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Medical Journal of Leontius, Slave of Vitus Aelianus

A first-person historical fiction written from the perspective of a Roman 'doctor'

AMANDA BUCHER

CLS 3500: Genders and Sexualities in Classical Antiquity, Spring 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Aaron Wolpert

Amanda is a Middle Childhood Education, Math & Science, major in the college of Education and Human Services. She is an avid cat lover and lives with her wife and their cats. In addition to being a student at WSU, she works three jobs--two of which entail hands-on education. Her hectic schedule invigorates her, however. She states "I've never been happier."

Amanda notes:

I learned a lot in the weeks leading up to this paper, and wrote down information on the side that I thought might be useful for the paper. Doing research on the side is very easy when you have such an amazing and engaged lecturer who will answer any questions and provide the class with interesting and relevant primary source material. I hope the audience will engage with this work with an open mind, and will be able to place themselves in the shoes of the narrator. If I can make anybody feel like they're experiencing it as they read, then I'll be happy.

Dr. Wolpert notes:

For this assignment, students adopt an imagined ancient perspective in order to develop primary source-informed views on the lived experience of views on gender and sexuality in the Roman world. In this submission, Amanda manages to make useful reference to a remarkable range of ancient documents, all the while crafting a credibly Roman voice. Her doctor-slave offers pitch-perfect commentary not only on the presumed physical causes of disease but also on the moral and social implications of bodily infirmity, in particular in relation to the marriage laws imposed by Augustus, the first emperor of Rome.

Before he passed away, my father advised me to keep a written record of my work with medicine, as some cases presented in the past may be relevant to some presented in the future. He was a Greek doctor, taken as a slave by Gratianus Aelianus during his decade of military service as a senior officer. I was born into slavery to the Aelianus family, here in the countryside of Hispania. My parents are both dead now, but I, Leontius, still live in service to the family. My master, Vitus Aelianus, is an experienced military man like his father. He's a good man: honorable to a fault, well-spoken, and rules over his wife, Valentina, seven sons, and home with love and wisdom.

That said, he is not without his share of frustrating flaws: Vitus can be reckless, thinks too much with his heart--at times--and is always in love with more than one person, at any given time. In exchange for not complaining about his own affairs when he gets home, he turns a blind eye to those of his wife, and only asks that she avoid married men, and not bear another man's child to him. The laws against adultery don't mean much to him, so long as no one is getting hurt in the process. All in the household have been forbidden to speak of the amount of sexual freedom he gives her, of course. If this written account is discovered, I will be severely punished.

Hilarius and Junius, the two youngest children of Vitus Aelianus, fell ill today. I have never seen anything like it. Their symptoms seem to come and go, as does their need for the toilet. Vitus's freedman, Sergius, suggested that I investigate the activities of the boys in the last few hours before they became ill. I suppose that's as good of a suggestion as any, since just examining their symptoms has me stumped and frustrated. My father's records contain nothing helpful to this current problem.

Sergius and I questioned the children in the presence of their father and found that they had been playing in a grove of trees nearby. Further questioning revealed that they had been daring each other to try eating leaves, berries, and flowers from the various plants in the area! I mentioned to Sergius that recklessness seems to be an inherited trait in this family, and he had the nerve to imply that it must be contagious, as I was

quite reckless at their age as well. Poisoning myself by accident was never something I did at their age. I pointed out to him that I shouldn't have to remind him of it, as we grew up together.

I'm not certain I ever want to have children if this is how frustrating they're going to be! Hilarius is old enough to know better, yet he still goaded the three-year-old into a potentially deadly pissing contest! He's in a great deal of trouble with his father over this, but that's not what I would consider comforting when this shouldn't have happened at all!

After a lot of searching through the vegetation and examining it to see what all had been ripped off and eaten by the youngest masters of the house, we did manage to figure out what had caused the illness-- despite Sergius's irritating commentary on my ability to track through plant life (Do I look like a hunter to him?). When ingested, the berries of the lantana plant are dangerous to livestock and humans, but not necessarily deadly, depending on the amount of berries consumed. The boys received a stern lecture from me on exactly why they couldn't ever do that again, and I gave them a small dose of a mustard solution to induce vomiting in order to get the berries out of their stomachs. They will likely be miserable for a couple of days, but at least they should live.

After I had finished treating the boys, I went for a walk with Sergius to get away from the crying and misery of poor Hilarius and Junius. There is nothing more I can do for them, and sitting around to watch them in pain doesn't sit well with me. With Sergius I can at least relax as much as is appropriate. We argue frequently, but (although I'd die before I would ever admit it aloud--and especially to him) I enjoy the debates we have. Tonight we discussed the recent changes to the marriage laws of the Empire. As usual, we differed in opinion. I enjoy being in the presence of someone who has no issues with letting a slave speak his mind, and we discussed them at length.

Sergius finds the new laws to be perfectly logical; therefore, he has no problem with them. If the laws make sense, why question them? That's his frustrating way. If the logic tracks clean, then leave the heart out of it and trust one's own intellect. I had to disagree with him somewhat, if only to spur on the conversation and watch his reactions to my dissenting opinion.

The reforms do make sense, but I don't like the idea of some law controlling when people marry or when they reproduce. It doesn't seem acceptable for a law dictated by man to determine when and with whom the natural functions of the mind and body ought to occur; for example, some young girls are mature enough to marry when they are fifteen or sixteen, while other girls may not be mature enough to marry until they are seventeen or eighteen years old. I insisted it was the same for boys: Vitus certainly wasn't ready for marriage when it was inflicted upon him by his father.

I tried these arguments and many others that I couldn't so passionately put my heart into, yet Sergius remained stubbornly set in his opinion. This is usual for him on almost any topic we've ever discussed, and I suspect it's the same in any disagreement he's ever had with anybody else. By the time we returned to the family home, neither of us had been persuaded to see things more in the way of the other.

I left him to go check on the boys, but gave them a concoction to help them sleep through the night. Most of the symptoms appear to have subsided, and as I prepare for bed, they are both sleeping comfortably and deeply. Their mother is sleeping in a chair by their bedside and will wake me if I am needed.

Though there is quite a bit of space between my master's large property and the home of the nearest family, it isn't such a bad walk to make it to their home. Marcus Severus sent a servant to my master requesting my services as a physician. They own a large farming property, and there was an accident with one of his freedman and a large blade. I advised the servant to instruct those currently tending to the young man to put pressure on the wound with clean cloth, and followed him shortly to tend to the injury. My time spent patching up the wounds of the Aelianus family served me well in this case. The injury was not as bad as it had originally looked once the bleeding had stopped and I was able to clean up some of the blood. From questioning him, I was able to deduce that he was lying about the cause of the injury.

It wasn't until I had managed to bully everybody else out of the room on the basis that none of them knew what they were doing--and I did--that I got the full story out of him.

His father and stepmother had recently arranged for him to marry a young lady of astonishing beauty from another nearby family. Lucia Horatius doesn't want to be married to him, but had agreed to the marriage for her own reasons. I can only wonder why, because the young man is definitely not the sharpest sword in the armory. He had been thinking of his marital problems and the impending birth of his first child, and the distraction had caused him to injure himself. I advised he go to the village nearby and use the services of a prostitute to release some stress. Though it is the women who must do most of the work in child-bearing and child-rearing, it isn't unusual for first time fathers to feel anxious. I have observed that even the best examples of manhood I've ever met show symptoms of nerves. Childbirth is dangerous, and men don't wish to lose their wives to it; in addition, it seems some also worry about being able to provide the best for their child (though this worry is doubtless more common in the less wealthy classes).

Today a woman snuck out to the Aelianus property to be seen by me. She had heard somewhere that Greek physicians are the best (and she's not wrong), and urgently needed my assistance. With my master's permission, I took the woman to the nearest couch and sat her down, as she was quite distressed. Try as we might, not master, Sergius, or myself could get her name or her family name out of her. She insisted that we must be kept in the dark for our own protection. I gave her some heavily watered down wine to calm her and soothe her throat, which was rough from harsh breathing.

It took many promises of silence on our part, but by the time we gave them, we were so curious about the cause of her upset that all three of us vowed to keep her secret just to hear her story. The nameless woman was on the run from her husband, who she feared would kill her if she dared to go back to him. As is his legal right, he had administered to her a sound beating for daring to speak to a male guest of his when he asked her a question. The guest had laughed as he'd watched his friend beat her. After he'd left, her husband beat her again, and used her body for his pleasure. When he'd left in the morning, she had run away, believing it her only chance to live.

More than once I've tended to women whose husbands have injured them so grievously, but it always saddens me. Just because it is a man's legal right to beat his wife doesn't mean he should do it. I

treated her, and we sheltered her for the night while Vitus decided what to do with her. Sergius and I urged him to turn her over to her husband to keep himself out of trouble, but he wouldn't listen. Because we had given our oaths, he insisted we had to honor them. In the morning, he sent her on her way with a couple of slaves as a gift to help her get wherever she wished to go.

Despite my status as a slave, I enjoy my position and my work. My master is kind – perhaps even too lax at times – and his wife and children are a delight to be near. Households in the cities are far more strictly controlled by the father who rules over them, as we pretend to be when we have company. That isn't to say that Vitus can't be strict when it's called for, or he's in an irritable mood, but those times are, thankfully, rare. The countryside we live in is beautiful, quiet, with our closest neighbors an hour's walk away.

There are so many less people living here than in the nearest village. One wouldn't think that there would be enough people to keep an old physician busy, and that would be incorrect. I suspect that even physicians in Rome don't have nearly as busy a life as I seem to have. If anything can go wrong on a specific day, it will. The Aelianus family has the strangest sort of luck: I'm not sure if the gods blessed them or cursed them.

Some of the other slaves were repairing a portion of the roof that had started to cave slightly. When Sergius passed underneath it, it fell on his head, cutting him. I'm concerned that some impurities may have gotten into the wound, but have cleaned it thoroughly. He was only unconscious for a few minutes, and is fighting me on whether or not he needs to stay in bed. Never mind that the man gets dizzy when he stands! Never mind that he claims he has the worst headache of his life! I had to tell him that I was worried about him to convince him to stay down.

After dealing with that and the injuries sustained by the slaves working on the roof over the course of the day, Junius came to see me complaining of a terrible pain in his arm. He was crying when his father carried him in. His mother turned her back for a minute, and Junius was in a tree and then just as quickly

back out of it and on the ground. The arm is broken, but it will heal fine. For a toddler, he certainly manages to get around. There's a lot of his father in him.

Tonight I found out why Sergius has decided it isn't logical for him to get married as the reforms dictate he should. He insists we're too far away from proper civilization for anybody who cares to actually tax him for it. There are no available women in the area that he finds suitable, and he is unwilling to travel further to find a wife. It was also made clear to me that he greatly prefers men: this I learned when one of our arguments ended with me on my knees, acting as a woman for him. I haven't been with a man since I was a teenager, many years ago, and was surprised to learn that I still enjoyed it. We have decided to be cautious and keep our sexual relations a secret, but I'm not sure I mind.

The appeal of having an extramarital affair has been beyond anything but my own theoretical standing for years now, but I think I understand thoroughly now. That which is forbidden is the most attractive. The secrecy, the intellectual connection, and the duration of the act make this particular thing more desirable. Vitus has mentioned Ovid's work to me before; in particular, I am reminded of one where he is giving his married mistress instructions on how to flirt with and tease him in front of her husband at a dinner party.

Though neither of us are married, our own social statuses make our sexual relationship scandalous. I find myself wanting for it, even alone in my room. Better poets and writers than I have expounded upon the ways that it is better to be with a man than a woman. Women have their delights and their sexual uses, but I've never had sex as good with a woman as I have with Sergius. Women's reproductive organs, though similar, differ enough from those of a man's that they can't possibly know how to stimulate them to the greatest effect as a man would. I'm pleased Sergius doesn't think himself unmanly for engaging in these acts with me and that he seems to want them to continue.

I found out while treating a cut on my master's forearm that Sergius has found a suitable bride. I suspect he wouldn't have agreed to the marriage at all if Vitus Aelianus wasn't so persuasive and obnoxiously insistent upon getting his way or doing what he thinks is right for a friend and former servant. She's beautiful, and seems intelligent, though I doubt she could keep up with her future husband in conversation. Titiana comes from a large family. Her father is a senator. That's all anybody has told me. Apparently it's all I need to know. I suspect Vitus might have learned of our affair and is putting a stop to it before he has to punish me for it. Causing pain to others when there's another way is not in his nature despite his impressive military career.

I dared to mention that I didn't like the match when Vitus was offering Sergius advice on which hole of hers to invade on their wedding night. Don't ask me what happened after, as discussing it leaves the taste of bile in my mouth that mixes poorly with the taste of jealousy. Suffice it to say, I don't think I'll be saying anything about it again.

Titiana has fallen ill only a week before her wedding. I did not cause this, as some suspect, because of my jealousy. I heal people. I don't hurt them. I'm a surgeon, not a murderer. Let this record bear the truth: I know what the problem is, and there is absolutely no way that I caused it. She has not menstruated in a fairly long time but insists she is a virgin. As one who has studied the work of Hippocrates and other physicians under my father, I am well aware of the imperfections that exist in the body of every woman, and first checked to see if it was the coldness of her body, a problem inside her cunt, or a problem of the mind halting the natural processes.

To say that her future groom, her parents, and I were surprised when the cause of the problem turned out to be an unexpected pregnancy making her nauseous and exhausted is an understatement.

One look at Sergius was all I needed to determine that the child is not his.

Sergius is rarely prone to displays of emotion, but the furrowing of his brow, the narrowing of his dark eyes, and the way his fists and jaw clenched were all I needed to see to determine that he was extremely livid. After some questioning from him and her scandalized parents, the sex-hungry girl finally admitted that she has been sleeping with an older slave who originally came to his owners from Egypt. He isn't even the property of the family, but that of their nearest neighbors. The two of them have been sneaking out to fuck for months. She claims to love him.

I don't know what will happen to either of them, and, quite frankly, my relief is enough that I can't bring myself to care. Titiana claims to have been enticed to experiment by paintings of the act hanging around the home and attempted to blame her crimes on her distraught parents. Sergius has left to go visit his parents for a time, insisting he doesn't want to be anywhere within leagues of the girl for some time.

The wedding has been called off.

I couldn't remember where I had last placed this record and so haven't updated it for a year. Much has happened, as so much tends to happen, over the course of a year. I have been made a freedman, though I have not left Vitus's home. There is much for me to do here, and this is where Sergius wishes to remain as well. We have our own jobs to do here, and now my work has increased again.

A new member was added to the household yesterday, much to Vitus's absolute delight: they've finally had a girl. Amelia is the most beautiful baby I have ever seen. She looks so much like her mother, with her dark hair and olive skin though she has her father's baby blue eyes. The village midwife came to take care of the birth, though she requested I assist due to the age of the mother (who is at the end of her bearing years), to aid her in preventing Vitus the heartbreak of losing his wife to childbirth. Valentina, the midwife, and I privately speculated that this should be her last child. This brings the total number of children to eight. Amelia's seven older brothers are excited to have a little sister to protect and coddle.

As with the others, Valentina insists on nursing Amelia herself because Amelia came from her body and not the body of some wet nurse. Since it is best for the child, I and the midwife agreed to this. She is in good health and her body is producing the correct amount of milk for the baby. Amelia has an excellent set of lungs and has woken up the entire household with her crying twice already tonight. Even in our own little home at the rear of the property Sergius and I could hear her. I commented on the power of her lungs the last time she woke us up, and Sergius grumbled that he's pleased she's so healthy, contemplated the virtues of moving to the village, and then rolled over and fell back asleep. I believe he's quite glad at the moment that he never had children of his own.

I expect our situation here will continue to improve. Vitus's eldest son, Sabinus, will soon be marrying his childhood sweetheart. I've watched them both grow up, and I am certain the match will be a good one. I wish them luck, many children, and many happy days together.