Introduction: Towards a History of the Ancient Patient’s View

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This is a volume about the *homo patiens* in the Graeco-Roman world: the ancient suffering man, woman, and child, their role in ancient medical encounters and in broader cultural contexts,¹ as well as their relationship to the health providers and medical practitioners of their time. The participle *patiens* is used here in its etymological sense denoting the ‘afflicted’, ‘the suffering’ person (who would be variously described in Greek as *ho arrhōstos, ho nosōn, ho kamnōn, ho trōtheis, ho katakeimenos*, or simply *ho paschōn*) and, as far as possible, freed from any Foucauldian connotations.² The title of this collected volume, *Homo Patiens: Approaches to the Patient in the Ancient world*, stresses our particular interest in the ancient patient’s view, while simultaneously alluding

¹ The concept of *medical cultures*—that is the notion of cultural systems of health and illness—appeared for the first time in the late seventies in the work of Arthur Kleinman. Kleinman with his 1978 *Concepts and a Model for the Comparison of Medical Systems as Cultural Systems* (Social Science and Medicine 12, 85–93) and his 1980 *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: an Exploration of the Borderline between Anthropology, Medicine and Psychiatry* looked for the first time at something as ‘objective’ as medicine and the body, and attacked the positive-reductionist views of clinicians and historians alike by re-contextualising them both and declaring them both to be as ‘subjective’ as any product of a cultural system.

to influential recent works in history of medicine, such as Michael Stolberg’s *Homo Patiens. Krankheits- und Körpererfahrung in der Frühen Neuzeit.*

Our collection appears at an interesting time for the history of medicine and the history of medical ethics: it coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of Roy Porter’s programmatic plea for a patient-centered history of medicine, in a seminal article with the explicit title *The Patient’s View: Doing Medical History from Below.* Furthermore, it comes almost a decade after Roger Cooter’s 2004 groundbreaking manifesto about what he described as “the end of the social history of medicine.” Most history of medicine, argued Porter, has been written in the form of grand stories of scientific progress and expanding knowledge, largely organised around a sequence of biomedical breakthroughs. Porter’s article was the first call for a fundamental rewriting of the history of medicine, shifting the perspective towards the patient’s point of view. Cooter, on the other hand, went as far as to declare the end of the social history of medicine and urged a radical re-consideration of the good old trusty categories of knowledge, science, scientific breakthrough, disease, and even the biomedical causes of death. Cooter’s extreme position can be explained and justified if we consider the fact that the development of the history of the patient’s view has in fact fallen far short of what was promised by Porter and others in the 1980’s. It is the case, of course, that some steps in the right direction have been taken: for example, in the field of medical ethics emphasis has increasingly been laid on the ‘power relations’ between the sufferers and their healthcare providers—not least in certain areas of modern psychological theory. The move is not only theoretical but has an influence on operational strategies too, as is perhaps most evident in the area of psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytical practices, whereby patient narratives are increasingly valued as a fundamental diagnostic tool.

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6 See Holmes, J. ‘Narrative in psychotherapy’, in Greenhalgh, T. and Hurwitz, B. (1998). *Narrative based medicine: Dialogue and discourse in clinical practice*, 176–84; and Thumiger’s contribution (Chapter Three, 109–110 with n. 3. in this volume.). Power as problem, that is, how various institutions exert power on individuals and groups of individuals, and how those latter resist and affirm their own identity, is a central theme in Foucault’s historical and philosophical work. See for instance, Foucault, M. (1962). *Maladie mentale et psychologie; id.* (1969). *L’archéologie du*