DISTURBING CONNECTIONS:
SYMPATHETIC AFFECTIONS, MENTAL DISORDER,
AND THE ELUSIVE SOUL IN GALEN

Brooke Holmes’

Galen’s *On Prognosis* reads less like a medical treatise than like a collection of detective stories, more Holmesean than Hippocratean.¹ In one memorable case, Galen, self-consciously following in the footsteps of his Hellenistic predecessor Erasistratus, diagnoses the lovesickness of a woman infatuated with the dancer Pylades. The star performer in the diagnosis, besides Galen himself, is the pulse. That is not to say there is an ‘erotically motivated pulse’, as some people think. Rather, Galen emphasizes, the pulse loses its natural rhythms whenever the mind is disturbed, an instance of the more general principle that ‘the body tends to be affected by mental conditions’.² The trick, accordingly, is to figure out what is disturbing the mind, which Galen succeeds in doing by observing fluctuations in the woman’s pulse when Pylades’ name comes up.

The principle that the body is affected by the mind or, more commonly, the soul had become common by the time Galen was writing in the second century CE. It was often taken as the flipside of another principle—namely, that the mind or the soul is affected by the body. From at least the Hellenistic period and possibly earlier, both tenets fit into the overarching framework of what was called sympathy (sympatheia). Galen himself firmly held that the body and, especially, its troubles have an impact on psychic and mental functions, going so far as to write a treatise at the end of his life entitled *That the Faculties of the Soul Follow the Mixtures of the Body*.³ He also made

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² As Barton 1994, 140–143 observes.

³ I adopt Jacques Jouanna’s suggestion (2009, 192) for the translation of the title of the treatise, but I retain the standard abbreviation (*QAM*) for convenience and consistency.
extensive use of sympathy as a pathological concept in his writings, drawing on earlier usage within the learned medical tradition.\(^4\) But what Galen does not do is privilege, at least explicitly, the relationship between the mind and the body as a site of sympathy. Moreover, he is downright wary of implicating the psychē in the sympathetic networks that he maps onto a well-defined anatomical landscape. In this paper, I try to account for Galen’s bipolar relationship to sympathy in the realm of mental disturbance by asking the following questions: What conceptual and explanatory work does sympathy do for Galen in this realm? Why is he so reluctant to apply it to the soul?

Taking up these inquiries has the advantage of yielding an unfamiliar angle on Galen’s psychology and, more specifically, his psychopathology. These topics have attracted a good deal of attention in recent years.\(^5\) Yet analyses of Galen’s views on the soul and its relationship to the body have been mostly confined to the obviously psychological works, such as his massive, mid-career opus the *Doctrines of Plato and Hippocrates* and the aforementioned *That the Faculties of the Soul Follow the Mixtures of the Body*. The concept of sympathy brings us into the territory of other texts, most notably *On the Affected Parts*, where the lines between the brain, the rest of the body, and the soul intersect and fail to intersect in ways that shed new light on Galen’s ideas about how the body disrupts mental functions.

The inquiry undertaken here also has repercussions for the larger question of the relationship between the mind or soul and the body in antiquity. One of the aspects of sympathy that makes it so intriguing is that the concept posits an affective connection without spelling out how that connection occurs or what ground joins the partners. The open-ended nature of sympathy emerges as particularly significant when the partners are the body and the soul or the mind, for the reason that it can be difficult to grasp the nature of the space where these entities meet (think of the enigmatic pineal gland in the writings of Descartes). In some cases, the language of sympathy is no more than an acknowledgment that two entities, say the body and the

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\(^4\) The standard study of sympathy in Galen remains Siegel 1968, 360–382, who is primarily interested in reading Galen in light of contemporary medical knowledge, especially neurology. See also the discussion of sympathy and continuities in the body at De Lacy 1979, 361–363.