

## Rethinking Antiquity Beyond the Pleasure Principle

The pleasure principle is the bedrock of psychological theory. Whether behaviorist, Freudian, or cognitive, the assumption is: people pursue behaviors that maximize pleasure and avoid pain. And yet this is not true. People engage in self-destructive compulsions, which are the focus of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), where he puts forward the notion of the death drive—not a desire, but a movement toward dissolution, a paroxysmal suffering and enjoyment through repetition. After its Freudian theorization, the death drive has been reinterpreted by psychoanalysts, philosophers, queer and feminist theorists, and Afropessimists. While in the current global crisis, we see individuals and states indulging in destructive behaviors that can be interpreted through the death drive, the death drive also possesses a disruptive aesthetico-political force that unsettles hierarchical modes of social being.

This diverse panel asks: How do ancient expressions of the death-drive supplement or contest modern ones? How does the death drive help us reimagine our relationship with antiquity and the psychological and methodological foundations of our discipline? These papers engage these questions across the whole of ancient literature and modern reception. They are written by accomplished scholars. We will also have a response.

Paper 1 argues that, in Thucydides' *History*, the desire to discover the causes of war—to return to a time before its beginning—recapitulates the desire to revert to a prior inanimate state. Likewise, the search for causes amounts to a disavowal of the primacy of human intention. This reading will lead to a discussion of classics as a discipline, which extends throughout the panel. In Lorraine Daston's words, classics is a form of necrophilia driven by an impossible desire to progress "from surviving fragment to lost whole."

Papers 2-3 examine specific ways in which individual texts can be better understood through a sophisticated understanding of the death drive. Paper 2 gives an overview, exploring the relation between self-harm, suicide, and the death drive as a way of approaching antiquity's discourse of the self. It begins with *auto-* compounds in Greek tragedy and moves through Attis and self-castration towards Christian ascetic self-violence. Focusing on the Lacanian death drive, paper 3 examines images of mangled bodies in Tibullus 2.6, a poem that restores the poet to an "inorganic state" outlasting his physical body, while displaying a versificatory form that constantly seeks to begin from the end.

Paper 4 rereads classical and post-classical Ledas through Elena Ferrante's novel, *The Lost Daughter*, and its 2021 film version. The paper explores current debates on the theoretical utility of the death drive for feminism. In the movie, Leda, a mother and literature professor, goes on vacation in Greece, where she has a series of encounters with a young mother and daughter. This movie allows us to see that the absence of Leda from many ancient sources may be imputed to the domineering role of her daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra. It is as though a lacuna in the archive of the ancient sources reflects reproduction as disavowed self-annihilation or as the "maternal death drive."

Paper 5 bring us full circle to the death drive as a disciplinary provocation. Since the 1980s, classicists have explored various ways in which classical studies might problematize its own institutionalization. These efforts to save the discipline often only end up re-idealizing Graeco-Roman antiquity and its study. What would it mean for classics to change itself, to incorporate its "Others" ? Can we imagine a renovated classics that is not a revenant?

## Bibliography

- Copjec, J. 1994. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge, MA.
- Freud, S. 1961. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. The Standard Edition. New York.
- Janan, M. 1994. "When the Lamp is Shattered": *Desire and Narrative in Catullus*. Carbondale.
- . 2000. *The Politics of Desire: Propertius IV*. Berkeley.
- Kristeva, J. 1980. *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai de l'abjection*. Paris.
- Lacan, J. 1986. *Le séminaire livre VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris.
- Miller, P. A. "Lacan's Antigone: The Sublime Object and the Ethics of Interpretation." *Phoenix* 61 (2007): 1–14.
- . "Enjoyment Beyond the Pleasure Principle." *The Comparatist* 39 (2015): 47–63
- Porter, J. "Love of Life: Lucretius to Freud." In *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, eds. S. Bartsch and T. Bartscherer, 113–41. Chicago 2006.
- Stocking, D. "The Ruin of Song: Community and Autoimmunity in Sophocles' *Antigone*." In *The Returns of Antigone*, eds. T. Chanter and S. D. Kirkland, 69–85. Albany, NY 2014.
- Telò, M. *Archive Feelings: A Theory of Greek Tragedy*. Columbus, OH 2020.
- Wohl, V. *Love Among the Ruins*. Princeton 2002.
- . "The Politics of Enmity in Euripides' *Orestes*." In *Greek Drama IV*, eds. D. Rosenbloom and J. Davidson, 224–69. Oxford.
- Žižek, S. 2004. "From Antigone to Joan of Arc." *Helios* 31: 51–62.