

---

Plague or Poetry? Thucydides on the Epidemic at Athens

Author(s): Thomas E. Morgan

Source: *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), Vol. 124 (1994), pp. 197-209

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284291>

Accessed: 04/05/2010 01:33

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://pr2litvip.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jhup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-).

## Plague or Poetry? Thucydides on the Epidemic at Athens

Thomas E. Morgan  
*Bellevue, Washington*

In the second book of his *History*, chapters 47 through 55, Thucydides describes in great detail a severe νόσος (disease) that ravaged the city of Athens in the summer of 430/429 BC.<sup>1</sup> This disease quickly reached epidemic proportions, attacking about twenty–five percent of the adult population with a high rate of mortality. So vividly did Thucydides describe the signs, symptoms, and sequelae of the disease that his ancient and modern readers alike became fascinated with the illness. But, despite his detailed description, the cause of the epidemic remains uncertain. Its mysterious nature has played upon the minds of philologists, historians, and physicians and, in recent years, the disease has assumed more importance in some quarters than the war in which it arose. Certainly more scholarly attention has been directed to the nature of the epidemic than to the effects of the epidemic on Athens' ability to conduct the war with Sparta.

Especially in the past one hundred years, physicians have joined philologists in speculating about what micro–organism caused the epidemic. One scholarly analysis has succeeded another, arguing that the cause was smallpox or measles, typhus or scarlet fever, bubonic plague or pneumonic plague, ergotism, leptospirosis or Tularemia, and, more recently, Marburg–Ebola virus, Rift Valley Fever, or influenza complicated by staphylococcal infection.<sup>2</sup> Each

<sup>1</sup>I will translate Greek words and phrases, with apologies to philologists, for the sake of physicians who may not have learned Greek. The terms 'disease' and 'epidemic' will be used throughout since they are more in keeping with Thucydides' terminology and avoid the connotations of the more usual term 'plague,' especially those of the medieval disease of the same name. The text of Thucydides used is the Oxford edition of H. S. Jones (1900, rpt. with apparatus criticus, 1942).

<sup>2</sup>Smallpox (Littman and Littman), measles (Page, Shrewsbury), typhus (Crawford, Gomme), scarlet fever (Rolleston 49), bubonic plague or pneumonic plague (Hooker, MacArthur), ergotism (Salway and Dell), leptospirosis or Tularemia (Wylie and Stubbs), Marburg–Ebola virus (Scarrow), Rift Valley Fever (Morens and Chu), influenza complicated by staphylococcal infection (Langmuir et al.).

proposed etiology fit the description in certain respects, but each had its difficulties as well, thus accounting for the continuing search for the true cause.<sup>3</sup>

Since the opinions of scholars have varied greatly and no consensus has been reached, what are we to conclude was the cause of the pestilence? Is modern medical science capable of determining what agent was responsible? As a physician, recently earning an advanced degree in Classics, I was at first hopeful that a definitive answer would emerge, but later I began to doubt. Within the past two years, however, two scholarly contributions have appeared which may direct future critical thinking along more productive lines. In the first, a contribution that appeared in these *Transactions*, Morens and Littman provided an analysis based upon epidemiological principles rather than the usual medical approach. Their analysis shows that the disease was one whose characteristics limit but do not define the etiological possibilities, a welcome departure from the seemingly endless arguments about the causative agent based solely on the symptoms described by Thucydides. The second contribution, by Percy, properly focuses our attention on Thucydides' description as a narrative work of the fifth-century BC that presents "...reality mediated, and therefore transformed, by the conventions of language and art" (599).

The purpose of this paper is to re-examine, in the light of these recent contributions, Thucydides' language, his ability to use medical terms and concepts correctly, the literary context in which the *History* was written, and his purpose in reporting the epidemic. My hope is that with such a review we can understand the limitations imposed upon our modern scientific and philological interpretation of Thucydides' words and ideas. Then, with a clearer grasp of his description, we can better evaluate the epidemic that ravaged Athens in the second year of the Peloponnesian War.

However much modern observers may wish it otherwise, we are still dependent on Thucydides; only he gives us such a complete description both of the disease and of its consequences for Athens. If we are to understand this description, we must understand Thucydides' times, his vocabulary, and the literary setting of his *History* in the last quarter of the fifth century. Although we cannot know all that might be desired in that regard—indeed, we are not even sure what fraction of the Athenian population was literate—we do have certain information that bears on the literary "standards" of his time. Cochrane in

<sup>3</sup>Cf. the excellent reviews of the problem by Scarborough, Poole and Holladay, and Longrigg.

1929 showed clearly how indebted Thucydides was to the Hippocratic authors, maintaining that it was their critical approach to medicine that influenced Thucydides to adopt the critical method in historical narrative. J. H. Finley agreed with Cochrane, holding that the Hippocratic critical method influenced not only Thucydides and the recording of history, but also extended to many other areas of Greek endeavor as well. Cochrane's seminal work was also accepted and extended by scholars such as Weidauer, Page, de Romilly, and Scarborough, but Thucydides' relation to the Hippocrateans has not yet been completely explored. The persuasive arguments of Cochrane and Weidauer still go largely unnoticed.

Page noted that Thucydides used many terms in his description of the disease that were also used by the Hippocrateans: αίματώδης (blood-red), φλόγωσις (burning), ὑπέρυθρον (reddened), πελιτνός (livid) among others. In his careful scholarship, Page noted verb usage that was typically Hippocratean as well as a number of terms that were not employed by the physicians exclusively. Sixteen years later, Parry (113) responded that Page had overstated Thucydides' dependence upon the physicians for technical terms, saying that the "vocabulary of the description of the Plague is not entirely, is not even largely, technical" and that most of the terms were in common daily usage. Parry's sharp disagreement with almost all previous scholarly commentary has never been, to my knowledge, critically reviewed, but has been accepted as the ultimate judgment by many later writers. Yet, if we are to understand precisely what Thucydides was describing, we must understand his terminology. Who is correct, Page or Parry? Using the computer-based *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG), I examined the occurrence of all the terms used by Thucydides to describe the symptoms in *History* 2.49 and confirmed that Page was in almost all respects correct. There are at least five terms in Thucydides' description that occur only in the Hippocratean corpus and nowhere else in all of the pre-Thucydidean Greek literature that has survived to modern times (Morgan). Page approached the problem to show that Thucydides was dependent upon the Hippocrateans for his medical terminology; Parry was at pains to show that Thucydides was not indebted to the physicians. As is often the case in such controversies, the truth lies somewhere in the middle, but the TLG search did support the conclusion that Thucydides knew the medical literature of his time and relied upon it for the technical terms and medical concepts demanded by his description of the disease.

A further fact helpful in understanding the literary culture of Thucydides' times emerged when the TLG search was conducted. The TLG-IBYCUS compact disc contains all *extant* Greek works of antiquity. As the

search for the occurrence of a given word proceeds, a sense of the volume of the literature being searched is imparted as a function of the time necessary for the search. The fact that emerged was that the fifty-one books of the Hippocratic Corpus are equal in volume to all other pre-Thucydidean Greek literature combined. The Corpus was, however, probably written both before and after Thucydides' time, so that only about half of what we have today would have been available to Thucydides.<sup>4</sup> Still, the number of volumes that would have comprised a complete Greek library (if indeed such a library had ever been assembled in fifth-century Athens) would have been heavily weighted toward medical works. While some may quibble as to the exact proportion of the medical works, they must have comprised a significant part of the written literature then available. We can conclude on this basis, as well as those cited by other authors such as J. H. Finley and Cochrane, that Thucydides must have known these medical works and could hardly have escaped being in some way influenced by them. But, in assessing the literary environment in which he composed the *History*, we should not forget that, while Thucydides depended on the physicians for some terminology and concepts of disease, he was addressing his *History* primarily to a non-medical audience.

It was in this environment, then, that Thucydides set down this account of what seemed to him to be the most important war in history. He says as much in the beginning (*History* 1.1) and thus justifies his labor. But it is important to understand that the *History* is narrative, a series of events linked temporally. There is little analysis of cause and effect compared to the practices of modern historians, and the reality of the events, especially the speeches, was admitted by Thucydides to have been tailored to suit his narrative purposes (1.22.1). Did

<sup>4</sup>This estimate is based on an analysis of the occurrence of the verbs "to die" (certainly a common verb of outcome in medicine) in Greek works before and after Thucydides' time. Prior to 430 BC the verb θνήσκω is overwhelmingly preferred, with 97 occurrences in 10 non-medical authors, while after 400 BC through the time of Galen the preference shifts to ἀποθνήσκω and συναποθνήσκω (more than 1195 occurrences of the compound verbs in four authors) as opposed to θνήσκω (237 occurrences in the same four authors). In each analysis, the Hippocratic Corpus was excluded. When the Corpus was analyzed separately, 232 occurrences of "verbs of dying" were found in 35 books: 90 were θνήσκω and 142 were (συν)αποθνήσκω. But the two forms did not often occur together in the same book; either θνήσκω was used or (συν)αποθνήσκω was employed. Of the 35 books using the verb, 12 used θνήσκω exclusively, 19 used only the compound forms, and only 4 books used both forms

I have assumed, based on the fact that θνήσκω was favored by more ancient authors, that the Hippocratic books using the simple form were the older books. Further, Thucydides uses both forms equally, thus placing him in the 'transitional' period. [For more complete analysis, please refer to my thesis.] Finally, the sum of the 'θνήσκω books' [12] plus the 'transitional' ones [4] equals those written before or during Thucydides' lifetime and is roughly equal to the 19 '(συν)αποθνήσκω books' written later.

Thucydides also tailor his description of the epidemic to suit the purposes of his story? I believe that he did and that we can find evidence to support this point of view in Thucydides' choice of verbs and style of presentation in the disease description as compared with the remainder of the *History*. If Thucydides had followed the Hippocrateans in describing the course of the epidemic, he would have been, like the physicians, telegraphic, terse and spare. By comparison, Thucydides' disease description is literary and complete. Physicians, both ancient and modern, tend to use the same verbs repeatedly to express the outcome of a case when it ends in death; Greek physicians invariably used a form of θνήσκω. Thucydides neither uses the same verbs as the physicians nor confines himself to a single one, using instead a variety of verbs: διαφθείρω six times in chapters 49–53, ἀπόλλυμι twice, and θνήσκω three times, but never in the disease description itself. He seems to alternate these verbs to *avoid* repetition. Was Thucydides choosing verbs more commonly used in military connections than in medical situations? Was this a subtle attempt to link the pestilence to the war in the mind of the reader? He also used the more ancient, poetic form θνήσκω rather than the compound ἀποθνήσκω in vogue during his lifetime.

With the exception of Parry, no scholar has paid attention to the style of the description. This is most curious because even to an inexperienced reader, chapters 49–53 seem remarkably free from the usual difficulties of Thucydides' style. There are few passages marked, as so often elsewhere, by ellipsis and difficult grammar. On the contrary, as Parry has so aptly put it: "The style of that description is observant and exact, but...it is grammatical, ...dramatic and imaginative, controlled throughout by the writer's determination to show the awful and overwhelming power of the sickness. The sentence construction is various, often containing powerful and unexpected verbs in emphatic positions, or after a climactic catalogue, resolving itself into an epigrammatic summation" (114). I would disagree with Parry's position in only one respect: the literary emphasis Thucydides displays has interfered with exact reporting of the medical facts. And it is this medical inexactness that has defeated modern attempts to assign an etiologic agent.

If then, as seems very probable, the description is a narrative one that verges on the poetic, how are we to view his description of the epidemic of 430–427? As a factual reality or as a narrative that blends fact with other purposes? Pearcy, reviewing the differences between modern ontological or

patho-physiological medicine<sup>5</sup> and Hippocratic doctrine, argues convincingly that modern physicians are "...conditioned...to suppose that Thucydides' text will be sufficiently transparent to allow [them] to identify the disease that it presents" (598–99). As a result, modern commentators have tended to take all symptoms at face value, to interpret all questionable technical terms in modern terms (e.g., the variations in translation of φλυκταίναις as either flat or raised skin lesions), to overlook certain items or their absence (e.g., the absence of reports of scarring if the disease were smallpox) and to misread the Greek, all in order to fit the disease to a modern patho-physiological entity. While Morens and Littman reviewed the disease symptoms ontologically, they correctly concluded that "...Thucydides' description of the epidemic disease is subject to potential error" (1992: 278). They note that his accuracy in recording signs and symptoms may be flawed because of inconsistencies between ancient and modern concepts of disease, because of lack of precision in ancient medical terms, because Thucydides was not trained as a physician (as far as we know), and because, as I will show, Thucydides wrote the account of the epidemic not for medical reasons alone but also for dramatic ones.

Pearcy has extensively discussed the point that ancient and modern concepts of disease differ, primarily because the ancients did not have modern knowledge of patho-physiology, but also because they regarded diseases as engendered by humoral imbalance within a single person. Given such a basic doctrinal difference, it is extremely unlikely that the two approaches will converge on a single disease entity. Lack of recognition of these differences in doctrines and lack of precision in medical terms have led to much ink being spilled during the past fifty years in the hope that by precise identification of symptoms a single modern cause of the disease could be recognized. For example, Thucydides' victims displayed reddish, livid skin, breaking out into small pustules and ulcers (...ὑπέρυθρον, πελιτνόν, φλυκταίναις μικραῖς καὶ ἔλκεσιν ἐξηθηκός, 2.49.5) or, in modern parlance, an exanthematous disease. Then the controversy raged among modern scholars: was the disease measles or smallpox or typhus or scarlet fever? Some read φλυκταίναις as 'blisters,' such as Aristophanes' rowers had (*Frogs* 236); others read 'spots' or 'rashes.' Thus the term φλυκταίναις, variously interpreted, meant raised skin lesions to some modern commentators but smooth lesions to others. Some said the rash was that of scarlet fever. No, said others, the lesions were the swollen glands of bubonic plague because Thucydides really meant to say βουβών instead of φλυκταίναις καὶ ἔλκεσιν. The fact that such crucially different meanings

<sup>5</sup>That is, the view that diseases are caused by agents such as microbes, genetic abnormalities, chemical disorders, etc. which cause abnormal functioning of the body or its parts.

could be read into Thucydides' words shows the degree of imprecision that exists.

Consider another, more flagrant, example of ancient and modern imprecision: In 2.49.8 *στερισκόμενοι* (the masculine, third person, plural, *middle or passive* participle of *στερέω*, agreeing with *πολλοί*, the antecedents of which are *αἰδοῖα*, *χεῖρας* and *πόδας*) has often been translated as active: 'cutting off,' rather than in the passive sense, 'being deprived of' or 'losing the use of' (LSJ s.v. *στερέω*, 1). Most modern commentators have missed the passive nuance of 'losing the use of' which accords with the ancient occurrences where one *στερίσκομαι...τῶν ὀμμάτων*, that is, 'loses the use of the eyes,' or 'is blinded' but certainly does not 'cut off the eyes.'<sup>6</sup> Interpreting the passive as active in *History* 2.49.8 has led some, including Lucretius, to a misunderstanding that *στερισκόμενοι* means amputation with a knife (as Lucretius' *ferro*), that is, surgically by the patient or physician, or amputation by gangrene.<sup>7</sup> Gangrenous amputation suggests typhus or ergotism (among other diseases), or the combination of influenza and secondary staphylococcal infection. This latter suggestion that two diseases which had captured popular attention in the twentieth century might have been the cause of a 'toxic shock syndrome' 2400 years ago, gave rise to a symposium at the 1985 annual meeting of the American Philological Association and to national press attention. Fortunately, Morens and Littman (1992, 1994) have now invoked epidemiological arguments to show that two or more diseases could not have been involved to cause a single epidemic, thus sparing academicians the necessity of arguing on philological grounds whether the middle or passive was intended.

These are only two examples of crucial symptoms that might identify the disease if more precise agreement between ancient intent and modern interpretation could be found. More such disagreements exist, but these two examples demonstrate the futility of our continued attempts to read into Thucydides' description a modern interpretation of the cause of the disease. There is another aspect of Thucydides' description that occurred both to me and to Morens and Littman that can perhaps lead us to a better understanding of Thucydides' 'case history.' It seemed to me and to other physicians to whom I showed a translation of *History* 2.49–50, that the organization of initial symptoms and signs mixed with later "complications and sequelae," as Morens and Littman (1992)

<sup>6</sup>For example, Herodotus 6.117.2 and 9.93.3–4 and Plato *Phaed.* 243a.–b.

<sup>7</sup>Bailey *ad* 6.1209 comments on Lucretius' error. The diagnostic importance of gangrene in the Athenian epidemic has been very much overstated in the literature, especially since it is unclear that gangrene was actually being described by Thucydides. Cf. Littman and Littman, especially at 270.

put it, closely resembles the 'head to toe' listing of symptoms and signs gathered by a neophyte modern medical student when first presented with a complicated diagnostic problem. The student, armed with a catechism for the ordering of signs and symptoms and rudimentary instruction in the methods of eliciting them, is sent into the presence of a more or less cooperative patient, there to sharpen the diagnostic skills. The result, almost always, is the collection of a bewildering array of data, not the least one of which can be omitted from presentation to the student's instructor. In order to miss nothing and to organize the symptoms and signs coherently, the student resorts to a catalogue arranged in 'head to toe' sequence.<sup>8</sup> Such may have been the ancient approach as well, although we have nothing to tell us how the formidable Hippocratean skills of observation were taught to apprentices. Whatever the reason, the occurrence of symptoms in the head-to-toe sequence described by Thucydides is not characteristic of any known disease.

When the epidemic raged throughout Athens, Thucydides was likely to have encountered a very confusing situation. He observed Athenians in all stages of the disease: some showed more of a given symptom than others, some were just becoming ill while others died or recovered; some had mild cases, others all the symptoms and sequelae; some passed the crisis in seven days, some in nine; all the populace was crazed with fear. How was the historian to deal with such confusion, recording everything and omitting nothing that might help the reader to recognize the disease when it recurred? Thucydides was undoubtedly acquainted with Hippocratean theory but not skilled in medical practice, therefore what would be more natural than the head-to-toe catalogue of symptoms and signs that he has left us?

Having considered the medical aspects of the description of the epidemic, let us turn to the historian's purpose in reporting it in such graphic detail and especially in placing it in such close association with the funeral oration of Pericles. Most historians believe that as the war progressed, Thucydides made notes from which he completed his *History* many years later.<sup>9</sup> If so, it appears from the description he has given us that he was no more certain of the form taken by the disease at the end than at the beginning of the war. It is obvious that neither he nor physicians with whom he must have consulted had a clear idea of the nature of this epidemic. What then was his purpose in giving such prominence to the description of the epidemic? Was it "merely to describe

<sup>8</sup>Such a sequence has for many years been mandated in the protocols taught in 'physical diagnosis' courses. See, for example, R. D. Judge and G. Zuidema, *Physical Diagnosis* (Boston 1963).

<sup>9</sup>J. H. Finley 77, M. I. Finley 46.

what it was like and set down the symptoms so that [it can] be recognized, if it ever breaks out again” (2.48.3)? Or was there another reason that guided him in his description?

It is likely that Thucydides used the epidemic to emphasize the effects of the war upon the Athenian people, who were then at the height of their powers. M. I. Finley notes that Thucydides had to describe the epidemic because it killed so many Athenians, but that “to make the point, however, Thucydides did not need to build up the horrifying picture he did, as detail is piled upon detail with superb artistry... The objective, for which the details laid the necessary basis, was the long final peroration [2.52–54] on the moral and social breakdown brought about by the plague” (49). And Parry is correct in saying that, to Thucydides, “The Plague is a *πάθος*, like war, and in fact, it is a partner of war. War, Thucydides tells us clearly in 1.23, consists of *πάθη*. It is in fact to be measured by suffering and destruction.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the description of the disease, which is clearly a result of conditions such as overcrowding brought about by the war, is a literary device emphasizing the triple destruction of crops, people, and animals by the war and its accompanying pestilence. Thucydides speaks of the Spartans ravaging the deserted fields and orchards at the height of the growing season while inside the crowded city people and animals are struck down by an illness none can prevent or treat. He describes the disease in horrifying detail and then shows that it leaves its victims so weakened in mind as well as in body that individual and collective mores collapse, men look only for pleasure and refuse to fight, the gods are forgotten, temples are desecrated, funeral pyres stolen, and the dead go unburied in Athens while the countryside is wasted. Thucydides concludes:

Τοιούτω μὲν πάθει οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι περιπεσόντες ἐπιέζοντο, ἀνθρώπων τ' ἔνδον θνησκόντων καὶ γῆς ἔξω δηουμένης.

Such was the disaster which fell upon the Athenians crushing them, with people dying inside the city and the land outside laid waste. (2.54.1)

With these words he evoked an image that joined him and his audience to a long line of authors going back to the very beginning of Greek literature: so Homer told in *Iliad* 1.47–53 of the pestilence rained down by Apollo’s arrows upon the Greeks warring at Troy, and Aeschylus spoke of “the evils with which the gods smote the Persians” (*Persians* 514), and Sophocles set the stage for the tragedy of Oedipus with the words:

<sup>10</sup>Parry 115. The excellent discussion by Parry on the poetic style of Thucydides is commendable.

“φθίνουσα μὲν κάλυξιν ἐγκάρποις χθονός  
 φθίνουσα δ’ ἀγέλαις βουνόμοις τόκοισί τε  
 ἀγόνοις γυναικῶν· ἐν δ’ ὁ πυρφόρος θεὸς  
 σκήψας ἐλαύνει, λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος, πόλιν...”

“Blighting the land in ripening flower,  
 Blighting the grazing herds of oxen,  
 Blighting our birth-laboring women, the fiery god strikes;  
 he hurls down a hateful plague on our city...” (OT 25–28)

Just so does Thucydides describe this epidemic: people dying in the city while the fields outside are laid waste. Any Greek reading Thucydides’ *History* would be confronted with powerful literary resonances between the conditions at Athens and the mythology and legends of Troy and Oedipus. It seems scarcely credible to suppose that such resonance was not intended by Thucydides.

Certainly the dramatic effect of the epidemic on the fortunes of Athens was not lost on ancient authors. There can be no doubt that Lucretius recognized the power of Thucydides’ description of the dual πάθος of war and pestilence. Why would he have given the epidemic such prominence and copied it so exactly in *De rerum natura*? And in the ‘Noric cattle plague’ of Vergil’s *Georgics* 3 many see another imitation of Thucydides’ description of the epidemic at Athens (West, Mynors *ad* 3.478). Indeed, some believe the ‘Noric cattle plague’ was wholly invented by Vergil for the dramatic and poetic effect he so admired in Lucretius and, by extension, in Thucydides (West 37, Thomas *ad* 3.478). In his mythical ‘plague at Aegina’ (*Met.* 7.523–613), Ovid used elements borrowed not only from Thucydides’ Athenian description, but from Vergil’s cattle plague as well (cf. Bömer *ad* 523). Thucydides’ disease description was emulated not only by ancient poets but also by ancient historians who admired the power of his description so much that they imitated it in their histories of Parthian and Byzantine wars.<sup>11</sup> These ancient imitators of Thucydides understood very well that the dramatic effects of the epidemic made gripping reading.<sup>12</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to go further into the descriptions of plagues by Latin authors or into the extensive bibliographies on the subject; yet, the fact that three of the greatest Latin poets responded as they did to the drama of Thucydides’ presentation of the Athenian epidemic suggests

<sup>11</sup>Woodman cites Lucian *De historiae conscribendi* 15 and Procopius 2.22.

<sup>12</sup>West, “Two Plagues,” concludes, “Virgil is rhetorical by comparison with Lucretius... Lucretius is emotional by comparison with Thucydides. But it would be misleading to say, *tout court*, that Lucretius is emotional or that Thucydides is dispassionate. A comparison with Greek medical writings shows that Thucydides’ account of the plague is dramatic and compassionate and poetic, artistically patterned to demonstrate Thucydides’ view of history” (88).

that a proper course for further investigation of Thucydides' dramatic intentions lies in this direction.

Those who look at the disease description separately from the rest of the *History* make another error. They fail to see how Thucydides places Pericles' funeral oration, the speech that celebrates Athens' pre-eminence and grandeur, in juxtaposition to the description of the epidemic and the moral and physical degradation the epidemic caused. Many months elapsed between the funeral oration in the winter and the onset of the epidemic the next summer, but Thucydides shortens this interval to the space of only six lines of text (2.47). Rapidly but graphically, he describes the disease in three short chapters totaling 72 lines (2.48–50) and then depicts Athens' degradation at length in chapters 51 through 54. And when we read the two sections together—the oration and the result of the epidemic—we see many parallels:

In 2.36 Pericles speaks of Athenian ancestors since it is “right and proper to pay them honor.” But in 2.52 Athenians have lapsed morally to such an extent that they do not bury their dead, the ultimate dishonor to ancestors.

In 2.37.2–3: “Athenians keep the law,” says Pericles, “...because it commands our deep respect. We obey the laws and those unwritten laws which it is held a shame to break.” But in 2.53.1: “The disease brought the beginning of great lawlessness,” and, finally, “no fear of god or the law of man restrained them” for no man expected to live long enough to be tried and punished (2.53.4).

In 2.41.5 and 42.5, Pericles speaks of γενναίως δικαιοῦντες (noble and righteous) men with ἀρεταί (manly virtue) who fought for Athens. We see a marked contrast in the descriptions in 2.52.4 of men who were ἀναισχύντους (shameless) in their deeds and reckless in openly seeking self-indulgent pleasure (2.53.2)

In 2.44 Pericles praises those who met brave, honorable death on the battlefield while in 2.52–53 Thucydides speaks of temples filled with the dead left unburied or burned shamelessly on stolen funeral pyres.

All this suggests that Thucydides intended the funeral oration, the epidemic, and its sequelae to be read together. He wished to describe the pathos of war and the pathos of the pestilence in juxtaposition in order to contrast the lofty ideals of the funeral oration with the degradation accompanying a terrible epidemic. In doing so he used images that resonated powerfully with the legends of Greek literature. In this way he could accomplish his greater objective, which was to show the incalculable, demonic effect of war and its concomitant pestilence on the citizens of Athens. There can be no doubt that his secondary

aim was to describe a very serious epidemic that continued to afflict the Athenian army for several years, both because it was a fact essential to his *History* and so that it might be recognized if it should occur again. What is in doubt is our ability to find an etiological agent for the disease by dissection of the signs and symptoms of Thucydides' description. These signs and symptoms are imprecise because our basis for understanding their meaning is different from that of the Hippocrateans or of Thucydides, who used Hippocratic terminology and doctrines. The terms are imprecise, in short, because the ancient humoral approach does not coincide with a modern patho-physiological approach, however much we might wish them to coincide. The description is imprecise not only because the recorder lacked medical training, but also because he took dramatic license. To focus endlessly on what currently recognized disease caused the epidemic is futile and diverts us from Thucydides' over-arching purpose: to describe a season of suffering that reduced Athens temporarily to the same condition which twenty-five years of war finally made permanent.

## Works Cited

- Bailey, C., ed. 1947. *T. Lucretius C., De rerum natura*. Vol. 3. Oxford.
- Bömer, F. 1976. *Commentary on P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphoses*. Heidelberg.
- Cochrane, C. N. 1929. *Thucydides and the Science of History*. London.
- Crawford, R. 1914. *Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art*. Oxford. 23–41.
- Finley, J. H., Jr. 1942. *Thucydides*. Cambridge.
- Finley, M. I. 1968. *Aspects of Antiquity*. New York.
- Gomme, A. W. 1956. *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 2. Oxford.
- Hooker, E. M. 1958. "Buboes in Thucydides?" *JHS* 8: 78–83.
- Judge, R. D. and G. Zuidema. 1963. *Physical Diagnosis*. Boston.
- Langmuir, A. D. et al.. 1985. "The Thucydides Syndrome. A New Hypothesis of the Cause of the Plague at Athens." *New Eng. J. Medicine* 313: 1027–30.
- Littman, R. J. and M. J. Littman. 1969. "The Athenian Plague: Smallpox." *TAPA* 100: 261–75.
- Longrigg, J. 1989. "The Great Plague of Athens." *Hist. Science* 18: 209–25.
- MacArthur, W. P. 1954. "The Athenian Plague: a Medical Note." *CQ* 4: 171–74.
- Morens, D. M. and M. C. Chu. 1986. "Letter to the Editor." *New Eng. J. Medicine* 314: 855.
- Morens, D. M. and R. J. Littman. 1992. "Epidemiology of the Plague of Athens." *TAPA* 122: 271–304.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. "The 'Thucydides Syndrome' Reconsidered: New Thoughts on the 'Plague of Athens.'" *Am. J. Epidemiology* 140: forthcoming.
- Morgan, T. E. 1989. "Thucydides' Description of the Athenian Plague." Thesis deposited in Suzzallo Library, University of Washington, Seattle.
- Mynors, R. A. B., ed. 1990. *Virgil's Georgics with Commentary*. Oxford.
- Page, D. L. 1953. "Thucydides' Description of the Great Plague at Athens." *CQ* 3: 97–119.
- Parry, A. 1969. "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague." *BICS* 16: 106–118.
- Pearcy, L. T. 1992. "Diagnosis as Narrative in Ancient Literature." *AJP* 113: 595–616.
- Poole, J. C. F. and A. J. Holladay. 1979. "Thucydides and the Plague at Athens." *CQ* 29: 282–300.
- Rolleston, J. D. 1937. *The History of the Acute Exanthemata*. London.
- de Romilly, J. 1962. *Thucydide: Livre II*. Paris.
- Salway, P. and W. Dell. 1955. "The Plague at Athens." *G&R* 24: 62–70.
- Scarborough, J. 1970. "Thucydides, Greek Medicine and the Plague at Athens: A Summary of Possibilities." *Episteme* 4: 77–90.
- Scarrow, G. D. 1988. "The Athenian Plague: A Possible Diagnosis." *Anc. Hist. Bull.* 2: 4–8.
- Shrewsbury, J. F. P. 1950. "The Plague at Athens." *Bull. Hist. Medicine* 24: 1–25.
- Thomas, R. F., ed. 1988. *Virgil's Georgics 3 with Commentary*. Cambridge.
- Weidauer, K. 1954. *Thukydides und die Hippokratischen Schriften*. Heidelberg.
- West, D. 1979. "Two Plagues: Virgil's *Georgics* 3.478–566 and Lucretius 6.1090–1286," in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature*. D. West and T. Woodman, edd. Cambridge. 71–88.
- Woodman, T. 1979. "Self-Imitation and the Substance of History," in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature*. D. West and T. Woodman, edd. Cambridge. 143–56.
- Wylie, J. A. H. and H. W. Stubbs. 1983. "The Plague at Athens 430–428 BC: Epidemic and Epizootic." *CQ* 33: 6–11.