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Historical Note

Melampous: a psychiatrist before psychiatry

PAULOS NTAFOULIS

University of Crete

PHILIPPOS GOURZIS

University of Patras

CONSTANTINOS TROMPOUKIS*

University of Crete

Although psychiatry was the last among the major branches of medicine to be recognized, taught and practised as a separate speciality, it is commonly accepted that even in antiquity there was a clear desire to study and understand mental illnesses, although they were not seen as distinct from physical diseases. Melampous is a figure balanced between historical reality and myth. Reading between the lines of the enchanting narrative preserved by Greek mythology, we can see the desire to comprehend mental illnesses and to propose systematic and credible treatments for them. In this article, an account is given of the myth of Melampous, with emphasis on the details that present him as a pioneer of contemporary psychiatric treatment and as having introduced pioneering approaches to psychiatric disorders.

Keywords: *classics; Greece; hellebore; history; medicine; Melampous; mythology; psychiatry*

Introduction

Identifying the roots and the pioneers of a medical discipline is not always simple. There are many approaches to defining psychiatry, and just as many answers

* *Address for correspondence:* Department of History of Medicine, University of Crete, PO Box 2208, 71003 Heraklion, Greece. Email: trompoukis@med.uoc.gr

to the question of who was the first psychiatrist. Johan Christian coined the term 'psychiatry' in 1803, but Philippe Pinel is undoubtedly the dominant figure in the history of modern psychiatry, as is Sigmund Freud for psychoanalysis (Morel, Bourgeron and Roudinesco, 2000). Looking further into the past, Plato is one particularly celebrated figure who also proposed psychotherapeutic techniques. Yet for those who believe that psychiatry is in fact a mixture of medicine, art and magic, the mythological Greek healer Melampous was a prophet and a psychiatrist before psychiatry (Precope, 1961: 32).

The story of Melampous

Melampous, the mythological son of Amythaon and Eidomeni, is believed to have been born in Pylos in the south-west Peloponnese around 1400 B.C. (Apollodorus, 1921). The name Melampous derives from his black foot: just after his birth his mother left him to lie in the shade, but his feet stuck out and were burned by the sun: *melas* (μέλας) = black; *pous* (πους) = foot (Grimal and Picard, 1976: 281–2). Preller, however, also notes that his name may perhaps symbolically reflect his role as a priest of Dionysus and a prophet (Preller, 1978). According to the second-century B.C. Greek author Apollodorus, there was a nest of snakes in Melampous's yard (Apollodorus, 1921). The servants had killed the adult snakes and Melampous, pitying the orphaned baby snakes, took them into his care. In gratitude, the tiny serpents licked Melampous's ears while he was sleeping, thus giving him the unusual ability to understand animal speech. The astonished Melampous woke and realized that he could foresee what was to happen in the future.

The cleaning of Melampous's ears by the snakes is considered to be the origin of the use of the snake as a medical symbol, although Asclepius was later associated with this symbol. There are, however, many other theories that attempt to explain why the snake is the most commonly used medical symbol (Wilcox and Whitham, 2003).

Melampous, therefore, had great powers and gifts – but this was not all. It was also said that Apollo himself had taught Melampous medicine. Apollo 'purified' Melampous at the River Alpheios, the waters of which were believed to have curative powers (Strabo, 1954). Several ancient writers also claim that Melampous travelled to Egypt, where he learned yet more about mysteries and medicine (Clement, 1968; Diodorus, 1962).

Melampous became famous for curing Iphiclus, the son of Phylacus. When Melampous's brother Bias wished to marry the beautiful maiden Pero, her father insisted that any suitor must show his cunning and bravery by stealing the cattle of the mighty King Phylacus. As Phylacus's wild dogs made the theft impossible, Bias asked Melampous to help. He went to Phylacus's territory, but was soon captured by Phylacus's men. In his prison cell, Melampous observed the movements of the termites, and concluded that the ceiling would collapse (according to the myth, he overheard two termites talking). He called out to

the guards and demanded to be moved immediately; they finally moved him, and the next morning the ceiling did collapse. The amazed guards believed that Melampous must be some kind of holy person to predict the collapse, and told the whole story to Phylacus who released Melampous from prison and begged him to heal the impotence of his son, Iphiclus (Apollodorus, 1921).

Melampous took the opportunity to ask for Phylacus's cattle in exchange, and he agreed. Melampous used his peculiar method of 'listening' to the birds: he sacrificed an ox and 'spoke' to the vultures that gathered around. Melampous learned that the last time Phylacus had made a sacrifice, Iphiclus had been terrified of the enormous bloody knife used. In order to calm the little boy, the king had thrown the knife aside, and it had hit a tree and become stuck in it. In order for Iphiclus to be cured now, the knife had to be removed from the trunk of a tree and heated in boiling wine which Iphiclus would then drink.

Melampous declared that if the knife were found, he would scrape off the rust, put it into wine and give it to Iphiclus to drink for ten days, after which Iphiclus would father a child. This is what happened, and Iphiclus had a son, Podarces. Bias was thus finally granted permission to marry his beloved Pero, by Melampous's assistance (Apollodorus, 1921).

The rust was generally believed to have healing properties. It has been argued that it was the rust that could have strengthened Iphiclus physically, but the psychological dimension is more likely to have been involved in the cure of his impotence. Professor Kouretas, one of the pioneers of psychoanalysis in Greece, discussed Melampous's cure (Kouretas and Tsoukadas, 1955). He emphasized the diachronic dimension of the psychoanalytic concepts: Iphiclus is the son who is beloved but also castrated. Melampous's inspired inquiry into Iphiclus's past must have been seen, in his time, as an unusual way of explaining symptoms and their causes. Yet this is exactly the psychoanalytic method of analysing the creation of a symptom. Recalling the trauma and resolving the pathological complexes is the next step. Melampous's therapeutic intervention is confirmed by basic psychoanalytic theories. Melampous is a diviner, a sacred person. He is in the process of becoming a myth, and through his perception he is able to cure. Kouretas compares the modern psychotherapist to Melampous. In the patient's view the therapist has mythical skills and abilities. In this way, transference is established and changes will take place. The symbolism of the wine with which the rust of the father's knife was mixed had a magical, miraculous character. The regressive patient incorporates the therapist's interpretations as a result of the enormous power of the therapist. Melampous is certainly not a typical psychoanalyst, but he acted as though he was aware of the verity of the main principles of psychodynamic analysis. This is not the only reason for calling him a psychiatrist before psychiatry.

Proitos, the king of Argos, called Melampous to cure the women of Argos whom the god Dionysus had turned mad. The famous healer asked for a third of Proitos's kingdom as payment, but the king refused (Apollodorus, 1921). As the women's health was worsening, the king was forced to recall Melampous.

This time Melampous asked for a double reward: a third of the kingdom for himself and another third for his brother Bias. Proitos unwillingly accepted the offer, and Melampous and his brother Bias became rulers of Argos.

Melampous treated the manic women by allowing them to dance and scream, believing that in this way the women's mania would be suppressed (Sigerist, 1987). He then used hellebore to treat their delusions, and finally made sure that they had a bath in river waters. Melampous had noticed that goats which ate hellebore purged themselves profusely, an observation that encouraged him to study the qualities of this flower further. The ancient writers do not agree on the colour of the hellebore. Dioscurides (1829) talks of black hellebore, while Galen (1821) notes that white hellebore was prescribed. In another version of the above story, Melampous is said to have used hellebore to treat delusions, prescribing it to women who believed that they had been transformed into cattle, while elsewhere his patients appear to have suffered from a tendency to murder children. Hellebore in large doses is said to cause convulsions, and it seems that Melampous was very familiar with the properties of hellebore. He appears to have been the first healer to use a pharmaceutical to treat mental disorders, and this was recognized by later doctors in antiquity who named his pharmaceutical, made from hellebore, 'melampodion'. He may justly be considered the pioneer of psychopharmacology. Melampous's successors in antiquity also prescribed hellebore: Hippocrates noted that it was successful in the treatment of depression, while Orebasios used it to treat hysterical women and epileptics. Even today, homeopathy uses medication, the main ingredient of which is hellebore, to treat psychosis, epilepsy and infections of the central nervous system. After his death, Melampous was worshipped as a hero and as a god. A temple was built to him at Aigosthena, and his grandson Amphiaraios was considered the greatest seer and therapist of his day (Pausanias, 1918).

Conclusion

Melampous used the principles of depth psychology, interpreted phenomena that seemed inexplicable and was familiar with the properties of herbs. At the same time, he used psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy. It is almost certain that Melampous was either a legendary or real figure upon whom the explorations and achievements of all the healers of his era have been focused. He thus represents the efforts that were made to treat psychiatric disorders with scientific criteria, free of superstitions and prejudices, although the later insistence that he was a priest of Dionysus reflects the conviction that such illnesses also had a metaphysical character. Melampous represents medicine's effort to free itself of non-scientific conceptions, an effort that peaked with Hippocrates, and this is why conflicting philosophical traditions attempted to appropriate him, adding to the original myth written by Hesiod other elements that insinuate the philosophical preferences of a seer (Kontogiannis, 1986). In every circumstance, Melampous is recognized above all as a doctor of the

soul (psyche) who used the art of the seer to discover the causes of illnesses and the medicines that would cure them. It is clear that the achievements of the ancient Greeks were not only in philosophy, theatre, historiography and poetry: in the field of medicine, and psychiatry in particular, they were formulating theories and attempting new and effective therapies.

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