellbeing, the importance of professional ethics, narratives of illness, patient care, diagnosis and authority issues, the confrontation with mortality, old age, incapacitating (chronic) disability, and so on.

What does it mean to be a ‘healthy’ human being? What is the value of ‘making sense’ of trauma and loss? What are the role, value and requirements of ‘human’ qualities in the context of healthcare? What useful strategies do ancient sources propose for ‘living well’ with chronic pain, disability, illness? And what about the ‘good death’ as an ultimate resort? Central to the conference’s endeavour was to explore and debate the continuing vitality and creativity inherent in the Classical tradition, hence also its specific interest in how Antiquity, at the level of motifs, myths and texts, is filtered in today’s healthcare practices, most notably in creative/expressive arts therapy.

Building on the results of the 2021 online workshop, this year’s conference, held in hybrid mode, hosted 20 specialists from around the world, both internationally renowned names and young and upcoming talent, to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue about healthcare and the conceptualization of well-being and illness, with a specific emphasis on what role Graeco-Roman Antiquity can play for healthcare providers and users today. Much of the effort of the speakers went to putting past and present into conversation, in an attempt to discover continuities and contrasts with contemporary perspectives. In this regard, the back and forth of ideas between classical scholars and qualified medical clinicians and practitioners during the conference resulted in fruitful – and, indeed, rare – joint venture.

In addition to the speakers, close to 10 external participants signed up to attend the event in person (most of whom postgrad/PhD students but also several people working in the health sector, including a retired surgeon), and the conference was also followed online by around 50 remote participants from around the globe (including teachers, students, researchers of Classics/ancient history, Medical Humanities and medical professionals).

After a long time of online conferences, the upbeat, collaborative atmosphere was very palpable throughout the course of the event, as it provided a much-longed-for opportunity for in person discussion and networking. Together with my co-organizers, Professors Michael Trapp and Brian Hurwitz (both KCL), we aim to keep this momentum alive in view of the next stage: editing and publishing (after thorough peer-review) a thematic volume based on the conference papers.

I am very pleased to report that we have been offered a book contract by Peter Lang to publish a thematic volume in their series *Medical Humanities: Criticism and Creativity*. The prospective book will aim to make a meaningful contribution to the flourish of Classics and Medical Humanities related publications which has emerged in the last decade. To this end, the *Healing Classics* volume will thankfully draw on these imaginative research strands and will also promote this kind of research and push it further into new directions. It will thus be the very first in its kind, in terms of thematic reach at least.

We are of course much obliged to the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies for their generous – and flexible! – support to help bringing this project to a successful conclusion. For the conference programme, list of speakers and their abstracts, please visit the conference website: < <https://thehealingclassics.blogspot.com/> >. We have recorded the event; if you wish to have access to the recordings, please send an email to < michiel.meeusen@kuleuven.be >.

1. Corinne Saunders, ‘Voices and Visions: Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval Writing’, in Anne Whitehead, Angela Woods, *et al.* (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016): 411-27, at 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)