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WHEN LOVE AILS: LOVESICKNESS AND THE AUTHENTICITY OF EMOTIONS IN PLAUTUS' *CISTELLARIA*¹

Abstract: This paper examines the first extant instance of the medicalization of love in Roman literature. In Plautus' *Cistellaria*, love is not just conceived through a conventional comic lens of erotic desire but as a psychosomatic disorder, expressed through symptoms that blur the boundary between mental disturbance and bodily illness. The analysis shows how Plautus integrates medical and popular knowledge to construct a model of *amor* that ancient audiences could recognize as pathological. This medicalization of passion serves a distinctly literary purpose: by grounding emotion in physical and cognitive symptoms, Plautus grants psychological depth and credibility to his protagonists. The authority of medical thought thus legitimizes what comedy typically trivializes, sincere feeling and genuine distress. *Cistellaria* emerges as a case study in how Roman literature appropriated scientific discourse to substantiate and shape narrative coherence. The study situates this medicalization of passion within broader ancient discourses on disease and affects, revealing how Plautus' comedy participates in the cultural translation of medical knowledge.

Keywords: Mental Disorders, Emotions, History of Medicine, Amor, Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Aretaeus

Non MeSH: Lovesickness, Plautus, Roman Comedy, Ancient Medical Thought, Gender and Emotion, Medical Humanities, Disability and Affect

Introduction

This article discusses Plautus' portrayal of love in *Cistellaria* ("The Story of a Casket") where *amor* emerges not simply as erotic or romantic desire, but as lovesickness – a medical

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condition with both physical and mental manifestations.² I argue that the play reflects how the concept of lovesickness, together with Greek medical thought more broadly, was already sufficiently widespread in Rome during Plautus' time for him to rely on his audience's recognition of medical allusions and double entendres. I also argue that by framing love as a genuine illness, Plautus also authenticates the depth of emotion experienced by both male and female protagonists and grants narrative legitimacy to their suffering.

We'll begin with an overview of the ancient understanding of lovesickness and a brief chronological survey of its development across various genres. Through close textual analysis I then show how *Cistellaria* aligns with earlier medical and literary traditions that describe this condition, as well as with later ones that consolidate it as a distinct nosological category. I conclude arguing that Plautus' medicalization of love serves to authenticate the emotional legitimacy of his characters' experience.

The Medical Framing of Lovesickness

Lovesickness had long been imagined as a disorder with recognizable psychosomatic symptoms and appropriate cures. Although it formally entered medical discourse only in the second century CE, in the works of Aretaeus and Galen, its literary tropes circulated widely centuries earlier. Archaic Greek poetry established enduring metaphor of love as an illness, with symptoms that spanned both physical and psychological dimensions. In Sappho's famed *Fragment 31*, the encounter with her beloved triggers a precise symptomatology: hot and cold flashes, tremors, irregular heartbeat, loss of speech, and sensory breakdown.

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
 ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐναντίος τοι
 ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδω φωνεῖ-
 σας ὑπακούει
 καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν τό μ' ἦ μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
 ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὡς με φώναι-
 σ' οὐδ' ἔν' ἔτ' εἴκει,
 ἀλλὰ κάμ μὲν γλώσσα <μ' > ἔαγε, λέπτον
 δ' αὐτικά χρωῖ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
 ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἔν' ὄρημι', ἐπιρρόμ-
 βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,
κάδ δέ μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐτ[α].

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me,
 the man who sits opposite you
 and listens nearby to your sweet voice and
 lovely laughter. Truly, that sets my **heart**
trembling in my breast.

For when I look at you for a moment, then
it is no longer possible for me to speak;
my tongue has snapped, at once a **subtle**
fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see
nothing with my eyes, my ears hum,
sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes
me all over, I am greener than grass, and
 it seems to me that I am little short of dying. [1]

² Unless otherwise noted, all Latin quotations and English translations are taken from the most recent Loeb Classical Library edition of *Cistellaria*, edited and translated by Wolfgang de Melo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Most of the symptoms resurfaced in later literary traditions, and were often framed in medical terminology and disease metaphors. By the 5th century BCE, Greek tragedy had linked *erôs* to madness: “the phenomenology of *erôs*, with its many points of contact with that of madness – sleeplessness, restlessness, pain, obsession, delirium, hallucination and physical distress – appropriated in tragedy the pre-existing poetics of the erotic emotion.” [2]

This conceptualization extended beyond poetry and drama. Philosophical prose also engaged with the pathology of love. Plato, for instance, explores *mania* in connection with love in multiple dialogues. In *Phaedrus*, [3] he frames it as divinely inspired; in *Timaeus*, [4] Plato’s most overtly medical treatise, he describes excessive pleasures, including sexual love, as a disease of the soul rooted in the body. Specifically, he attributes the mad state into which men fall (*ἐμμανής*) to a humoral imbalance caused by an excess of semen. Aristotelian tradition elaborates on this physiological view. In *Pseudo-Aristotle’s Problems*, [5] lovesickness is redefined as a pathological condition rooted in excessive and unfulfilled sexual desire, closely associated with melancholy. Melancholic madness is, in turn, described as an atrabiliar condition provoked by thermo-sensitivity of the black bile. The treatise presents black bile as a substance whose thermal modulation determines whether an individual becomes pathologically insane or not.

Aside from philosophical engagement with medical aspects of lovesickness, early medical writings did not yet systematize this condition. Nevertheless, anecdotes preserved by later authors suggest that lovesickness was already regarded as clinically real before Plautus’ time. Soranus of Ephesus (1st – 2nd century CE), in *Vita Hippocratis*, [6] attributes to Hippocrates the diagnosis and cure of Perdiccas, Macedonian king afflicted with lovesickness for his father’s wife. Another well-known case involves Erasistratus of Ceos (304 – 205 BCE), who reportedly identified Antiochus I Soter’s lovesickness for his stepmother Stratonice – a story recounted by Plutarch (c. 46-120 CE) in *Demetrius* [7], Heliodorus (4th century AD) in *Aethiopica* [8], and Appian (2nd century AD) in *Syriake* [9], to name a few. While the historical accuracy of these legendary accounts is questionable, they still “preserve [contemporary] medical debates on the diagnosis, prognosis and therapy of *erotomania*.” [10]

The first clinical conceptualizations of lovesickness appear in the works of Aretaeus of Cappadocia (2nd century CE) and Galen (129–216 CE). Yet, some scholars question whether even these authors classified it as a distinct medical disorder. Salas, for instance, argues that “neither author [Aretaeus (and Rufus from Ephesus)] discusses lovesickness as a class of disease,” suggesting instead that it only emerged as a discrete nosological category in the 4th century CE. [11] Contrary to this and similar claims, the present study demonstrates that medical categories can be conceptualized rigorously outside medical literature. What Salas calls “the stuff of literature” often provides deeper insight into contemporary medical thought than the surviving medical corpus itself. This point is especially pertinent given the scarcity of extant medical writings during certain periods:

for instance, the four-century gap between the last preserved Hellenistic treatises and Celsus' *De Medicina* (1st century CE).

In the specific case of lovesickness, numerous scholars have successfully argued for its inclusion in ancient nosological classifications, from Pigeaud [12] and Mazzini [13,14] to more recent contributions by McNamara [15] and Ribeiro [10], to name a few. McNamara offers a particularly intriguing explanation for the absence of lovesickness in Hippocratic texts: rather than denying its medical status, this omission may reflect professional rivalries between *ιατροί* (*iatroi*, “physicians”) and folk, particularly female, healers within what she describes as “a competitive and pluralistic [professional] environment.” [15]

Both, the anecdotal evidence and philosophical engagement, a discipline closely intertwined with medical thought, suggests that lovesickness was already treated as a recognizable clinical condition by the time Plautus was writing. Stories such as those of Perdiccas and Antiochus I Soter attest to a medical and cultural landscape that the audience of *Cistellaria* would have readily recognized.

Lovesickness in *Cistellaria*: Female Love and the Embodiment of Affect

Cistellaria or “The Story of a Casket”, written between 209 and 207 BCE, is an adaptation of *Synaristosia* “The Women Lunching Together” a play originally written by the Greek playwright Philemon. In the Plautus' reworking the story follows Alcesimarchus and Selenium, lovers living together in an unofficial union, whose relationship is jeopardized when Alcesimarchus' father arranges an advantageous marriage for him. Nobody knew though that Selenium was actually a citizen woman, conceived through rape, exposed and then secretly raised by the courtesan Melaenis.

As Alcesimarchus descends into madness upon learning of his father's plans, he begs Melaenis to give Selenium to him. She refuses, prompting his violent threats and near-suicide. Meanwhile, a slave sent by Selenium's biological parents arrives, triggering Melaenis' revelation of her true identity. In the final moments, Selenium is recognized as a citizen's daughter, and the play ends with the promise of her and Alcesimarchus' legitimate union.

The opening scene of the play immerses the audience in the secluded, feminine space of free, non-citizen sex workers, unveiling their precarious life circumstances. In this safe space, the authentic emotions of these women are brought to life: their solidarity, camaraderie, loyalty, empathy, and even filial love. This nuanced portrayal challenges conventional depictions and reframes the courtesan as a fully realized character with genuine emotional depth.

Into this unusually emotionally layered world Plautus introduces a radical innovation for Roman comedy – a courtesan capable of sincere, transformative love. While her fellow courtesans indeed exhibit loyalty and affection toward one another, they remain incapable of love for men and continue to treat them as mere sources of income. Thus Selenium emerges as a singular figure from the outset.

Indications of her sincerer love, and of her lovesick condition are given very early in the play when her friend Gymnasium provides the initial description of her:

Gym. [...] meus oculus, mea Selenium,
numquam ego te **tristiorem** uidi esse. quid,
cedo, te opsecro, tam abhorret hilaritudo?
nec munda adaeque es, ut soles (hoc sis uide, ut
petiuit **suspirtum alte**) et **pallida es**.

You, apple of my eye, my dear Selenium, I've never
seen you **more melancholic**. Tell me, please, why
has cheerfulness shrunk back from you so much?
You're **not as neat as usual** (just look how **she**
heaved a deep sigh), and **you're pale**.
(lines 53 – 57)

Gymnasium describes here some of the classic signs of love-induced illness, like pallor, sighing, unkemptness, emotional withdrawal, that we meet both in lyrical poetry and in drama. For instance, in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, at the outset of the play, Aphrodite describes Phaedra as afflicted by love – a disease not readily discernible to external observers, that manifests through moaning and a loss of speech. [16] Chorus too observes unusual traits of Phaedra: when the old nurse accompanies her outside of the palace, the chorus marvels at Phaedra's looks – she is miserable, her clothes are ragged and her complexion very pale. [16] Selenium, as we've seen, echoes this tradition. She shares with Phaedra the signs of a lovesick heroine marking her the part of a venerable dramatic lineage of suffering women.

The next stage in the gradational progression of Selenium's character building is marked by her own account of her condition:

Sel. [...] **doleo ab animo, doleo ab oculis,**
doleo ab aegritudine.
Quid dicam, nisi **stultitia mea me in**
maeorem rapi?

Sel. **I feel pain in my heart, I feel pain in my**
eyes, I feel pain in my sorrow. What should I
say, except that **I'm driven to sadness by my**
own silliness?
(lines 60-1)

The language employed by Selenium to articulate her experiences is inherently medical in nature yet used in colloquial context. The verb *dolere* in Plautus typically conveys the sense of physical pain. However, in this context, I argue that Selenium is referring to mental suffering. When combined with the ablative of cause, the phrase could be rendered as: "I am in pain because of my mind, I am in pain because of my eyes, I am in pain because of my sickness."³ It is her *animus* – her mind, that is playing tricks on her. Her senses too: her eyes are torturing her; she's downright sick and tormented by this condition of lovesickness. This interpretation, suggesting psychosomatic anguish, is further supported by her use of the noun *aegritudo*, which from early on in Latin carries dual connotations, referring both to bodily illness and mental affliction, encompassing grief and sorrow.

³ These and similar translations are not intended as a commentary on De Melo's Loeb translation. They are offered simply as alternatives that more clearly highlight the medical implications in passages where de Melo, quite rightly, aimed to preserve stylistic harmony rather than provide a drier, more technical rendering.

In the following sentence, two additional terms likely indicate mental aberration. Paschall observes that a major group of terms denoting madness in Roman comedy originates in words that convey divine causation. [17] These figurative expressions often semantically borrow from the roots meaning “to be taken, possessed, or struck,” specifying a divine agent, or standing alone. In this instance, the verb *rapere* (“to seize, to take violently, to abduct”) is employed alongside the noun *stultitia*, denoting “sluggishness or slowness in reasoning” but also extending to “insanity.” Both words thus suggest some sort of aberration, either intellectual disability or a mental disorder. Moreover, together, the construction *stultitia mea me rapi* closely parallels well-established Plautine formulations such as *intemperiae tenent/agitant aliquem* or *insania tenet/agitat aliquem* (“to be seized or agitated by insanity”).⁴ Interpreted in this way, the translation of the line should be slightly adjusted to: “What can I say, if not that my very own insanity has driven me to this sorrowful state!”⁵

These alternative readings aim to better reflect the mélange of everyday and medical terminology that, I believe, underlies Plautus’ puns. So far, we still do not know what Selenium is suffering from, but the discussions in the play strongly suggest some sort of medical condition.

Expanding on the interplay between colloquial and scientific discourse, in lines 63–64 Gymnasium advises Selenium to conceal her *stultitia* deep within her *pectus* (“chest”). In this instance, *pectus* is not used metaphorically but rather in its literal anatomical sense, referring to the part of the human body that houses vital organs such as the heart. Selenium’s response reinforces this interpretation: *At mihi cordolium est!* (“But I have a heartache,” line 65). Her bafflement implicitly challenges Gymnasium’s advice – how can Selenium hide her insanity within the very organ afflicted by this illness?

The medical undertones reach their peak in Gymnasium’s subsequent lines (65–67):

Gym. quid? id unde est tibi cor? commemora
opsecro; quod neque ego habeo nec quisquam
alia mulier, ut perhibent uiri.

Gym. What? Where have you got a heart from?
Tell me, please; it’s something neither I nor any
other woman have, so men say.

While Gymnasium’s remark aptly underscores the main theme of the scene – emotional life of women, where the heartfelt emotions of Selenium are juxtaposed to the

⁴ Cf. “*Quae te intemperiae tenent, qui me perperam perplexo nomine appelles?*” (Mil. 434-35); “*nescio pol quae illunc hominem intemperiae tenent.*” (Aul.71); or “*Quae te intemperiae tenent? quas tu mihi tenebras trudis?*” (Ep. 475-6).

⁵ The primary meaning of the noun *stultitia* conveys a lack of intellect, often manifested as sluggishness or rigidity in reasoning (*stultitia* < *stultus* < PIE *stell-* “to be stiff”). With this meaning, it is frequently used synonymously with *inscitia* meaning “ignorance” or “lack of knowledge”. However, it is notable that in Plautus, *inscitia* is occasionally employed as a euphemism for the seduction and abuse of young women (cf. *Truculentus* 845). This raises the possibility that Plautus may also be alluding to this particular connotation in the context of *Cistellaria*, given Selenium’s sense of betrayal and abuse by Alcesimarchus. Finally, *stultitia* is often employed as a synonym for *insania* (“insanity”), which reinforces the complexity of the term in this specific narrative context.

perceived emotional emptiness of her fellow courtesans who are supposedly incapable of feeling affection for their clients, it also carries a much deeper significance. Even if taken ironically, these lines reflect and reinforce prevailing Greco-Roman beliefs regarding the supposed physical and intellectual inferiority of women. Within the framework of the cardiocentric theory which held that the heart was the primary organ responsible for both cognition and emotions, Gymnasium's statement takes on deeper significance. By suggesting that women lack a heart altogether, the passage implies not only an absence of emotional depth but also a fundamental deficiency in intellect aligning with broader ancient medical and philosophical discourses that positioned women as inherently weaker, less rational beings.

Ancient medical writers consistently framed the female body as physiologically and intellectually inferior to the male. Aristotle argued that women were biologically defective, possessing colder and more porous bodies that rendered them incapable of generating the vital heat associated with rational thought and physical strength.⁶ Within this paradigm, female physiology was often linked to passivity, excess of moisture, and an inherent lack of self-control, all of which contributed to the perception of women as less capable of independent reasoning. The notion that women were deficient in *cor* (heart), the very organ believed to govern both intellect and emotion, thus functions as an exaggerated expression of this ideology, reducing women to irrational beings who exist outside the realm of true wisdom and self-governance.

After further description of her state Selenium is finally diagnosed by her more experienced friend.

Gym. amat haec mulier.

Sel. eho an amare occipere amarum est, opsecro?

Gym. namque ecastor Amor et melle et felle est fecundissimus; gustui dat dulce, amarum ad satietatem usque oggerit.

Sel. ad istam faciem est morbus qui me, mea

Gymnasium, macerat.

Gym. perfidiosus est Amor.

Sel. ergo in me peculatum facit.

Gym. bono animo es, erit isti morbo melius.

Sel. confidam fore, si medicus ueniat qui huic morbo facere medicinam potest.

Gym. ueniet.

Sel. spissum istuc amanti est uerbum "ueniet," nisi uenit.

Gym. This woman's in love.

Sel. What! Falling in love isn't bitter, is it?

Gym. To be sure, Love abounds in honey as well as in gall; if you taste him, he gives you sweetness, but then he piles you up with bitterness till you're full.

Sel. The illness that's tormenting me is of that sort, my dear Gymnasium.

Gym. Love is treacherous.

Sel. Yes, he's embezzling all I have.

Gym. Take heart, that illness will get better.

Sel. I trust it will, if the doctor comes who can cure this illness.

Gym. He will come.

Sel. That phrase "he will come" is a sluggish one for a lover, unless he does come.

(lines 69-77)

⁶ Cf. e.g. *Politics* 1.1254b, or *G.A.* I.728 a.15-25. For more on Aristotle's view on sexual differences, see Deslauriers 2022.

This passage humorously encapsulates the idea of love as a disorder. Selenium's condition is first diagnosed externally by an observer, her friend Gymnasium, before she herself acknowledges it. This course of action mirrors a pattern found in later medical writings and dramatic literature. Following the traditional framing, lovesickness, infamous for its diagnostic elusiveness, is initially described through the symptoms exhibited by the afflicted. Outsiders first detail these symptoms which the sufferers themselves later reiterate. Once the symptoms are listed and interpreted, a diagnosis is made typically again first by an outsider, before being unquestionably confirmed by the sick person.

After identifying the nature of the illness as lovesickness, the next step is to seek a cure. Here again, *Cistellaria* closely adheres to the literary and medical construction of love as a disease: the cure for the lovesick lies beyond the afflicted individual. Selenium can take or do nothing to heal herself; the only remedy is the object of her lovesickness – the person she loves *graviter* (“madly”).

This trajectory is evident in poetry, drama, and medical literature alike. The medical tradition did not so much invent the condition as codify a set of symptoms and metaphors already circulating in the broader literary culture. The persistence of this conceptual framework across genres from lyric and tragedy to philosophical prose, demonstrates how closely intertwined the medical and literary understandings of emotional pathology had become by Plautus' time.

This convergence finds its first explicit clinical articulation in the works of Aretaeus of Cappadocia (2nd century CE) and Galen (129–216 CE), who identify and classify the physiological and psychological effects of unfulfilled desire. Their writings mark a turning point, translating the metaphorical and philosophical language of passion into a medical discourse of diagnosis and cure. Although their formal systematization occurs later than Plautus, it reflects intellectual patterns already visible in the cultural environment that informed *Cistellaria*.

Discussing melancholy in his *On Causes and Symptoms of Chronic Diseases* Aretaeus recounts the case of a man, initially misdiagnosed with melancholy and later revealed to be lovesick. [18] His condition was ultimately cured, not by medical intervention but by the fulfillment of his romantic longing. Like in the case of Selenium, the man's disease was not easy to diagnose at first.⁷

In his *Prognosis*, a survey of case studies, Galen describes the case of a Roman woman, the wife of a certain Justus. Justus' wife suffered from an enigmatic condition, which, after initial troubles, Galen managed to diagnose as lovesickness. [19] Her symptoms included persistent insomnia, antisocial behaviour, and a notably erratic heartbeat whenever the name of her love interest was mentioned. Palpitations, long associated with lovesickness since the time of Sappho, were the key symptom that led Galen to settle

⁷ Aretaeus' case marks a shift away from the humoral theory used to explain the aetiology of lovesickness, reflecting a broader trend in the medical circles of the 2nd century CE.

on lovesickness as a diagnosis.⁸ Galen's case echoes Erasistratus' famous diagnosis of Antiochus I with lovesickness for his stepmother, Stratonice. Galen situates his own case within this tradition, framing it as an evolution of Erasistratus' methods.

All three cases – those of Erasistratus, Aretaeus, and Galen, begin with the assumption that melancholic madness and lovesickness are related ailments. They were commonly mistaken for one another, especially among the lay community.⁹ While Galen's account does not detail a cure, the cases of Erasistratus and Aretaeus suggest that the only effective treatment for lovesickness was fulfilling the patient's romantic desires. This cure, already prevalent in literary depictions of lovesickness, underscores a thematic continuity between medical and literary traditions.

In tragedy, the unattainability of such a remedy frequently drives the dramatic plot to its tragic conclusion. In philosophical discourse, there is no explicit mention of requited love as a cure for lovesickness. However, sexual intercourse is often prescribed as a remedy for the related ailment of melancholy. Outside of specific discourse of madness and lovesickness, regular sexual activity and orgasm were already present in the Hippocratic corpus as a part of a healthy regimen for both men and women alike.¹⁰ Approaching love and madness, Plato in *Timaeus* prescribes a regimen that includes appropriate sexual activity to mitigate such disorders.¹¹ In later medical explorations of the tensions between love and madness, authors like Rufus from Ephesus (1st – 2nd century CE), expanded on the idea that unfulfilled desire could lead to melancholic madness, recommending sexual intercourse as a therapeutic remedy. The idea of reciprocated love or sexual fulfillment as a cure for lovesickness, or melancholic madness, respectively, remained influential for ages to come.¹²

⁸ The practice of diagnosing illnesses based on pulse activity gained prominence as early as the 3rd century BCE with Erasistratus of Ceos. By the time of Galen, it had become a central method in medical diagnostics, integral to the analysis and treatment of various conditions.

⁹ While they may share the symptoms, such as insomnia and erratic behaviour, melancholy and lovesickness differed in both cause and treatment. Although Galen did adhere to humoral theory in general, his diagnosis of Justus' wife challenged the notion that lovesickness arises from bodily imbalance. Instead, Galen located its origin in the emotional realm, positioning lovesickness as a psychological, rather than physiological, condition.

¹⁰ See, e.g. *Aff.* 1, *Epid.* 6.8.23.

¹¹ Here, Plato attributes the diseases of the soul, including lovesickness, to a somatic origin – namely, humoral imbalance: “Indeed, almost all those affections reproached as ‘incontinence in pleasure’, as though the wicked acted voluntarily, are wrongly so reproached; for no one is voluntarily wicked” (*Tim.* 86b–d, trans. W.R.M. Lamb). This view firmly embeds lovesickness within the framework of somatic and humoral theory, blending its physical and psychological dimensions.

¹² This idea, however, was not without its detractors. Caelius Aurelianus, a 5th-century CE physician, explicitly rejects the notion that lovesickness can be cured by indulging the very cause of the ailment: “Some physicians hold that love is a proper remedy for madness ... they are not aware of the obvious truth that in many cases love is the very cause of it (*furoris amor fuerit causa*) ... surely it is absurd and wrong to recommend, of all the remedies for the disease, the very thing that you are trying to treat” (Caelius Aurelianus, *On acute diseases and on chronic diseases*, Drabkin 1950:557–559, *apud* Ribeiro 2020, 64).

Plautus' depiction of Selenium's condition closely follows both literary tropes and medical beliefs. Just as physicians struggled to distinguish lovesickness from other maladies, Selenium's condition is initially unclear, diagnosed only through her friend Gymnasium's external observation of symptoms. All the symptoms, as well as the proposed cure – union with the object of desire, also mirror the medical case studies where relief is achieved through the fulfillment of romantic longing.

By echoing the established trajectory of lovesickness found in medical and literary traditions, Plautus lends credibility to Selenium's emotional suffering. Her feelings are validated through their alignment with the symptoms and behaviors attributed to other canonical lovesick figures, and she remains consistent in these traits throughout the play. Unlike her fellow courtesans, Selenium does not feign love. She is unable to follow the old procuress' advice to love only in appearance (lines 96–97). Instead, she loves wholeheartedly, rejecting the calculated detachment expected of her. This stark contrast between Selenium, embodying the unusual role of an “honest prostitute,” and the other courtesans is rooted in her hidden identity: as the audience will soon learn, Selenium is, in fact, a freeborn citizen.

It is precisely this ambivalence of Selenium's status, positioned between the world of free courtesans and that of marriageable citizen women, that allows Plautus to grant her a level of agency that is otherwise nonexistent among citizen female characters. In Roman comedy, agency is typically reserved for courtesans, while citizen women remain flat, passive, and largely uninfluential figures. However, while courtesans' agency is usually tied to morally dubious intentions, Selenium's distinctiveness lies in her refusal to conform to such expectations. The intensity of her emotions reinforces her moral integrity and is also validated, in turn, through the literary and medical condition of lovesickness.

Lovesickness in *Cistellaria*: Male Love and Madness

Selenium is not alone in her affliction: Alcesimarchus too suffers from lovesickness, only his case displays traits bordering on pure madness. In New Comedy and Roman *palliata*, male characters are more often the lovesick parties, but their condition is typically framed as an obsessive, sexual desire. Just like Selenium, Alcesimarchus, too, deviates from the comic norm. While his passion retains the urgency typical of comic lovers his condition is much deeper and dramatically extreme.

Already Alcesimarchus' opening monologue is a tour-de-force of emotional collapse:

Alc. credo ego Amorem primum apud homines
carnificinam commentum.
hanc ego de me coniecturam domi facio, ni foris
quaeram, qui omnis homines supero, [atque]
antideo **cruciabilitatibus**
animi. iactor [crucior], agitor, stimulator, uorsor
in amoris rota, miser exanimor,
feror, differor, distrahor, diripior,
ita nubilam mentem animi habeo.
ubi sum, ibi non sum, ubi non sum, ibi est animus:
ita mi omnia sunt ingenia;
quod lubet, non lubet iam id continuo
ita me **Amor lassum animi ludificat,**
fugat, agit, appetit, raptat, retinet,
lactat, largitur

Alc. I believe it was Love who first devised
torture among us men. I draw this inference
from home, from my own experience – no need
to look outside: I outdo and surpass everyone in
mental agony. I'm being thrown around, tossed
around, pierced, turned on the wheel of love;
poor me, I'm being destroyed, driven, driven
apart, dragged apart, torn apart: so clouded is
my mind. Where I am, there I'm not, where I'm
not, there my heart is; all my moods are like this.
What I like I dislike at once: **this is how Love**
tricks me – I am mentally exhausted – how he
puts me to flight, drives me off, lays hands on
me, drags me back, holds me back, entices me,
bestows on me.
(lines 203-17)

At first glance, Alcesimarchus appears to follow the well-established comedic tradition of the lovesick young man. His speech is saturated with the conventional vocabulary of romantic suffering common to nearly every *adulescens amans* in *palliata*. Adjectives like *miser* (“poor, wretched”) and verbs such as *pereo* (“I’m done for”) and *distrahor* (“I’m torn to pieces”) are standard components of their lexicon, reinforcing the image of the desperate, emotionally overwhelmed lover. The tropes are likewise not without precedent. He speaks of being turned on love’s wheel, dragged, torn, tricked, driven to the point of mental exhaustion – *lassum animi*. However, while the imagery is familiar, the intensity is not. The theme *amor cruciabilitates animi*, which runs through the monody, sets the emotional tone for the portrayal of *Cistellaria*’s male protagonist and lays the groundwork for the dramatic escalation that follows. [20]

The damaged state of the text prevents us from tracing the gradual escalation of Alcesimarchus’ behaviour. The next relatively intact section appears only in the scene where he encounters Gymnasium and learns of his father’s plans to marry him to another woman. In response, he loses his wits. In a delusional fit, he commands his servant to fetch armour, summon horses, and prepare armies for war.

Alc. i, affer mihi arma, et lorica adducito.
Ser. lorica adducam? sa * * * ned * *
<add>ucere.

Alc. i, curre, equom affer.

Ser. perii hercle, **hic instant miser.**

Alc. abi atque hastatos multos, multos uelites,
multos cum multis—nil moror precario.
ubi sunt quae iussi?

Ser. **sanus hic non est satis.**

Gym. **manu esse credo nocitum**, quom illaec
sic facit.

Ser. **utrum deliras, quaeso, an astans
somnia,**

qui equom me afferre iubes, lorica adducere,
multos hastatos, postid multos uelites,
multos cum multis? haec tu peruorsario
mihi fabulatu's.

Alc. dixin ego istaec, opsecro?

Ser. modo quidem hercle haec dixisti.

Alc. **non praesens quidem.**

Alc. Go, bring me arms, and get me a breastplate.

Ser. I should get you a breastplate? *** get ***.

Alc. Go, run, bring me a horse.

Ser. (aside) I'm ruined, **he's mad, poor chap.**

Alc. Go and fetch many men with spears, many
light-armed soldiers, and many soldiers with many
things—I'll accept no entreaties. Where are the things
I ordered?

Ser. (to Gymnasium) **This man isn't in his right
mind.**

Gym. Because he's behaving like this **I believe he's
been bewitched.**

Ser. (to Alcesimarchus) **Are you mad or dreaming
while standing upright?** You're telling me to bring
you a horse, get you a breastplate, many men with
spears, then many light-armed soldiers, and many
soldiers with many things? You've been prattling this
sort of thing to me in a wrongheaded way.

Alc. Please, did I say these things?

Ser. Just now you said them.

Alc. **I wasn't present.**

(lines 284-96)

His detachment from reality is immediately recognized as a sign of madness. His servant, in genuine alarm, exclaims: "I'm ruined, he's mad, poor chap." As the delusion deepens, the desperate slave turns to Gymnasium for guidance. Accustomed to the bewilderment of men, Gymnasium responds with composure. In a measured, almost clinical tone, she offers what reads as a diagnosis, both in phrasing and in certainty: "Because he's behaving like this, I believe he's been bewitched." By attributing Alcesimarchus' behaviour to supernatural influence, Gymnasium demonstrates an informed understanding of love-madness and its association with magic. This diagnosis momentarily casts her as a *doctrix amoris*.

McNamara argued that in ancient Greece and Rome lovesickness, notoriously difficult to treat, was not typically the concern of professional physicians. Instead, female traditional healers, *pharmakeis* and *pharmakides*, or sorceresses, addressed such ailments through charms and love potions. [14] In comedy, female sex workers often stood accused of such sorcery. Possessing expertise in matters of love, they could thus appear both as the cause of lovesickness and as those capable of curing it. In *Cistellaria*, Gymnasium, a free sex worker, embodies this dual role perfectly: she can use her knowledge of love to enchant when she finds it useful or amusing, as seen in her exchange with Alcesimarchus' father (lines 305-44), or she can use it to diagnose and explain the lovesickness. In fact, she first diagnosed her friend Selenium, and now Alcesimarchus. Only, in Alcesimarchus' case, Gymnasium's assessment proves particularly revealing:

Gym. Video te **Amoris** valde tactum **toxico**,
adulescens.

Gym. I can see that you've been struck hard by
Love's poisoned shaft, young man."
(line 298)

The choice of *toxicum Amoris* ("Love's poisoned shaft"), instead of the more conventional *sagitta Amoris* ("Love's arrow"), is deliberately evocative of Gymnasium's association with love medicine. The word *toxicum*, closely linked to both poison and antidotes, further reinforces her role as a *Doctor of Love* within the comedic framework.

This hallucinatory episode finds its parallels elsewhere in Plautus. Similar instances occur in *Mercator* (930–949), where the *insanus amator* Charinus embarks on an imaginary chariot ride, and in *Menaechmi* (835–871), where Menaechmus of Syracuse engages in a delirious dialogue with Dionysus and Apollo. In all three cases, the hallucinating character exists in a separate reality from their interlocutors, and all three characters are immediately labelled as insane by those around them. Yet, the key distinction between Charinus, Menaechmus and Alcesimarchus lies in the authenticity of their madness: while Charinus and Menaechmus are merely feigning insanity, Alcesimarchus genuinely experiences a fit of madness. His whole character is constructed around the unrestrained intensity of his emotions, and therefore it would be dramatically inconsistent for him to engage in conscious deception and false representation of such emotions.

In a subsequent confrontation with Selenium's adoptive mother, Melaenis, Alcesimarchus remains true to his character, displaying an "irrational, self-contradictory, and highly farcical reaction." [20]

Alc. at ita me di deaeque, superi atque inferi et
medioxumi,
itaque me Iuno regina et Iouis supremi filia
itaque me Saturnus eius patruos—
Mel.ecastor pater.
Alc. —itaque me Ops opulenta, illius auia—
Mel. immo mater quidem.
Iuno filia et Saturnus patruos et pater Iuppiter?
Alc. tu me delenis, propter te haec pecco.

Alc. But as truly as the gods and goddesses, the
ones above and below and in the middle, and
as truly as Juno, their queen and the daughter
of Jupiter on high, and as truly as Saturn, her
uncle—
Mel. (interrupting) Goodness, her father.
Alc. —and as truly as opulent Ops, her
grandmother—
Mel. (interrupting again) No, her mother, surely.
Juno the daughter, Saturn the uncle, and Jupiter
the father?
Alc. You're bewitching me, because of you I'm
making these mistakes.
(lines 512-17)

This time, Alcesimarchus' love-sick madness manifests as a loss of cognitive abilities. His attempt to swear vengeance is so confused that he muddles the divine genealogy. The comic correction by Melaenis underscores his confusion, but the emotional breakdown is real. Mixing up such fundamental knowledge signals the depth of his cognitive collapse. He blames Melaenis for his state: "propter te haec pecco."

This builds up toward an explosive oath:

Alc. enim uero ita me Iuppiter
itaque me Iuno itaque Ianus ita—quid dicam
nescio.
iam scio. immo, mulier, audi, meam ut scias
sententiam.
di me omnes, magni minuti, et etiam patellarii,
faxint ne ego dem <uiuae> uiuos sauium Selenio,
**nisi ego teque tuamque filiam aeque hodie
optruncauero, poste autem cum primo luci
cras nisi ambo occidero, et equidem hercle nisi
pedatu tertio omnis efflixero,**
nisi tu illam remittis ad me.

Alc. But as truly as Jupiter and as truly as Juno
and as truly as Janus – and as truly – I don't know
what to say. Now I know. Listen, woman, so that
you may know my decision. May all the gods, the
great and the minor ones, and even the domestic
ones, prevent me from giving a kiss to Selenium
while we're both alive, **if I don't butcher you and
also your daughter today, if I don't kill you both
afterwards, tomorrow, at the crack of dawn, and
if I don't exterminate you all in a third and final
stage, unless you send her back to me.**
(lines 512-27)

Alcesimarchus' delirium escalates significantly in this scene. This stage of his emotional collapse manifests as an uncontrollable outburst of rage (Lat. *ira*, Gr. *orgē*), that borders on the irrational and further complicates the clinical reading of his condition. While earlier in the play the underlying condition of lovesickness drew him to hallucination, this scene pivots to a different conceptual framework: rage. From Homeric heroes to tragic figures like Ajax, characters overcome by rage often enter a liminal state in which reason gives way to emotional extremity.

Ira as an exaggerated emotional state was undoubtedly pathologized in antiquity. The idea that intense passion could corrupt judgment and impair reason was not merely literary; it belonged to a medical and philosophical understanding of the passions as pathological forces that sicken the soul. Haris points to how Aristotle's definition of *orgē* in the *Rhetoric* reinforces the performative and actionable dimensions of anger. For Aristotle, anger that did not lead to violent action, or at least urged to act, hardly counted as *orgē*. [21] Hellenistic, and later Roman, moral philosophies support this equation, categorizing violent anger as indicative of madness and symptomatic of a loss of *sophrosynē*.¹³ Later medical literature, notably Galen, similarly identifies rage as "sickness of soul," analogous to madness due to its physiological intensity and the absence of rational restraint. "You can see that rage is a madness from the things men do when they are in the grip of rage [...] Don't you not think that anger is a sickness of the soul? Or do you think that men of old were wrong when they spoke of grief, wrath, anger, lust, fear, and all the passions as diseases of the soul?" [22]

Within this intellectual context, Alcesimarchus' condition in *Cistellaria* becomes paradigmatic. His anger is loud and theatrical, much like the furious and intense expressions of *orgē* that Harris identifies across ancient sources. His revenge fantasy culminates in brutal threats of violence that escalate systematically through three distinct phases:

¹³ From Cicero (cf. *Tusc. Disp.* 4) to Horace (cf. *Odes* 1.16.5-9, *Epist.* 1.2.62), to Seneca (cf. *De Ira*), excessive anger or rage has been seen as a form of loss of rationality, that is as madness, and as such was to be avoided at all costs.

immediate action, near-future violence, and indefinite annihilation (lines 525–529). The repetitions of these threats should not be viewed as mechanical dittography; [23] rather, their variations in timing (*hodie*, line 524, *cum primo luci cras*, line 525; and *pedatu tertio*, line 526) and verb choices create a carefully structured rhetorical crescendo. Furthermore, contrary to De Melo’s translation, the masculine plural *ambo* in the line 525 suggests that Alcesimarchus includes himself among the victims, hinting at suicidal ideation.

Soon after, he explicitly calls on Death:

Alc. recipe me ad te, Mors, amicum
et beneuolum. [...]
ecquid agis? remorare. lumen linque.
Sel. amabo, accurrere,
ne se interemat.

Alc. Receive me unto thee, o Death, your friend
and well-wisher. [...] Won't you do something?
You're delaying. Leave the light.
Sel. Please, come to my aid, so that he doesn't kill
himself!
(lines 640-4)

Although no blood is ultimately shed, the visual intensity of this moment, heightened by Selenium’s immediate alarm, creates a climactic turn in the emotional arc of the play. The attempted suicide swiftly gives way to an impassioned abduction of Selenium, a narrative pivot that does not reduce the dramatic tension but rather reconfigures it. What we witness in these final scenes, then, is not only the culmination of a romantic plot but the dramatization of mental instability triggered by emotional excess. Alcesimarchus’ suicidal impulse, his abrupt reversal, and the physical seizure of his beloved – all point to a psychic state marked by affective extremity, a disordered mind oscillating between despair and possessive fervor.

This abduction, though not unprecedented in Roman comedy, marks him as unusually agentive. Only a handful of comic lovers, like Sostratus from *Dyscolos* or Chaerea from *Eunuchus*, display this level of agency and independent initiative. Yet a stark contrast separates *Cistellaria*’s protagonist from these counterparts. While Sostratos and Chaerea are in love with women who are passive and largely devoid of agency, Alcesimarchus’ beloved actively participates in shaping her own fate. Selenium’s agency, her ability to act independently places her outside the normative binaries of citizen wife and meretrix. Her anomalous character enables a representation of female subjectivity that is both emotionally complex and narratively active. Alcesimarchus, too, exceeds the expectations of his character type through his emotional excess and volatility.

Conclusion

It is the authenticity of emotion between the two that gives rise to their respective displays of agency. This agency, in turn, finds its narrative justification in the trope of lovesickness. In Selenium's case, the playwright needs only attribute the standard literary symptoms of lovesickness, well-established in both literary and scientific discourses, to elevate her emotional status. For Alcesimarchus, however, the balance demanded something stronger: a commensurate intensification of his condition, such that his role as *adulescens amans* transforms into something more extreme – *amans amens*, the lover-turned-madman. His lovesickness must escalate to the point of pathological rupture to match Selenium's emotional autonomy. This escalation is essential to play's narrative symmetry. In other words, "If Selenium *trahitur* from lovesickness (line 115), Alcesimarchus, at a minimum, must *distrahitur* (line 209)." [24]

The emotional logic of the play drives its protagonists beyond conventional roles and into a space where the legitimacy of their affection is measured not by social resolution alone, but by the extremity of their suffering. As such, the lovers' mutual *amor* is not merely affective but diagnostic: the depth of their passion is revealed through their respective departures from healthy condition, either physiological or psychological. The final tableau – Alcesimarchus' violent desperation and Selenium's simultaneous fear and concern – thus encapsulates the play's central thesis: lovesickness destabilizes identity and renders madness a tragic counterpart to desire.

Rezime

Rad se bavi motivom ljubavi i njegovom medikalizacijom u Plautovoj komediji *Kovčežić* (*Cistellaria*), najranijem poznatom primeru takvog pristupa u rimskoj književnosti. Umesto uobičajenog komičkog tropa, ljubav je ovde prikazana kao psihosomatska bolest, u antičkoj medicini poznata kao „ljubavna bolest“. Rad upoređuje Plautov prikaz ljubavi sa tadašnjim, pre svega helenskim, medicinskim razumevanjem ovog fenomena. Pokazuje se da je patologizacija ljubavi imala jasnu narativnu funkciju: osećanju koje je u rimskoj komediji često trivijalizovano Plaut ovde daje ozbiljnost i autentičnost, čime psihološki produbljuje likove i pokreće radnju. Rad, takođe, ukazuje na to da je već u krajem III i početkom II veka pre nove ere uticaj helenske medicine bio dovoljno snažan da je Plaut mogao računati na razumevanje svojih medicinskih aluzija i dosetki među publikom različitog porekla i obrazovanja.

Ključne reči: Plaut, *Cistellaria* (*Kovčežić*), ljubavna bolest, rimska komedija, antička medicina, emocije, mentalna oboljenja, Platon, Aristotel, Galen, Aretej iz Kapadokije

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