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Special Section I: Mad, Bad or Sad? Unruly Passions and Actions in Modern Greece (Introduction)

Dimitra Vassiliadou

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Special Section I / Section Spéciale I

MAD, BAD OR SAD? UNRULY PASSIONS AND ACTIONS IN MODERN GREECE

Introduction

More than a century ago, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga wrote, in a book that would become a bestseller, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919): “One may well ask, ... is joyfulness and quiet happiness nowhere to be found? To be sure, the age left in its records more traces of its suffering than of its happiness. Its misfortunes became its history.”¹ Although Huizinga was referring to the Middle Ages, the authors of this special section, all modern historians, are quite familiar with the idea that available historical documents often chart human “misfortunes” rather than pleasure and happiness. From across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period that roughly charts the chronological range of all articles in this section, available primary sources still provide ample information on what was forbidden, controlled or punished, sketching a vivid picture of modernity’s historical subjects being criminalised, punished, castigated and redeemed.² All five articles that follow revolve around “unruly” passions and “unnatural” actions in Greece, and belong to this long historical tradition of dealing with what different cultures in different times excluded from “normality”.³ They document how several public and private discourses attempted to express, decode, classify, punish, prevent or even cure a number of undesired social realities, such as

¹ Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 30.

² Tanya Evans makes a similar remark regarding the surviving historical evidence on sex and sexuality, noting that “it is much easier to discover how sexuality was represented rather than experienced, controlled rather than enjoyed. We will always know more about what was forbidden than what was not.” “Knowledge and Experience, 1750 to the Present,” in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body in the West: 1500 to the Present*, ed. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (Abington: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 258.

³ Most authors in this special issue participated in the one-day conference “Pathological Emotions, Unruly Passions, Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries”, co-organised by the Health History Network and the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Athens in May 2019. Their initial papers were thoroughly revised, anonymously reviewed and resubmitted as full articles.

homicides, mental and sexual “abnormalities” or “dysfunctions”, and nervous and emotional “disorders”. In doing so, they detect human pathology across different theories and practices, based on specific biological, social and cultural assumptions, merging evaluations, hierarchies and moral judgments about individuals and their “nature”. This section also charts the gradual crystallisation of these ideas into scientific – psychiatric, forensic, legal and pedagogical – knowledge, and shows how and in what ways other discourses, such as those expressed by the dubitable “public opinion” or the historical subjects themselves, adjusted or deviated from the then scientific orthodoxies. Finally, most of the articles demonstrate the continuous efforts of state officials and other experts, mainly physicians, to establish themselves as important public actors and secure their expertise against their competitors.

In the opening article, “‘Medea’ in the Greek Courtroom: Contesting Insanity Among Jurists, Psychiatrists and the Public,” Efi Avdela deals with a crime that acquired “enlarged publicity” in 1961 in Athens, when Jane Brown, an American citizen, after killing her three children, unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide. In an act by definition incomprehensible as it contravened every known assumption on maternal instinct and maternal love, judges, juries, psychiatrists and the press debated a crucial question: was the accused mad or bad? As Avdela shows, both the judiciary and the press were immediately trapped in the “Medea narrative”, an interpretation of the triple homicide that prioritised feelings of revenge towards the defendant’s unfaithful husband, and refuted the many psychiatric diagnoses claiming she had at least diminished or even total lack of liability for her acts.

Remaining at the scene of sensational postwar murder cases, Despo Kritsotaki and Panagiotis Zestanakis, in their article “‘Pervert, Sadist, Voyeur and Necrophile’: Pathological Sexual Desire in the Case of the ‘Dragon of Sheikh Sou’, 1959–1963”, discuss an infamous case of a purported serial killer and rapist who was arrested, tried and found guilty for three criminal attacks in 1959, only to be executed a few years later, despite his claims of innocence. The authors highlight the representations of the “Dragon” in the press, as well as the forensic and psychiatric evaluations of him, to uncover the mediatization and pathologisation of criminal and “perverted” sexuality.

Eleftheria Zei’s article, “The Ambiguous Construction of a Modern Melancholic Self: Evanthia Kairi’s Correspondence, 1814–1866,” brings us back to the early nineteenth century and the formation of the epistolary self of Evanthia Kairi. Intersecting Kairi’s melancholic autobiographical discourses with the core formative features of her life in their social and cultural specificity, Zei frames gloominess within a modern “active sensibility”, situated far from its pathological, medical perceptions. Instead, she analyses melancholy as a low emotion and a state

of mind attached to the formation of Kairi's *virtuous* individuality, highlighting her moral education, the complex emotional web of her family relations, her celibacy and solitude, which urged her to depict herself as a modern woman writer.

Despina Karakatsani and Pavlina Nikolopoulou, in their article "'Normal Children' and 'Sick Feelings' in Greek Pedagogical Discourse During the Interwar Period, 1911–1939," turn our attention to the distinct features of "normal" and "abnormal" emotions regarding childhood. Placing at the centre of their analysis the writings of Greek educators, especially the written work of Nikolaos Exarchopoulos, they present their recurrent efforts to regulate children's affective world and to distinguish desired emotional expressions from unwanted or dangerous ones. Emerging at, more or less, the same period with the science of eugenics, pedagogy undertook the crucial national task of teaching future citizens "how to feel".⁴

Finally, my own contribution, "Men of Disordered Passions in the Belle Époque of Neurasthenia," highlights the clinical picture of neurasthenic men on the eve of the twentieth century. Making use of the case notes of the neurologist-psychiatrist Simonidis Vlavianos, the article delineates how the national construct of neurasthenia that was formed prioritised men of unruly emotionality and disordered sexual practices, in order to correspond to both the social and cultural changes of the time and to the agenda of the neurologist-psychiatrists, who were seeking to establish themselves as important actors in the public scene.

Different periodisations and source materials produce different historical narratives. Within this special section there is a thick line separating the early nineteenth from the twentieth century, in which disorderly emotions were increasingly attached to psychosomatic illnesses and systematically explored as medical pathologies. Zei's article on Kairi's emotional discourses analyses female sadness and melancholy as core features of philosophical ideas nurtured in "enlightened" Europe, quite removed from the intense medicalisation that would later define them. Her case study, situated on the borderline between the early modern and modern periods, proposes a somehow "positive" reading of melancholy as the necessary emotional basis for the formation and reformation of a virtuous female self. Disorderly emotions were deemed to lose their fictitious aura and their intellectual connotations within the highly medicalised twentieth century, as the rest of the section's articles clearly illustrate. Although each twentieth-century contribution can be read in its own right, there are several strands that bind these articles together. In what follows, I will briefly highlight three of these intersections: the existence of distinct experts connected with

⁴ Ute Frevert et al., *Learning How to Feel: Children's Literature and Emotional Socialization, 1870–1970* (Oxford: University Press, 2014).

the regulation of human behaviour, the persistent recognition of pathological sexuality as a crucial social issue, and the quest to tame individual emotional expressions and behaviour.

The first essential matter that emerges from all articles dealing with the twentieth century is the strong presence of various experts exercising their “right to speak”. Four different case studies show that for the greater part of the century, established experts, the most striking examples being educators, jurists and penologists, continued to regulate the acceptable, “normal” or lawful behaviour in Greece. For example, from the nineteenth century, educational policymakers were responsible for the moral education of children, who constituted the most sensitive and amenable part of Greek society. The disciplinarian aspects of pedagogical ideas and practices were maintained throughout the following century and underwent significant changes in the interwar period. Drawing on the experimental findings of other disciplines, such as psychology, criminology and, especially, eugenics, educational policy was adapted once again to the needs of Greek nationalism. Determined to drastically limit children’s “abnormal” or “anomalous” behaviour, which was perceived as a threat to the nation’s future, educators sought to discover and implement in actual pedagogical practice the laws that determined the mental and physical health of children. As is shown, during the 1960s Greek jurists – members of a much older state institution – would steadily confront all the other specialties seeking the recognition of their expertise in the courts. Intense disputes between judges and psychiatrists were quite typical. Judges systematically refused to acknowledge psychiatrists’ expertise regarding the mental state, and thus the liability, of perpetrators in homicide cases. This is one of the existing examples that confirms the substantial difficulties the psychiatric profession faced in trying to establish its expertise in Greece. Although the post-war press systematically published medical (forensic and psychiatric) views on the “psychopathology of various criminals”, the role of forensic psychiatrists in the courts would remain limited. The efforts of psychiatrists to demarcate the field of their professional practice were long and persistent, but not always successful. After all, as the example of neurasthenic men testifies, they had been claiming their place as regulators over crucial issues of social life at least since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The second distinct theme that is explored across the same period concerns pathological sexual traits. Sexuality underwent significant changes everywhere in the Western world during the twentieth century, a period marked by the gradual and ambiguous liberalisation of sexual discourses and practices.⁵

⁵ Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.

In Greece, as elsewhere, these developments were accompanied by intense frustrations and distinct reactions, articulated around the existing hierarchical gender and sexual relations.⁶ Kritsotaki and Zestanakis underline the rising visibility of women in the public sphere that accompanied increasing urbanisation, evident in the Greek cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s, that boosted public anxieties about sexuality. They discover traces of the emphasis placed on sex in the public, medical and judicial reactions to the case of the alleged “Dragon” of Sheikh Sou, Aristidis Pangratidis. Popular journalism, which also mediated the discourses of psychiatrists and forensic psychiatrists, prioritised the sexual dimensions of the crimes, and the “Dragon” soon acquired the characteristics of a perverted male sexuality. This pathological version of male extreme aggression remained both exceptional and marginal, and it was perceived as an expression of immorality rather than a clear indication of a mental illness. More than half a century earlier, milder versions of “abnormal” or “problematic” male sexuality would mainly concern private neurologist-psychiatrists, as the example of Simonidis Vlavianos illustrates. The “neurasthenic” men who visited his private office and clinic seeking treatment and cure were mainly showing symptoms associated with sexual excesses or deficiencies. These included practices long considered immoral and detrimental to mental and physical health, such as masturbation or excessive sexual activity, especially outside marriage, but also practices such as deficient or weak sexual desire and activity, considered equally harmful to individuals and the social order. Neurasthenia was clearly becoming a strategic field in which unacceptable versions of male sexuality were being methodically built. Even when sexuality is not the key theme under discussion, it remains somehow present, as the elephant in the room: it preoccupies interwar pedagogy in its concerns over the immoral habit of masturbation, and raises further suspicion about the accused Jane Brown due to her alleged hypersexuality.

One last key issue highlighted by the authors concerns disorderly emotions. The notion that emotions do have a history means their historical study has become a burgeoning field in modern research, placing them at the heart of “what it meant to be human” in culturally specific ways. As Rob Boddice recently put it, emotions “are part of cognitive processes, undergirding social relations, colouring in reasoned discourse and providing a sense of what hurts and what pleases, what feels good and bad, and what feels right and wrong”.⁷

⁶ Indicatively, see the different case studies for Greece included in Dimitra Vassiliadou and Glafki Gotsi, eds., *Ιστορίες για τη σεξουαλικότητα* (Athens: Themelio, 2020).

⁷ Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 191.

Here, unruly emotions and morbid passions clearly intersect with the history of psychiatry. This strong connection stems from the common idea that mood disorders can impact the human mind, soul and body, and thus decisively determine individual behaviour. For example, among the most common causes of male neurasthenia in the beginning of the twentieth century in Greece were severe emotional traumas. The basic symptomatology of a typical “nervous man” included emotional expressions presumably incompatible with male individuality and nature, such as cowardice, fear, shyness or intense sadness expressed with outbreaks of weeping. A part of the medical treatment for neurasthenic men was targeted at the rational management of their emotional expressions. Similarly, according to the normative pedagogical thought of the interwar period, “neurasthenic” or “psychopathic” children could be understood through their assigned, “anomalous” emotions, such as jealousy, cruelty or hostility. One of the main scopes of children’s education was to fight hereditary predispositions responsible for the expression of disorderly emotions in childhood. Still, emotions pervaded the judicial management of crimes. Both “mental furore” and “fit of rage” were recognised by the Greek courts as factors that could contribute to a partial loss of liability, and therefore as mitigating circumstances in homicide cases. The public expression of emotions evoked in the courtrooms was reproduced in the press, as in the case of Jane Brown’s trial, with explicit references to the feelings of disgust and the emotional shock it provoked in “public opinion”. The law was steeped in emotions.

This special section brings together historians who have worked systematically in diverse topics, such as the history of crime and criminal justice, the history of pedagogical ideas, the history of emotions, the history of psychiatry, and the fields of auto/biographical research and media studies. In doing so, it benefits from the different layers of analysis and the methodological pluralism the authors put forward – press cuttings, clinical notes, scientific publications, trial documents, law and jurisprudence treatises, regulatory discourses and private letters – give tangible content to the concepts of “unruly passions” and “unnatural actions” and reveal how private and public actors acted to regulate them in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Greece.

Dimitra Vassiliadou
University of the Aegean