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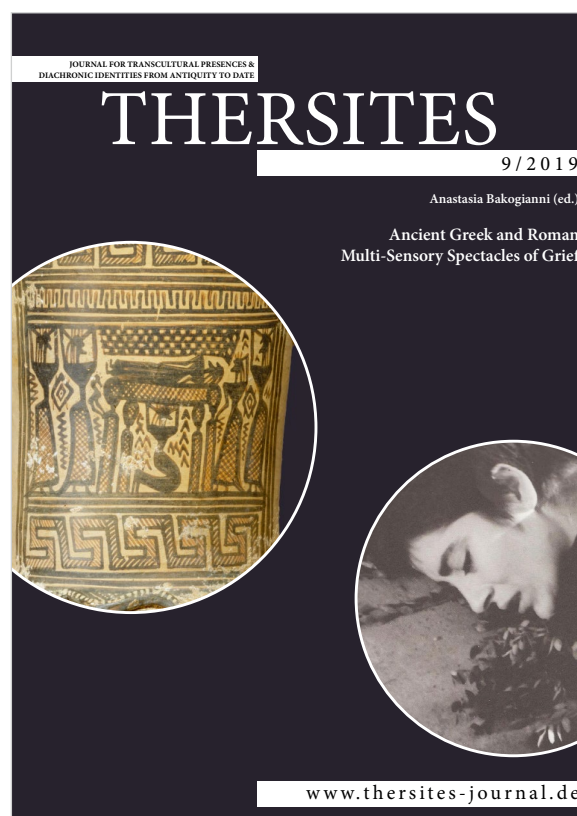
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## Introduction

Ancient Greek and Roman Multi-Sensory  
Spectacles of Grief

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## **ABSTRACT**

Is grief for the death of a loved one a universal, trans-historical emotion? What role does the historical, political and socio-cultural context play in how grief is understood, processed, performed, written about and represented in art? This special issue of *Thersites* seeks to address these questions with reference to the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Drawing on a wide range of both textual and material culture evidence, the six papers that make up this issue investigate how the ancient Greeks and Romans reacted to the death of relatives, friends and members of their wider community, and how it affected their lives, societies and sense of identity. The first half of the issue is devoted to the portrayal of grief in the Homeric epics and Greek tragedy, while the second examines a rich variety of Roman evidence from inscriptions to art, literature and philosophy. Our work intersects with wider debates in the cross-disciplinary field of the History of Emotions, but some of the papers also reference recent scholarship on the senses in antiquity.

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## Introduction: Ancient Greek and Roman Multi-Sensory Spectacles of Grief

### 1 Introduction: Ancient Greek and Roman Multi-Sensory Spectacles of Grief

GRIEF is one of the most powerful emotions that strongly affects both body and mind. The ancient Greeks and Romans distrusted the disruptive potential of uncontrolled emotions and the impact that open displays of such emotions could have on the body politic in general, and men in leadership roles, in particular. Two well-known examples from the classical world, that specifically reference grief in a time of war, exemplify the ancient perspective. From ancient Greece, comes Pericles' warning to his fellow Athenians of the dangers of excessive mourning. According to Thucydides, this injunction formed part of his *Funeral Oration*, delivered at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War.<sup>1</sup> Grieving over the fallen too excessively was discouraged, because it could potentially undermine the city's efforts to win the war against Sparta and her allies. Expanding Athens' sphere of influence thus outweighed the personal cost born by the families of the soldiers who died in pursuit of this goal. Julius Caesar only mourned his beloved daughter Julia for two days, because the news reached him, while on military campaign in Britain, and he could not afford to waste any more time on personal matters. In this Roman example, too, devotion to the state outweighs personal considerations. This was judged an essential quality/virtue for the Roman elite to possess, especially desirable for those commanding the Roman army in the field, or later ruling the Roman Empire. Cicero admired

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<sup>1</sup> Thuc. 2.6

Caesar's self-control in the face of grief,<sup>2</sup> and helped to transform this incident into an aspirational exemplar for imitation.<sup>3</sup>

In the ancient world, war was endemic, disease rife and life in general more fragile and precarious. Restraint on the part of the bereaved could be viewed as a practical response to the loss of family and friends in such a harsh and dangerous environment. But this is too easy and unproblematic an interpretation, as the example of Cicero demonstrates. Despite his earlier praise of Caesar's restraint, Cicero went on to problematise this model for dealing with personal grief in his later work, by emphasising the difficulties he himself faced following the death of his own beloved daughter, Tullia.<sup>4</sup> Classical art is full of spectacles of grief, from ancient Greek funerary *lekynthoi* depicting scenes of loss, to the performance of mourning in classical tragedy, to Roman funerary inscriptions, and philosophical thought, to name but a few representative examples. They serve to demonstrate the impact of death and loss on these two ancient societies and the different ways they 'coped' with grief. Restraint and self-control tended to be valorised, because they benefited the state, but these were not the only possible responses as we discover in our ancient evidence, as the six papers that follow demonstrate.

The genesis of this special issue of *thersites* was a panel at the Annual Conference of the International Society for Cultural History at Umeå University in Sweden (26-29 June 2017). It was organised on the principle that the ancient world should be represented at a conference devoted to the history of the senses and emotions.<sup>5</sup> The number of references to ancient Greek and Roman evidence scattered across several papers by colleagues working in other Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines, not only testifies to the relevance of the classical world in the study of the emotions and the senses, but also to the need for classicists to represent our field at such cross-disciplinary forums. Classicists have much to contribute as they have been

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<sup>2</sup> Cic. Ad. Q fr. 3.6.3.

<sup>3</sup> Later Roman authors, including Seneca (Cons. Marc. 14.3), refer to Caesar's example in their work.

<sup>4</sup> In the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations* and on several occasions in the *Letters to Atticus*. See also Altman (2009) 411-445.

<sup>5</sup> There was a second panel that examined Roman material only, with a particular focus on cultural memory, materiality and memory, organized by Lewis Webb (Umeå University). Plus, additional individual papers in other panels.

fruitfully engaging with both these approaches to investigating antiquity,<sup>6</sup> and increasingly exploring their overlap with wider debates in the Humanities and Sciences. More work remains to be done, but such intersections open up opportunities for the meaningful cross-fertilisation of ideas, and thus represent the cutting edge of cross-disciplinary research.

There is already a rich and fast-growing body of classical scholarship on ancient emotions,<sup>7</sup> that is increasingly adopting precisely such a cross-disciplinary approach, but it is not my intention here to summarise developments in the field. I will, however, selectively pull on some of the discussion threads that are particularly relevant to the papers in this special issue. David Konstan has argued that the ancients' understanding of grief differs significantly from our own.<sup>8</sup> In their highly performative cultures, the ancient Greeks and Romans largely dealt with loss in the public arena, as an essential part of their socially constructed identities. Intense personal grief, and its expression, is generally codified as anomalous and transgressive, but is nonetheless depicted and memorably explored in our ancient evidence (as the six papers that make up this special issue demonstrate).

The theme of the conference that was the starting point of our investigations was 'Senses, Emotions and the Affective Turn: Recent Perspectives and New Challenges in Cultural History'. The 'affective turn'<sup>9</sup> highlights the false dichotomy between mind and body, drawing on recent advances in cognitive theory and neuroscience.<sup>10</sup> Reason has traditionally been

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of scholarship on the ancient emotions include, but are not limited to Fortenbaugh (2002, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., originally published in 1975); Stanford (1983); Elster (1998); Konstan (2006); Chaniotis (2012); Chaniotis & Ducrey (2013); Cairns & Fulkerson (2015); Chaniotis, Kaltsas & Mylonopoulos (2017); Alexiou & Cairns (2017); Cairns & Nelis (2017); Kazantzidis & Spatharas (2018); Spatharas (2019). On the senses, see Butler & Purves (2013); Bradley (2014); Toner (2014); Squire (2015); Betts (2017); Purves (2017); Rudolph (2017); Butler & Nooter (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Cairns & Nelis (2017) 7.

<sup>8</sup> Konstan (2006) 244-58.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the importance of 'affect' in cultural theory see Hemmings (2005) 548-567. For a philosophical perspective, see La Caze & Lloyd (2011) 1-13.

<sup>10</sup> For a useful introduction to the impact of scientific research on the study of the history of emotions, see LeDoux (2017) 51-61. On the cognitive turn and its usefulness as a framework for thinking about audience reception, see

thought of as superior to emotion, an evaluation that has its roots in antiquity and the Greeks and Romans valorisation of male self-control. The same was not expected of women, who were viewed as easy prey to irrational emotions they could not control, making them the ideal performers of the more unrestrained aspects of funerary rites.<sup>11</sup> In Greek and Roman art and literature, however, we come across striking examples of both male and female abandonment to grief. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Seneca began the process of theorising the ways in which emotion affects both the body and mind and discussed the role played by judgement in human beings.<sup>12</sup> Modern philosophers, scientists, creatives, and scholars working in the Humanities and Social Sciences have followed in their footsteps and the debate continues. One of the reasons why grief over the death of a loved one stands out, both then and now, is precisely because it so strongly affects both mind and body, pushing both to extremes states (see in particular Carriescio, Abbattista, Bakogianni and Gorostidi). As Konstan points out even modern psychologists cannot easily distinguish between ‘normal’ grief and its pathological version.<sup>13</sup>

This special issue explores a wide range of ancient evidence for the portrayal of grief in ancient literature and material culture, but also draws attention to the key role played by the senses in the performance of grief in ancient funerals, as well as in fictional accounts. If we wish to fully engage with ancient rituals of death and burial, the close connections of the study of the senses and the history of emotions should be acknowledged and addressed (in our issue see in particular Clancy, but also briefly Bakogianni and Hope). Ancient funerary rituals were designed to engage all the senses, turning them into truly multi-sensory spectacles. Ancient Greek and Roman epic, lyric, drama, as well as historical and philosophical texts, sought to create ‘spectacles’ in the imagination of their listeners and readers. Building on previous work that defined spectacle as a type of

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Yearling (2018) 129-144. On some of the problems that have arisen at the intersection between the Arts and the Sciences that have to be explored further, see Leys (2011) 434-472.

<sup>11</sup> Stears (2008) 141-143.

<sup>12</sup> On Aristotle, see Konstan (2006). On Seneca, see Konstan (2017) 231-243.

<sup>13</sup> Konstan (2016) 30. Sophocles’ *Electra* clearly belongs to the later category.

performance that requires an audience,<sup>14</sup> I apply this term, in its ancient, more positive iteration, in what follows, precisely because it draws attention to the highly performative nature of ancient Greek and Roman culture.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Spectacles of Grief in Ancient Greece

In ancient Greece collective expressions of grief constituted the norm, while individual displays, no matter how intense and deeply felt, were expected to eventually be subsumed into the communal forms. In this way the grieving person could be reintegrated back into their society after their period of mourning and the identity of the deceased preserved in cultural memory.<sup>16</sup> Jesús Carruesco explores this divide with reference to two of the most memorable characters in the Homeric epics, Achilles and Penelope. His discussion takes the *Odyssey* as its starting point and analyses Penelope's grief for her husband Odysseus. Her womanly grief is mirrored at different points in the epic by both her son, Telemachus, and paradoxically her husband, who is in fact still alive. The ambiguity of Penelope's status (she spends the majority of the epic unsure of whether she is still a wife or a widow) places her in an uncomfortable liminal place and that has serious implications for Ithaca as a whole. Instability at the top of the social pyramid rolls downward and infects the whole community. Only Odysseus' return and his assumption of kingly power, after both his intellectual and physical skills are put to the test, restores order to his kingdom. Penelope's long-standing grief thus symbolises Ithaca's problems in the absence of its rightful king.

In the *Iliad*, Achilles takes his grief over Patroclus to extremes and rejects all attempts to console him.<sup>17</sup> Instead he rampages over the battlefield and repeatedly desecrates the body of Hector, denying it proper burial. The extreme emotionalism of the Achaeans' best warrior has enthralled audiences down the centuries, but it is codified in the epic as unhealthy and dangerous for the wider community because it isolates the hero. Only when Achilles returns Hector's body to Priam's safe-keeping and grants the Trojan King the necessary time to bury his son with full honours, does the epic story

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<sup>14</sup> Christesen and Kyle (2014) 2. In ancient Rome 'spectacle', referred to a much-anticipated event that was invested with cultural significance. Kyle (2007) 10.

<sup>15</sup> Bakogianni (2015) 1-21.

<sup>16</sup> On the importance of communal 'rites of passage', see Davies (2002) 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Munteanu (2017) 83-89.

reach its conclusion. Hector's large public funeral that involves the whole city, might not be the end of the story of the Trojan War, but it is an emotionally satisfying ending, that highlights the clash of personal and communal values and the human cost of the male heroic code that lies at the heart of the epic.

The next pair of papers by Alessandra Abbattista and Anastasia Bakogianni investigate Sophocles' portrayal of Electra's grief from two different, but complimentary perspectives. Abbattista offers readers a close textual analysis of the theme of the nightingale in Sophocles' tragedy, rooted in a detailed comparative study of the Sophoclean dramatic text and the myth of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus. Her careful unpicking of the tragedian's nuanced reception of the mythical exemplum allows us to revisit Sophocles' transgressive heroine with fresh eyes. The juxtaposition of Procne's grief and anger over her husband's rape and mutilation of her beloved sister, and Sophocles' drama serves to deepen the tragedian's characterisation of Electra. It is also a pointed reminder to his ancient audience of the inherent danger in women's voices, especially when they are raised in lamentation.<sup>18</sup> Even the silenced voice of Philomela cannot be contained; in spite of Tereus' removal of her tongue, she manages to inscribe her narrative onto the tapestry she weaves for her sister. Electra's voice raised in a never-ending lament is codified as particularly transgressive in Sophocles' dramatic version of the story, because of its close connection to anger and the desire for revenge, as in Procne's case. The mythical story thus underscores the intensity of Electra's mourning and prepares the audience for the extremes to which the Sophoclean tragic heroine will go over the course of the tragedy in her pursuit of vengeance. This Electra does not hesitate to pray for revenge and she urges her brother on as he commits matricide.

Electra turns her grief into a weapon, and deploys it to both summon back her brother Orestes (the rightful avenger and heir), and to keep her father's memory alive. Such is the intensity of her grief that it even leads her, when she believes Orestes to be dead, to consider carrying out the vengeance herself. Plato was so concerned about the impact of the representation of strong emotions on stage and in poetry that he ended up banning poetry in his *Republic*.<sup>19</sup> His desire to establish an ideal state ruled by the tenets of philosophy was incompatible with Greek tragedy's focus on

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<sup>18</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992) and (2000).

<sup>19</sup> *Rep.* X.



violent emotions that are unleashed with disastrous results.<sup>20</sup> Electra, Greek tragedy's mourner *par excellence*, is a striking example of the negative type of portrayal of emotion that Plato objected to. Bakogianni's investigation of Electra's performance of grief in modern Greece, employs a comparative model, with the specific aim of reflecting on ancient vs. modern audience response. We can never recover how ancient spectators responded to Electra's grief in the fifth-century BCE, but a comparative study of two modern performances from the end of the last millennium by the National Theatre of Greece, can help us revisit the question of the audience reception of the Sophoclean tragic heroine. In Lydia Koniordou's production of Sophocles' play (1996), Electra enjoys a close relationship with the chorus, which ameliorates, at least to a degree, her isolation. As does the communal rituals they perform together. Koniordou builds on a long tradition of performing the ancient tragedy on the modern Greek stage by stressing ritual and Electra's relationship to the chorus. In contrast, Dimitris Maurikios ensured that his Electra (1998) was cut off from the chorus thus heightening her loneliness and emotional distress that reaches pathological levels.

These two diametrically opposite ways of staging Electra's grief in modern Greece testify to the clash between traditional and innovative approaches to staging ancient tragedy by one of the country's premier theatre companies. Located at opposite ends of the tradition-innovation spectrum, the two productions divided critics with much of the debate centred on how Electra's grief was performed. Modern audiences tend to sympathise with Electra's grief, but her desire to avenge her father, even at the cost of matricide is deeply disquieting and is often downplayed or explained away as pathological. Ancient audiences might have also sympathised with Electra's personal grief, at least to a degree, and they would have understood her desire for vengeance. It is her transgressive behaviour that would have disturbed ancient spectators, because Electra breaks both gender and social norms. Her refusal to moderate her mourning and to begin the process of re-integrating back into her society make her an outcast and thus a deeply unsettling tragic protagonist to ancient audiences. There might be some fundamental commonalities and continuity between the portrayal and performance of ancient and modern grief, but the different historical, political and socio-cultural contexts also mean there are some fundamental differences.

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<sup>20</sup> Munteanu (2017) 94-95.

### **3. Spectacles of Grief in Ancient Rome**

In the second part of our special issue we return to ancient Rome and the self-control that elite Roman males were expected to exhibit, and consider to what degree this societal pressure reflected Roman funerary and commemorative practice. The emphasis placed on the necessity of overcoming personal grief for the sake of the state,<sup>21</sup> is revisited in Diana Gorostidi's paper, which distinguishes between public and private Roman displays of grief. She argues that in the private sphere, there was room for a greater range of responses to grief. To demonstrate her point, she synthesises a variety of evidence (inscriptions, iconographical and other material culture evidence, discussed in conjunction with literary texts)<sup>22</sup> on the theme of the grief caused by the premature death of babies and young children. Our ancient sources highlight the reversal of the natural order that such deaths represent. Children were expected to look after their parents in their old age and ensure that they were properly buried, a motif that remained popular and in common use in post-classical times, too. Our ancient Roman sources, however, dwell in particular on the thwarted hopes that the families of the dead children had for their futures. Even in a world of very high infant and young children mortality rates such early losses were viewed as worth commemorating. What is striking, however, is the emphasis placed on the children's missed potential as contributing members of Roman society. The gap between the public and private spheres is thus not as wide as it might at first appear. The individual's obligations to the state dominate both public and private ideology and shape the way the dead are commemorated.

David Clancy returns to the city of Rome and our ancient evidence for funerary rites from a different, sensory angle. His paper covers material from the first century BCE to the second century CE, and investigates the odours associated with ancient Roman funerals. Burning sweet-smelling herbs and spices, a common practice for honouring the gods in Roman religion, became increasingly popular in funerary practice. In addition to the practical consideration of masking the malodorous smells emanating from the corpse, it was also a way to honour the dead and to mark their transition

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<sup>21</sup> Graver (2017) 195-196.

<sup>22</sup> For an example of the importance of combining textual and material culture evidence to better understand emotions, see Chaniotis, Kaltsas & Mylonopoulos (2017).

from the world of the living to that of the dead. Sourcing and burning expensive and exotic spices for funerals became another marker of elite identity, and a source of competition among the aristocratic families of the Republic. Emperors could, however, afford to outspend their competition, so imperial funerals became lavish state occasions where the transformation of an emperor into a god was accompanied by the burning of expensive herbs and spices. Wonderful smells thus marked an emperor's passage to his rightful place among the gods, underscoring his unique place at the top of the imperial system. Clancy demonstrates the importance of investigating the olfactory dimension of funerary rites. In addition to being a way for those left behind to honour their dead, and a marker of social class and identity, the burning of sweet-smelling herbs and spices at Roman funerals demarcated the line between the living and the dead. It was a potent, public olfactory sign that the dead person had joined the ancestors, and it was time for those left behind to start on the final phase of their journey to re-join their community, having first fulfilled their obligations to the dead. This practice formed part of the ancient Romans' ritual strategies for dealing with grief, and despite the challenging nature of our ancient evidence that requires us to synthesise a wide range of different material, it rewards closer study.

Valerie Hope further problematises the question of public vs. private displays of grief in ancient Rome, with specific reference to the first imperial dynasty, the Julio-Claudians. As in the Republic, betraying too much emotion was frowned upon in the *principate*. An emperor who could not restrain his emotions and passions was viewed as unfit to rule the Roman state. Nero, for example, was considered excessive in his grief, as in every other aspect of his life. Suppressing all visible traces of grief was, however, equally problematic for a Roman emperor, as in the case of Tiberius whose behaviour at his adoptive son's funeral was condemned as unfeeling or even hypocritical. Tears and a sorrowing countenance were expected of an emperor in mourning, but they could be interpreted either positively or negatively. They were viewed as a sign of their true character and functioned as yet another public test of their ability to rule. Roman emperors were expected to take a leading role in directing the communal grief of the people, especially in the case of the death of their predecessor, but also when their heirs preceded them in death, a prominent feature of Augustus' long reign. How the first emperor mourned his dead relatives and friends became the measure by which all his successors were judged. Showing too much or nor

enough grief was equally problematic. Striking the right balance was challenging, especially for the man at the top of the ancient Roman social pyramid, whose every emotion was dissected and analysed not only by those he ruled, but also by posterity.

It is precisely because grief is commonly believed to be a universal,<sup>23</sup> trans-historical emotion that it acts as a useful entry point for a debate of both the commonalities and the differences between these ancient cultures and our own. More generally, it testifies to the ability of the arts to both depict and elicit emotion in their readers and audiences.<sup>24</sup> It also allows us to reflect on the question of the therapeutic value of the arts, and whether they have the power to console the bereaved, both then and now (on this aspect, see in particular Bakogianni and Gorostidi). Human beings are drawn to such fictionalised representations of emotion, in part due to the inherent appeal of strong storylines and memorable characters operating in a world of heightened emotional tensions. As Cairns argues, however, such representations of emotion in the arts also help us to ‘extend and deepen our emotional repertoires’.<sup>25</sup> Shifting through our evidence for what it can reveal about how grief was conceptualised, practised and represented in ancient Greece and Rome seems especially relevant in the new millennium, given that so many modern societies have become entrenched in their avoidance of death and everything associated with it. Refusing to deal with the impact of grief on individuals and communities has serious implications, as our ancient case studies aptly demonstrate, and it is a lesson well worth heeding. In a time of ongoing crisis for the Humanities, we need to seize every opportunity to reiterate the value of the Humanities and the ways in which they help us explore what it means to be human.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gunzburg argues that ‘human emotion has not changed in quality throughout recorded time’: (2019) ii.

<sup>24</sup> Sullivan & Herzfeld- Schild (2018) 118-119. For a discussion of the nuances of the author/playwright-text/drama-readers/audiences relationship, see Halliwell (2017) 105-123.

<sup>25</sup> Cairns (2017) 74.

<sup>26</sup> Johanna Hanink’s recent call to arms in *Eidolon* (1/05/2017) is particularly relevant here. She advocates for ‘Reception 2.0’, which she defines as research that engages more closely with ‘how the ancient past is visibly interwoven in the fabric of the present moment’: <https://eidolon.pub/its-time-to-embrace-critical-classical-reception-d3491a40eec3> (accessed 11/12/2019). On the

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importance of classicists engaging in contemporary public debates, see Porter (2008) 480.

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