



Alexandros Papadiamantis' 'Vardianos sta sporka'; a new look in the light of the medical humanities

Iakovos Menelaou

PhD scholar, Department of Classics
King's College, London

Corresponding Author:

Iakovos Menelaou
King's College, London, UK
Email address: menelaou dot iakovos at gmail dot com

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Abstract

One of medical humanities' main goals, as it has emerged in recent years, is to promote and establish a more humane perspective in medicine. Doctors should focus on the patient and on his or her individual voice rather than on the disease. Through a study of Alexandros Papadiamantis' novel 'Vardianos sta sporka' ('Guardian of the Quarantined Ships'; 1893), I seek to show how this humane attitude is reflected in the German doctor in the story. The doctor, apart from utilizing the healing force of medicine, recognises the importance of faith and a mother's care as important elements for recovery in a patient with cholera.

Keywords: Faith; Literature; Medical humanities; Papadiamantis; Religion

Introduction

Alexandros Papadiamantis (1851-1911) was a prolific Greek author who is still very popular. His stories have been 'serialized in the newspapers and read aloud in village cafés'.^[1] He was greatly influenced by the teachings of the Orthodox Church. He accompanied his father, who was a priest, in the conduct of certain religious ceremonies, and these experiences also influenced him greatly.^[2] In his writings, Papadiamantis engaged with traditional themes like religion and folk medicine, but also with

modern ones like psychology and modern medicine.

In this paper we are going to see that Papadiamantis' religious faith is manifested through the character of Skevo — the old woman protagonist in the short novel 'Vardianos sta sporka' (1893).^[3] In the story, Skevo's faith functions together with medical treatment as the healing power for her son, Stavros, who suffers from cholera. I will be sharing quotes from the book that exemplify the point I am exploring — that literature of this kind can be used

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by medical educators to help learners explore the relationship between medicine and faith; the quotes are English translations that I have made from the original which is written in Greek.

The Historical Setting of the Novel

The historical background is clearly stated by Papdiamantis: 'finally, it was 1865 and cholera spread during the summer in Eastern Europe, probably as always, through the Muslim pilgrims.'[3] According to sources, the cholera pandemic of 1865 spread to several ports of Greece and the government had to take certain measures against its consequences. This pandemic was the fourth in the nineteenth century, as Greece had suffered the same disease in 1854, 1855 and 1856.[4] The 1856 pandemic expanded after an epidemic during a Mecca pilgrimage that resulted in the death of 30.000 out of the 90.000 pilgrims who visited Mecca in that year. Several pilgrims who survived took the disease back to Europe and Africa, and it was spread even further in Europe by war.[5]

The intersection of medicine and faith in 'Vardianos sta sporka'

Skevo, an old woman from Plakes, learns that her son who works as a sailor is ill during the cholera pandemic and has been taken to the island Tsougria. Since Skevo wants to be with her son and if possible help him recover, she decides to go to the quarantined island; however, because of certain restrictions and the fact that a woman cannot work as a guard of the 'infected ships' approaching the area, Skevo disguises herself as a man.

Skevo's main characteristic throughout her adventure is her strong faith and the fact that she never gives up hoping for

God's help. She sees the disease as a sign by God for the sins of men: 'Disease was the worst...may God save, again, the whole world and secondly, us, the sinners'. She asserts that 'sin made fear greater' and advises: 'Repentance, Christians'. When she learns that her son is one of the cholera victims, she is upset but does not lose her faith; she prays on her knees to God for her son's salvation: 'she tried to say the Jesus prayer, but she could not speak and her lips did not move; just the meaning of the prayer came to her mind'. After her long prayer, she feels sure about her decision to disguise herself as a guard.

Skevo understands the difficulties and risks of her attempt; nevertheless, she is not trying to deceive anyone and her goal is pure: to be with her son and take care of him while he is ill. This is why she prays to God for help, standing clear to Him; her prayer is a voice of supplication. Even today, according to more modern studies, survival rates from certain conditions are higher among religious believers after controlling for demographic differences.[6]

Skevo's faith in God is also present when she goes to meet her daughter before she leaves for Tsougria. The daughter who has no children is encouraged by Skevo 'to be cautious and be careful with medicines; and to have faith that she will have a child, only if this is God's will'. Skevo is not afraid of cholera as she had it once, but even if she is infected she does not care; the most important thing for her is her son. Still her faith is never under dispute as she acknowledges the possibility of death and explains it as God's will: 'If death was the case, may God protect him — her son, at least she would see him and he would die in her arms; she would have no complaint. It would be enough if she went to him when he was still alive'.

Once she reaches Tsougria, Skevo crosses herself, an indication of her pure faith. Making the sign of the cross is a simple Christian ritual that connects with the most important mysteries of Christianity: the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Second Coming.[7] The gesture of the cross combines simplicity and a profound meaning and is a self-blessing reflecting the sacramental blessing by the priest. Through blessing herself, Skevo shows her attachment and faith to God and His will.

Skevo reveals her plan to the German physician, who shows understanding toward and compassion for the mother's concerns and anxiety. He is also helpful and reassures her that although Stavros 'has suffered a lot', 'he will live'. Glad to hear the good news and without undermining the physician's intervention and skills, Skevo explains: 'I prayed to the icons, I begged the Panagia, a little silver icon I have, to take pity on me and send me good news for Stavros...' The physician does not undermine the role of faith and the way Skevo interprets the cure of her son and asks her to tell him the whole story on how she ended up in Tsougria. In her narrative, Skevo, again, stresses the role of prayer and faith: 'I begged the Panagia and she gave me courage'. The depiction of the fictional physician by Papadiamantis goes beyond what one might expect from his knowledge of the practice of medicine, but could allude to either a real-life model whom the author has encountered, or is based on his expectations of an ideal physician.

The physician shows a clearly humane attitude when he gives permission 'for the patient to be moved off the ship in order to have motherly care and his own visits...'. The German doctor accepts that apart from medicine other things can also help an ill person to recover. In this way, Papadiamantis urges the reader to

consider, without undermining the effectiveness of conventional medicine, that ideal surroundings, motherly care, and faith in God are also necessary and that everything together constitutes comprehensive treatment.

Another important element in the novel is Fr Nikodemos' help: he goes to the mountain and gives over his monastic cell to Skevo as a place for her son's recovery. He also encourages Skevo to use any supplies he has and sends her some more. Moreover, Fr Nikodemos tells her that she 'should have all her hopes in God, and if it is God's will, nothing will happen to her son'. In reply, Skevo says 'we all have sinned to end up here', showing, once again, how she believes cholera to be divine punishment for human sins.

The end of the novel shows them all, the German doctor, Fr Nikodemos, Skevo and Stavros eating together in an atmosphere of feast and celebration. The food they partake of, souvla and kokoretsi, and alcohol, are reminiscent of the traditional way Greeks celebrate Easter. Through this metaphor, Papadiamantis may be taken to be presenting the son's resurrection. The boy has returned from the ships and the world of sin and has defeated cholera — and sin, too. Interestingly, the son does not appear to have a voice in the narrative. He does not speak at all in any part of the novel, and he only appears in the end of the story, deepening the sense of a second birth and resurrection. Stavros' cure may be considered a result of faith and medicine. The people attending this feast, together with the mother and the son, are the physician who represents medicine and Fr Nikodemos who represents faith.

Although Skevo is presented as a very religious woman who believes and sees her son's salvation as a result of God's grace, she never doubts the efficacy of

medicine. In contrast, she sees the German doctor as an integral part of her son's recovery and this is verified through his attendance at the feast. Similarly, while Skevo advises her daughter (in respect of pregnancy) to be careful with medicines, she does not say that medicine cannot help her. However, she exhorts her daughter to believe in God so that He can help her and bring her what she wants in the same way that Skevo believed in God and Stavros was cured.

Vardianos sta sporka and the medical humanities

Hippocrates reasoned that both disciplines, the sciences and the arts, were fundamental to the practice of medicine.[8] The medical humanities, as we understand them today, stand between them as a link connecting these two fields. A formal appreciation of literary texts and the creative arts exposes practitioners of medicine to the human side of medicine and compels them to see patients as more than just an illness.[9-11] The medical humanities have been shown to improve the relationship between doctors and patients, where the suffering individual can have his own voice and is not seen as the object of a medical investigation.[9,11] A study of literature as a part of the medical humanities can create more communicative and compassionate doctors and it is now a part of the formal curriculum in many medical schools.[8-12]

An appreciation of language can be honed through the study of literature.[9,11,12] This can help a doctor choose words carefully when communicating with a patient and also help him pay attention to the patient's words and metaphors when he expresses his concerns. As opposed to conventional medicine, through the medical humanities

one can bring the focus on to the person who is suffering and on to his stories by helping one look at emotions, attitudes and human aspects in general.[9]

In Papadiamantis' 'Vardianos sta sporka', one can see how a humane attitude on the part of the specialist helps bring about positive results. The doctor in the story is compassionate and he recognises how important it is for the patient to be with his mother. In addition, he shows flexibility towards the regulations and restrictions imposed because of quarantine. He does this without suggesting the breaking of any rules or setting other people at risk of infection. The fact that the doctor attends the feast with the mother, the son and with Fr Nikodemos is an indication that he considers it important to provide not only medical but also emotional support that gives hope to the patient and his family.

More importantly, the German doctor does not seem, at any point of the narrative, to repudiate the mother's religiosity and her prayers during the recovery of her son. On the contrary, by allowing her to be with her son, he indirectly approves her prayers as an effective non-medical method that could help in Stavros' recovery. According to researchers in the present era, regular prayer and spirituality can benefit mental and physical health.[6,13]

Conclusion

Apart from the obvious, that 'Vardianos sta sporka' could be viewed as a fictional representation of a historical fact — the cholera pandemic that swept Europe, including Greece, in the nineteenth century — it is also a paradigm of how the reading of literature as a part of medical humanities training could help in a better understanding of the suffering individual. Modern understanding of

science and medicine makes it easier now than before to recognize how religious and scientific thoughts are linked — and how both disciplines engage the imagination and deserve respect.[11] The physician in Papadiamantis’ novel manifests a combination of religious and scientific thought as demonstrated through his overall attitude. The novel, thus, can be taken as an example of medical humanities literature that straddles this important inter-disciplinary area. Health providers should be trained to consider this possibility and, along with other means, could use this short novel — or extracts from it — to generate discussions on how they can

work with their patient's religious beliefs. It will allow patient-centred care to be delivered in a way that patients find contextual and which they therefore find acceptable.[11,14,15] In addition, the doctor in the novel could serve as a role model for fostering communication skills, appropriate attitudes, and a more sensible way of thinking in medicine. Stavros is cured when many others died — this can be seen by some as a miracle and as God’s response to Skevo’s prayers and faith, but it is likely the result of the doctor’s knowledge and skill, and his kindness, understanding, sympathy and humane treatment.

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