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Thucydides' Plague, a Narrative Aggressor

Masen J. Williamson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Roger T. Macfarlane, Chair
Michael Pope
Thomas Wayment

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Thucydides' Plague, a Narrative Aggressor

Masen J. Williamson
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

This thesis expands upon the notion that Thucydides' plague narrative in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* punctuates his argument for the unique greatness of the Peloponnesian War. Through the plague, Thucydides displays the collapse of Greek society's standards and practices. He does this by describing a plague which does not conform to 5th century BCE Greek medical ideas. Balance, human art, and divine intervention all fail in their attempts to restore the health of the individual and society. Thucydides portrays the plague as a narrative aggressor whose intent is to topple Athens and its ideals. Lucretius' plague narrative, because it narrates the same historical moment but from a different perspective, is then discussed in order to demonstrate how other authors have used Thucydides' technique.

Keywords: plague, Thucydides, balance, domain, sanctuary, Peloponnesian War, Lucretius, historiography, Greek medicine

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
BACKGROUND	v
Introduction.....	1
The Greatness of the Plague	4
The Description of the Plague.....	9
Athens as a Symbol.....	14
Divine and Mortal Attempts to Heal.....	18
The Divine in Thucydides.....	20
Balance as it Relates to Healing.....	23
Balance Elsewhere	27
Homeric Medicine	29
Hippocratic Medicine.....	31
Sanctuary Healing.....	33
Lucretius' Plague	34
Conclusion	40
BIBLOGRAPHY	41

BACKGROUND

I first stumbled upon the topic of this paper after reading Rachel Bruzzone's article, "*Polemos, Pathemata, and Plague: Thucydides' Narrative and the Tradition of Upheaval*," where she argued that the plague passages in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* punctuate his thesis that the Peloponnesian war was an affront to Greek identity. After searching along this vein, I found others, including Hornblower and Kallet, who highlighted the same idea. They stressed the importance of understanding how these memorable passages functioned in Thucydides' larger work. They argued that these passages fit into a rhetorical trend of the fifth century BCE where an author displays a combination of disasters and distresses (plague, war, pestilence, famine, etc.) which function together to overthrow or undermine a society. While I fully agree with these authors' findings, I noticed that they discuss *that* Thucydides does this but do not go on to say *how* he showed this through the plague. This is where I believe I can make a contribution.

After reading through Thucydides' account, I felt uniquely positioned to weigh-in on this subject. I had taught a medical terminology course for a few semesters and was accustomed to seeking out medical parallels in the texts I read so that I could discuss them in class. I noticed that Thucydides' description of the plague and its effects were overtly medical and that he was grappling with Greek medical theory in general. While there were many medical parallels, three stood out to me as the most blatant. The first was the sense of health attained through balance. This idea is that a person is unwell because there is imbalance within or around them and that the only way to restore health is to bring that individual back into a state of balance. The second was the idea of health being the possession of a particular domain. Namely that the source of the illness, either mortal or divine, determines who has the ability to cure the ailment. Divinity must

work in its own sphere and mortality likewise. Thirdly, I observed that Thucydides contends with the notion of sanctuary healing. Whether temple incubation or oracular intervention, site-specific healing plays a major role of Thucydides' narrative and serves as his more graphic example.

Thucydides discusses the causes and effects of the plague in terms of balance. He points out both the afflicted person burning from within (2.49) and the afflicted city stifling and hot within the walls (2.52). He records that the victim of the plague is externally cool to the touch, yet suffering from an unquenchable thirst (2.49). This unyielding desire for that which is cold and wet is imbalance. The radical disparity in temperature is imbalance. Thucydides overtly claims that the plague caused an expulsion of all biles named by physicians, a phenomenon which was impossible to their understanding of Greek medicine. He is purposefully recoding the plague as an illness which goes against his understanding of Greek medicine.

Thucydides records his plague in a way which straddles the two domains. Vivian Nutton, in his foundational work *Ancient Medicine*, identifies this idea of domain-based healing in Homeric medicine. Thucydides uses, employs, and manipulates this idea. He begins by pointing out the failing of the human arts, stating that the physicians could do nothing to stop the plague (2.47). Later on, he highlights the collapse of divine methods of healing and the abandonment of those attempts (2.52). Thucydides' plague cannot be healed within either sphere of influence because the plague does not belong solely to the mortal or divine domains. The origin of the malady determines who has the ability to cure the affliction, so Thucydides purposefully makes his plague arise from both domains. The disease is a foreign affliction, traveling from Ethiopia through Egypt to Libya, then across Persia into Athens (2.48). The disease is also a divine illness, announced by way of oracle and traveling with the Lacedemonians by means of some god (2.54). The disease, being both divine and mortal, cannot be stopped by human art nor godly

intercession. Thucydides further topples domain-based healing by describing that the plague arrives *ex nihilo* (2.49). The plague is both mortal and divine and springs up in Athens out of nowhere. Thucydides is intentionally creating a plague which does not adhere to this understanding of Greek medicine.

Thucydides' most graphic example of the collapse of Greek medicine is through his sanctuaries. It is recorded that because of the plague temple worship ceased entirely (2.52). The temples, typically filled with ritual and supplications, were instead filled with corpses (2.52). They became crypts for those who attempted to reach healing through divine means. Thucydides describes death raging rampant throughout the city of Athens and destruction ravaging the country beyond the walls (2.54). The idea that healing can be attained through divine intervention at holy sanctuaries is found across all evolutions of Greek medicine. Yet Thucydides' plague is not touched by these intercessions or impeded by ritual.

Understanding that Thucydides describes a plague which undermines and undercuts Greek medicine answers how Thucydides attacks his society through the plague. It is further evidence that the plague is not a historical aside but an episode which punctuates his overall message. The plague is meant to help portray the devastation of the times. Realizing that Thucydides is manipulating the historical illness for narrative purposes asserts the necessity to study his account as a rhetorical piece. Other authors, such as Lucretius, have recorded the plague at Athens for rhetorical purposes and have been studied with that understanding in mind. Thucydides' plague narrative is a rhetorical device as opposed to a historical event. The plague is meant to show that everything is attacking the Greeks, from the air they breathe to the city they live in. He does this by creating an illness a fifth century BCE understanding of medicine could not cure.

Introduction

In Thucydides' description of the plague at Athens, he presents an illness which combats a Hellenic understanding of medicine. Thucydides casts the plague as a narrative aggressor to fit his larger argument that the Peloponnesian War is an affront to Greekness. The plague he describes undermines the foundation of Greek medical thought and creates a climate in which the afflicted cannot possibly recover their health. This plague, while based on an actual historical illness, became the agent by which Thucydides could illustrate how all things were attempting to destroy Greek identity. It is not as important in this study to identify what illness the historical plague was as it is to understand why Thucydides details it in this way and how he describes the collapse of Greek medicine against it. Perhaps too much attention has been given to the historical identification of the plague as if the record Thucydides left were in some way the same genre as what is called history today. It is a piece of literature first. Other authors, such as Lucretius, employed Thucydides' description of the plague in a similar fashion to undermine other philosophical trends outside of medicine. While Thucydides' plague attacked Greek methods of healing and Lucretius' represented imminent death and mortality, they both used the same historical events to support their own ideologies. Thucydides' plague must be viewed as an argument justifying his claim that the Peloponnesian War was an affront to Greekness, as many have already done in seeing Lucretius' first century BCE account as rationalizing Epicureanism.

Greek medical philosophy centers first on the idea of domains and later on balance, whether attained through humors, pneuma, temperature, or otherwise. There is evidence in Thucydides' narrative that he understood Greek medicine in both these ways. While the view of domain-based healing is less prevalent in later Greek writers, it is found at their foundations.¹ It

¹ Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004): 37–52.

is essentially the idea that the source of an illness determines who can have the capacity to heal it. More endemic though is the idea that harmony creates health. Greek medicine, when describing the effects of healing in this way, is about restoring equilibrium from an unbalanced state. This balance must be found within and without the body if the individual is to maintain a healthy condition. Thucydides writes the plague intentionally so as to unbalance the individual body and created an imbalance in the environment around the individual. His plague lingers on the fringes of both the divine and mortal realm and consequently becomes incurable. The plague made it impossible to reach equilibrium anywhere, thus undermining what Greek medical thought could explain. Thucydides recorded a malady which stood in direct opposition to how he thought healing could be attained. By this method, the plague itself became an assailant against Greeks.

The recent work of Rachel Bruzzone solidifies the claim that Thucydides presents the plague as an affront to Greekness and does not simply mention it as a historical aside.² In regard to the plague narrative, Bruzzone states that “it is one of his most prominent passages...serving as his final statement before the transition to the narrative of events that will make up the vast majority of his text. It is also one of the few times he explicitly defends the thesis of the unique greatness of the Peloponnesian War that he asserts at the very onset of his work.”³ This “unique greatness” Bruzzone alludes to is the attack against Hellenic ideals themselves. In viewing the plague passages in the context of his larger work, L. Kallet wrote that, “It does no service to his—and, therefore, our—understanding of the war to sweep under the rug, make improbable excuses, or awkward explanations, for what does not conform to our preconceptions, as if the historian

² S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides I* (Oxford, 1991), 63.

³ Rachel Bruzzone, “*Polemos, Pathemata, and Plague: Thucydides’ Narrative and the Tradition of Upheaval*,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017): 883.

has ‘slipped’ a bit from the program.”⁴ The plague is as much about the Peloponnesian War as the annual invasions of Attica. Merely because the pathogenic assailant does not bear a flag does not mean it is not actively attempting to conquer the Greek populace. This war is not only about land and conquest but about the salvation of a culture. Thucydides’ particular emphasis on the scale of the plague “demonstrates that he, like Homer, is writing a ‘disaster narrative’ of the most vivid and dramatic type.”⁵ Others have noted that Thucydides fits into a literary tradition in which a combination of disasters combat a society,⁶ but how he does this through the plague has not been detailed.

The plague at Athens, as Thucydides related it, is addressed in this study in order to find out how it stands in relation to Greek medical philosophy to show that the plague did not just infest the individual human organism, but the identity of the society, the Athenian social organism. First, the plague will be discussed as Thucydides has presented it, with emphasis on how it interacts with the societal identity. The events of the plague are grouped by theme instead of the sequence in which they appear in order to show more clearly how they connect to medical ideas. Greek medicine will then be discussed in order to examine common themes and philosophical trends. Next, the way in which the plague directly undercuts the ideals and standards affirmed in Greek medical thought will be shown. Finally, Lucretius’ use of Thucydides’ plague narrative will serve as a parallel by which we may see that Lucretius was following Thucydides’ method of using the plague at Athens to undercut philosophical belief; even if the philosophies they combated were worlds apart.

⁴ L. Kallet, “Thucydides, Apollo, the Plague, and the War,” *AJP* 134 (2013): 360–361.

⁵ A.J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 30.

⁶ J. Jouanna, “Famine et pestilence dans l’Antiquité grecque : un jeu de mots sur *limos / loimos*,” *Cahiers de la Kérylos* 17 (2006): 197-219. “The analogy between the human body and the body politic, as we shall see, was continued by many thinkers, and the notion of health as a harmonious, balanced mixture of opposites grew to dominate medicine well into the nineteenth century, if not down to the present day.” Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 48.

The Greatness of the Plague

When approaching the greatness of the plague, Thucydides claimed that, “no plague so great nor ruin of man was remembered by anyone anywhere” (οὐ μέντοι τοσοῦτός γε λοιμὸς οὐδὲ φθορὰ οὕτως ἀνθρώπων οὐδαμοῦ ἐμνημονεύετο γενέσθαι; 2.47.3).⁷ This universal phrase situates the plague in a position of superiority to all other attacks, destructions, and calamities which followed in Thucydides’ narrative. This plague was the greatest not only because of its effect on the individual citizens of Athens, but because of its ability to bring ruin upon the Athenian society.

The plague must be understood to be more than a mere illness, for the result of Thucydides’ plague was the collapse of the Athenian society. It stripped the boundaries away from Greek culture and allowed it to fall into ruin through hedonism and other distresses.⁸ Thucydides is illustrating the societal destruction of the plague as a moral incursion. This plague attacked the culture as much as the individual. The plague caused widespread ἀνομία throughout the city of Athens (2.53.1) and removed all threat of future consequence through divine retribution. It showed men for who they really were, for the plague allowed them the pleasure of not concealing their crimes any longer (ἀπεκρύπτετο μὴ; 2.53.1). The plague removed the societal boundaries which would have moderated actions. “Thucydides had recognized the moral degeneration that accompanied the twin assaults of war and pestilence in Athens: he notes how rapid changes of fortune encouraged ‘the indulgence of pleasures previously concealed’ and the pursuit of ‘satisfactions that were quick and pleasurable,’ amidst a general atmosphere of lawlessness and disrespect for the gods.”⁹ Present pleasure, ἡδονή (2.53.1), was their only

⁷ Except where indicated, all translations are my own. For the Greek text I am relying on the Loeb editions and the Perseus Digital Library.

⁸ Hedonism here is used to express unrestrained pursuit of personal pleasures.

⁹ Hunter H. Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature* (Oxford, 2019): 161.

pursuit. They treated their bodies and wealth as fleeting pleasures and abused them equally (ἐφήμερα τὰ τε σώματα καὶ τὰ χρήματα; 2.53.2). No one held on to what was thought to be honorable (τῷ δόξαντι καλῷ) before the plague, and all citizens abandoned the old customs and adopted the pursuit of today's pleasure (ὅτι δὲ ἤδη τε ἡδὺ πανταχόθεν τε ἐς αὐτὸ κερδαλέον, τοῦτο καὶ καλὸν καὶ χρήσιμον κατέστη; 2.53.3). Present pleasures were embraced and hedonism spread throughout Athens (2.53.1–3). It does a disservice to Thucydides if we read his narrative in the same way we might a medical history or a status report of infection rates.¹⁰ This complete collapse of the society was as much a symptom of Thucydides' plague as overpowering thirst and vomiting biles.

Thucydides lingers more on the effect and less on the cause of the plague. He does, however, provide a possible method of travel for the pestilence (2.48.1-2). He states that it is a foreign illness that attacks Athens, and asserts that he hopes his account could be used to identify the pestilence if it ever occurred again (2.48.3). This though was not his main focus. He cared more for how the Hellenic individual and society collapsed because of this new, foreign threat. When tracking the course of the illness across the region, Thucydides described it in terms of καταβαίνω and εἰσπίπτω, both verbs which are associated with the progression of war and, more specifically, the movement of an invasion or attack (2.48.1–2). Thucydides employs the term καταβαίνω twenty-five times in his work and in every instance, it refers to the movement of military groups, whether in preparations for war or within the course of a battle.¹¹ He uses, however, the same term twice when discussing the plague, the first in its course to Athens:

¹⁰ This skill has been refined in the time of this paper due to the coronavirus pandemic.

¹¹ 1.93.7, 1.105.3, 2.20.2, 2.98.4, 3.23.3, 3.95.1, 3.106.3, 4.15.1, 4.25.9, 4.44.1, 5.8.1, 5.10.2, 5.58.3–4, 5.59.2, 6.30.1, 6.101.1, 6.101.3, 7.44.8, 7.78.4, 8.45.6, 8.71.1

ἤρξατο δὲ τὸ μὲν πρῶτον, ὡς λέγεται, ἐξ Αἰθιοπίας τῆς ὑπὲρ Αἰγύπτου, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ ἐς Αἴγυπτον καὶ Λιβύην κατέβη καὶ ἐς τὴν βασιλέως γῆν τὴν πολλήν. ἐς δὲ τὴν Ἀθηναίων πόλιν ἐξαπιναίως ἐσέπεσε, καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἐν τῷ Πειραιεῖ ἤψατο τῶν ἀνθρώπων... ὕστερον δὲ καὶ ἐς τὴν ἄνω πόλιν ἀφίκετο (2.481–2).

It first began, as it is related, out of Ethiopia above Egypt and then descended (καταβαίνω) into Egypt and Libya, and then into much of the king's territory, and then falling (εἰσπίπτω) suddenly upon the city of Athens, and grasped (ἄπτω) first the people in Piraeus... and then came (ἀφικνέομαι) into the upper city.

And the second in its march throughout the individual body:

ἔπειτα ἐξ αὐτῶν παρμὸς καὶ βράγχος ἐπεγίγνετο, καὶ ἐν οὐ πολλῷ χρόνῳ κατέβαιναν ἐς τὰ στήθη ὁ πόνος μετὰ βηχὸς ἰσχυροῦ (2.49.3).

Then, from these symptoms, sneezing and hoarseness began and in not much time the hardship descended (καταβαίνω) into the breast and produced fierce coughing.

Both of these uses of καταβαίνω personify the plague in a way which animates the disease and gives it intent. Thucydides uses this term exclusively characterize and agent's active motives.

The overt militaristic intent of the term is seen when one compares these uses to other instances καταβαίνω, such as:

αὐτοὶ δὲ περὶ ὄρθρον καταβάντες ἀπὸ τῶν Ἐπιπολῶν ἐς τὸ ὀμαλὸν καὶ διὰ τοῦ ἔλους, ἧ πηλῶδες ἦν καὶ στεριφώτατον, θύρας καὶ ξύλα πλατέα ἐπιθέντες καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῶν διαβαδίσαντες, αἰροῦσιν ἅμα ἔφ' τό τε σταύρωμα πλὴν ὀλίγου καὶ τὴν τάφρον, καὶ ὕστερον καὶ τὸ ὑπολειφθὲν εἶλον (6.101.3).

And at dawn they went down (καταβαίνω) from the Epipolae into the plain and through the marsh and, where it was muddy and solidest, placed doors and wide planks and

having gone across them, they at once seized the stockade at dawn, save only a small portion of the trench, which they later took.

And:

προσμεταπεμψάμενος δὲ ἐκ Πελοποννήσου στρατιὰν πολλήν οὐ πολλῷ ὕστερον καὶ αὐτὸς τῆ ἐκ τῆς Δεκελείας φρουρᾶ μετὰ τῶν ἐλθόντων κατέβη πρὸς αὐτὰ τὰ τεῖχη τῶν Ἀθηναίων (8.71.1).

After sending for a numerous army from the Peloponnesus not much later, he with his own guard out of Decelea with these went and march down (καταβαίνω) to the very walls of Athens.

While both of these uses of the term καταβαίνω do describe a motion from an upper region to a lower one, they demonstrate that Thucydides uses this term to be a downward motion with intent. It is a group of people who descend for a reason, not just an abstract downward movement.

Thucydides further personifies the plague and gives it intent by using εἰσπίπτω, another military motion term, sixteen times in his work.¹² Only two of these iterations (1.131.2, 4.24.5) do not directly refer to the movement of military units. While he only uses the term once in reference to the plague, as shown in the example above, two of the other instances of εἰσπίπτω are given to highlight Thucydides' use of the term in his larger work.

διαδραμὼν δὲ τὸ τῶν Ἀθηναίων στρατόπεδον ἐσκεδασμένον κατὰ τὴν χώραν καὶ πρὸς τὸ τεῖχος τετραμμένον ἐσπίπτει ἐς τὴν Μεθώνην (2.25.2)

(Brasidas) ran across the army of the Athenians, scattering them down into the field, and turning about toward the wall, rushed (εἰσπίπτω) into Methone.

¹² 1.106.1, 2.4.5, 2.22.2, 2.25.2, 3.98.1, 3.112.6, 4.68.5, 4.112.2, 4.130.6, 5.65.4, 5.72.3, 7.29.4, 7.84.3

ἐσπεσόντες δὲ οἱ Θρᾷκες ἐς τὴν Μυκαλησσὸν τάς τε οἰκίας καὶ τὰ ἱερὰ ἐπόρθουν καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐφόνευον φειδόμενοι οὔτε πρεσβυτέρας οὔτε νεωτέρας ἡλικίας (7.29.4).

The Thracians rushing (εἰσπίπτω) into Mycalessus destroyed the houses and temples, and slew the people, sparing neither the old nor the young.

These occurrences of the term εἰσπίπτω clearly link the progress of a military group, in battle, rushing into a city with the intent to desolate the populace. Thucydides, by using the same term to describe how the plague suddenly rushed into the city of Athens, is paralleling this language. By introducing one possible route for the plague in military language, Thucydides is directly connecting his narrative plague to the larger war. Personifying the inanimate plague as an assailing army, Thucydides links the intent of war to the intent of this epidemic. When addressing the source of the plague, Thucydides linked this mundane origin to oracular prophecy.

Thucydides consistently connects divinity to the war and, implicitly, to the plague.¹³ One of the only universal phrases Thucydides recorded when describing the diseases' effects as a whole was given in the form of a prophecy.

ἦξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἅμ' αὐτῷ (2.54.2).

A Dorian war will come and plague with it.

The results of the war and plague are clearly linked in this prophecy. For on the one hand, if Thucydides created this prophecy for literary flourish, he chose to link them by appealing to divine mandate, and if the prophecy was well-known and pre-dated his narrative, he chose to

¹³ Bruzzone, "Polemos, Pathemata, and Plague," 882-909; Lisa Kallet, "Thucydides, Apollo, the Plague, and the War," *The American Journal of Philology* 134 No. 3 (2013), 369-70; B. Knox, "The Date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles," *The American Journal of Philology* 77 (1956): 135-6.

include it because it plainly linked the two events and their subsequent effects. In either case, Thucydides openly chose to juxtapose the two calamities. Bruzzone and Woodman both have observed that the syntax within Thucydides' prophecy highlights this juxtaposition and parallels the connection found within Homer's *Iliad* (1.61).¹⁴ The plague, just like the war, was a monumental threat against the Hellenic peoples. This threat was not just a contemporary event but one which maintained the same intention as those who invaded Attica. Thucydides recorded the plague as an aggressor whose goal it was to undermine Greek society.

The Description of the Plague

Thucydides' plague narrative comprises eight of the most famous paragraphs in his entire work. It punctuates his thesis and prepares the reader for further accounts of the attacks against Hellenic peoples. Thucydides' language when defining the plague serves to generalize the illness and create an idea rather than a disease. Thucydides' description of the plague in Athens employed five different nouns to describe the epidemic: νόσος, κακόν, νόσημα, λοιμός, and φθορά. The most frequently used terms are νόσος (2.47.3, 2.49.6, 2.50.1, 2.54.5, 2.54.5), κακόν (2.49.7, 2.51.4, 2.51.5, 2.52.3, 2.54.2), and νόσημα (2.49.6, 2.51.1, 2.51.6, 2.53.1), while λοιμός (2.47.3, 2.54.2, 2.54.3) and φθορά (2.47.3) are used with less uniformity. Νόσος appears to be directly referring to specific effects of the plague, the onset of the plague, and the descriptions of the plague. Κακόν might be taking into account the other results of the plague; not only the illness, but also the collapse of law and religious rites. The only usage of κακόν that is difficult to read in this way is the first ("For the κακόν first settling in the head, then spread throughout the whole body from above," διεξίηει γὰρ διὰ παντὸς τοῦ σώματος ἄνωθεν ἀρξάμενον τὸ ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ πρῶτον ἰδρυθὲν κακόν 2.49.7). It is also worth noting that λοιμός, arguably the most

¹⁴ Bruzzone, "Polemos, Pathemata, and Plague," 899; Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, 35.

specific plague term, is only used once by Thucydides (2.47.3), which appears to be a more generic sweeping statement about the caliber of disease. The other two instances of the term refer to an older song or chant (2.54.2, 2.54.3) which parallels Homer's language of the plague Apollo sent against the Greeks at Troy (1.61). Thucydides could have chosen to use the term λοιμός whenever referring to the plague, but instead preferred to use general terms for maladies and calamities, only electing to employ the more specific λοιμός when oracular verse or style necessitated. By repeatedly using generic terms for the illness, Thucydides created a more relatable illness and reached a wider audience.¹⁵ Bruzzone observed, when analyzing the varied types of suffering in Thucydides' larger work, that "the coincidence of several types of sufferings that appeared to be unrelated may have encouraged Greeks to believe they were sent by some malign supernatural force bent on annihilating a society."¹⁶ This combination of distresses is found not only in Thucydides' narrative points, but also in the words he chose to use to describe them. The varied, often indefinite terms he employed to name the plague created an amorphous malady; a universal illness. By grouping the events of Thucydides' narrative, it can be seen that he was actively presenting a phenomenon greater than a historical illness.

In Thucydides' conclusion to the plague, he stated that the worst effects of the calamity spread across Athens (ἐπενείματο δὲ Ἀθήνας μὲν μάλιστα; 2.54.5). The word ἐπινέμω is used here to describe the plague's course and effects. This term, which is only used once in all of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, brings to mind devastating war imagery. It is often used when describing the effects of weaponized fire. Herodotus, Pindar, Plutarch, Polybius, and Diodorus all use ἐπινέμω in conjunction with fire spreading throughout a city in times of

¹⁵ P. Michelakis, "Naming the Plague in Homer, Sophocles and Thucydides," *American Journal of Philology* 140, no. 3 (September 2019): 381-414.

¹⁶ Bruzzone, "*Polemos, Pathemata, and Plague*," 894.

war.¹⁷ It is used twice in Homer's *Iliad* to describe a distribution through a company (9.216, 24.625) and once in the *Odyssey* in the same way (20.254). Its association with plague can be seen in Hippocrates' *De morbis popularibus*.¹⁸ Thucydides uses ἐπινέμω purposefully to close his description of the plague because of its close association with war. By using ἐπινέμω, he leads his readers to see the weaponized nature of the plague in his description. He is linking the attack from foreign armies in war to the attack of this foreign illness.

Thucydides described the illness's specific effects in terms of balance. Throughout his narrative he pits balance against imbalance. The plague enters his historical record thus:

τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἔτος, ὡς ὠμολογεῖτο, ἐκ πάντων μάλιστα δὴ ἐκεῖνο ἄνοσον ἐς τὰς ἄλλας ἀσθενείας ἐτύγχανεν ὄν: εἰ δέ τις καὶ προύκαμνέ τι, ἐς τοῦτο πάντα ἀπεκρίθη. τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀπ' οὐδεμιᾶς προφάσεως, ἀλλ' ἐξαίφνης ὑγιεῖς ὄντας πρῶτον μὲν τῆς κεφαλῆς θέρμαι ἰσχυραὶ καὶ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρυθήματα καὶ φλόγῳσις ἐλάμβανε, καὶ τὰ ἐντός, ἢ τε φάρυγξ καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα, εὐθὺς αἱματώδη ἦν καὶ πνεῦμα ἄτοπον καὶ δυσῶδες ἠφίει: ἔπειτα ἐξ αὐτῶν παρμὸς καὶ βράγχος ἐπεγίγνετο, καὶ ἐν οὐ πολλῷ χρόνῳ κατέβαιναν ἐς τὰ στήθη ὁ πόνος μετὰ βηχὸς ἰσχυροῦ: καὶ ὅποτε ἐς τὴν καρδίαν στηρίζειεν, ἀνέστρεφέ τε αὐτὴν καὶ ἀποκαθάρσεις χολῆς πᾶσαι ὅσαι ὑπὸ ἰατρῶν ὠνομασμένα εἰσὶν ἐπῆσαν, καὶ αὗται μετὰ ταλαιπωρίας μεγάλης. λύγξ τε τοῖς πλέοσιν ἐνέπιπτε κενή, σπασμὸν ἐνδιδούσα ἰσχυρόν, τοῖς μὲν μετὰ ταῦτα λωφήσαντα, τοῖς δὲ καὶ πολλῷ ὕστερον. καὶ τὸ μὲν ἕξωθεν ἀπτομένῳ σῶμα οὐτ' ἄγαν θερμὸν ἦν οὔτε χλωρόν, ἀλλ' ὑπέρυθρον, πελιτνόν, φλυκταίναις μικραῖς καὶ ἔλκεσιν ἐξηθηκός: τὰ δὲ ἐντός οὕτως ἐκάετο ὥστε μῆτε τῶν πάνυ λεπτῶν ἱματίων καὶ σινδόνων τὰς ἐπιβολὰς μηδ' ἄλλο τι ἢ γυμνοὶ

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Histories* 5.101; Pindar O. 9.6; Plutarch, *Demetrius* 22; Polybius, *Histories* 14.5.7; Diodorus, *Historical Library* 17.26.

¹⁸ Hippocrates, *Epidemics* 3.4.

ἀνέχεσθαι, ἥδιστα τε ἂν ἐς ὕδωρ ψυχρὸν σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ρίπτειν. καὶ πολλοὶ τοῦτο τῶν ἡμελημένων ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἔδρασαν ἐς φρέατα, τῇ δίψῃ ἀπαύστῳ ξυνεχόμενοι: καὶ ἐν τῷ ὁμοίῳ καθειστήκει τό τε πλεόν καὶ ἔλασσον ποτόν (2.49.1–5).

That year, as everyone agreed, actually happened to be without all other sickness; but if someone were suffering from another sickness, they were consumed by this one. In other cases, for no established reason, but suddenly and while in previous health, exceeding heat seized the head first and burning and readiness seized the eyes, and the insides, where lies the throat and tongue, immediately became bloody and wrenched a strange and foul *pneuma*. Then sneezing and hoarseness came from them, and in not much time the suffering descended to the breast with strong coughing, and when established in the stomach, it was upset, and vomits bile of every kind named by physicians ensued with great suffering. Then for most empty retching followed causing violent spasms, which for some ceased right after and for others much later. And externally the body was not gripped with very much heat nor pale, but was reddish, livid, and produced small blisters and ulcers. The insides burned so much that the patient could not bear wearing clothing or linen even of the thinnest variety, but wanted to be naked and would have preferred best to throw themselves into cold water; and many of those who were not looked after did throw themselves into cisterns, being overcome by unquenchable thirst, and it amounted to little whether they drank much or little.

The insides of the individual were afflicted first. Starting with the head, the malady moved throughout the body attacking the communicative senses. It caused an excess of heat and dryness throughout the body and caused its victim to emit rancid *pneuma*. The terms Thucydides used to describe the symptoms of the plague in this passage are innately medical. Bile (χολή) and

pneuma (πνεῦμα) begin the description of the plague in terms common to physicians.

Thucydides is purposefully using medical language familiar to his audience in order to tear it down. All of the body's biles were in excess and the plague caused the body to involuntarily eject them. The body, though suffering from excess heat, was cool externally, though that did not prevent the desire by those suffering from the illness to seek out excessive sources of coldness and wetness. The sick sought out this excess as opposed to balance. They were compelled to fill their lives with the extremes because they knew they would perish regardless. The plague created extremes. On the one hand, an internal, unquenchable fire. On the other, unyielding desire for that which brought little succor.

When summarizing his own narrative of the effects of the plague, Thucydides states that there was death raging within the walls of Athens and destruction without (τοιοῦτόν μὲν πάθει οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι περιπεσόντες ἐπιέζοντο, ἀνθρώπων τ' ἔνδον θνησκόντων καὶ γῆς ἔξω δηουμένης; 2.54.1). The external factors around the narrative plague also created imbalance. Thucydides' narrative plague afflicts those who are sick already or completely healthy alike. This malady swallowed up all other afflictions of the year and consumed the Athenian populace.

The year Thucydides describes is unusually free from other illnesses (2.49.2), an observation which probably serves to emphasize that the events of the plague were intended to be understood in abstraction from other recorded historical events of the year. Thucydides is starting from a 'blank slate' as it were. He describes the city's influx of citizens from the military conflict and the stifling condition (πνιγηρός) they had to endure. Because the population was forced to be in close contact they created an excess of heat to the point of choking (2.52.1–2). In regard to passages like this, Gardner stated, "here too we can explain the association partly through Greek precedents, as Thucydides correlates the plague suffered by the Athenians in 430

BCE with the more general pathos of civil strife among Greek States.”¹⁹ The afflictions Thucydides describes attacks the environments around the individuals as well as the individuals themselves. This extreme case of death and calamity appeared to arise *ex nihilo*. This sudden extremity was imbalance.

Athens as a Symbol

Thucydides situates the plague narrative within his second book so as to emphasize the social disaster’s virulent destruction of Athenian potential. The famous Funeral Oration, which Thucydides contrives for Pericles and places only pages before the plague, projects a remarkably idealized theory of Athenian society. Then only pages later, when plague strikes, everything Thucydides articulated through Pericles is undermined.

Thucydides has Pericles begin by delineating the customs and practices associated with funerary rites. These included offerings, processions, public burial locations, and speeches (2.34). Pericles, the great Athenian orator and general, is chosen to give the customary funerary speech and is at first reluctant to do so, but eventually concedes out of adherence to the Greek custom (2.35, 37). He praises the Athenian political structure, heritage, citizens, temperament, and customs (2.36, 38–41) concluding that:

ξυνελών τε λέγω τήν τε πᾶσαν πόλιν τῆς Ἑλλάδος παιδευσιν εἶναι καὶ καθ’ ἕκαστον
δοκεῖν ἄν μοι τὸν αὐτὸν ἄνδρα παρ’ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ πλεῖστ’ ἄν εἶδη καὶ μετὰ χαρίτων μάλιστ’
ἄν εὐτραπέλως τὸ σῶμα αὐταρκες παρέχεσθαι (2.41.1)

And so, I say that the whole city is the teachings of Hellas and that it seems to me that each man of us could, by himself, produce, with the greatest grace and dexterity, and much skill, a self-sufficient body.

¹⁹ Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 18–19.

The Athenian citizen, at least according to Thucydides' Pericles, is competent in all things and stands as the pinnacle of Greek teachings. Individual citizens are the product of the union of all Hellenic ideals. Through Pericles' speech, Thucydides is setting up Athens and her citizens to exemplify the Greek ideal. He even has Pericles claim that Athenians have no need of a Homer to recount their exploits because they have engraved them on countryside and monuments (2.41.4). Pericles explicates in closing that one earns honor through death (2.44, 46). While Thucydides may have been present for the historical Periclean Funeral Oration in 430 BCE, he uses Pericles as a narrative tool to express his own thoughts. The speech appears to be a rhetorical contrivance inserted out of natural sequence in order to set up the Thucydidean ideal. Thucydides, having established his own view, used the plague to undercut what he has just praised.

Thucydides' use of the term *σῶμα αὐτάρκες*, "self-sufficient body" is remarkable. The adjective *αὐτάρκης* meaning "self-sufficient" or "sovereign" characterizes the social body envisioned by Pericles at the moment of its apogee. The resulting expression articulates the Athenian polity as a figurative "self-sufficient body." The word immediately draws connections to both the medical world and stoic thinking. The Hippocratic Corpus contains 14 iterations of this term throughout the corpus when describing the function of the body while Galen, the great Roman physician, uses this term 444 times in his corpus of material. Stoic authors on the other hand use this term to describe a person who is both content with the bare essentials and who is detached from worldly affairs.²⁰ By using *αὐτάρκης* here Thucydides draws a connection between the medical view of a corporeal organism which is healthy, i.e. needing no medical

²⁰ See Audrey N. M. Rich, "The Cynic Conception of *Aytarkeia*," *Mnemosyne* 4 Vol. 9 (Brill, 1956): 23–29.

intervention, and the cynical stoic view of a person who has separated themselves from the affairs of the populace.

Thucydides employs this term four times in his work:

καὶ ἡ πόλις αὐτῶν ἅμα αὐτάρκη θέσιν κειμένη παρέχει αὐτοὺς δικαστὰς ὧν βλάπτουσί τινα μᾶλλον ἢ κατὰ ξυνηθείας γίνεσθαι (1.37.3).

And at the same time, since their city has been self-sufficient (αὐτάρκης), they furnish their own judges whenever someone transgresses rather than by mutual agreement.

τὰ δὲ πλείω αὐτῆς αὐτοὶ ἡμεῖς οἶδε οἱ νῦν ἔτι ὄντες μάλιστα ἐν τῇ καθεστηκυῖα ἡλικίᾳ ἐπηυξήσαμεν καὶ τὴν πόλιν τοῖς πᾶσι παρεσκευάσαμεν καὶ ἐς πόλεμον καὶ ἐς εἰρήνην αὐταρκεστάτην (2.36.3).

Now the more parts of us here, we who are still in the best phase of life, enlarged our city and prepared it in war and peace to be the most self-sufficient (αὐτάρκης).

σῶμά τε αὐταρκες ὄν οὐδὲν διεφάνη πρὸς αὐτὸ ἰσχύος πέρι ἢ ἀσθενείας, ἀλλὰ πάντα ξυνήρει καὶ τὰ πάση διαίτη θεραπευόμενα (2.51.3).

It proved that no body was self-sufficient (αὐτάρκης), whether through strength or concerning weakness; but it seized all people, even those who were given medical treatment.

While the first of these quotes show the Corinthians' viewing Corcyra to be αὐτάρκης and thus able to govern itself without outside intervention, the other three are directly linked to how Thucydides uses the plague. Through Pericles, Thucydides first establishes that it is the citizens who have made Athens sovereign αὐτάρκης (2.36.3). He then sets up the individual citizens to be individually αὐτάρκης (2.41.1). And finally proclaims, in the same language, that during the plague no person was physically (corporeally) self-sufficient enough (αὐτάρκης) to withstand the

plague. Thucydides transitions in very short proximity from socio-political self-sufficiency to corporeal-medical self-sufficiency. The plague completely topples this ideal which Thucydides has Pericles form. This manifests Thucydides' rhetorical application of the plague as an aggressor undermining Pericles' high-minded ideals.

Thucydides' plague narrative subverts the ideals established in Pericles' funerary speech. The plague actively destroyed the customs, citizens, and city of Athens. All of the customary rites, ceremonies, and processions associated with death are abandoned during the plague (2.52.4). Pericles had noted that Earth is the tomb of all remarkable men (ἀνδρῶν γὰρ ἐπιφανῶν πᾶσα γῆ τάφος; 2.43.3), but the plague named Athens as death's repository (ἀνθρώπων τ' ἔνδον θνησκόντων; 2.54.1). While Pericles' own personal desire and station were not able to sway him from adhering to the burial customs, this plague's influence was able to impede all Athenian citizens from doing so. Thucydides goes so far as to contrast the Periclean boast about Homer with the destruction presented because of the oracular prophecy (2.54.4). Through the funerary speech, Thucydides established Athens as a type for Greekness.

Thucydides' usage of the city of Athens and her citizens as a metaphor for a society is not uncommon in fifth-century writings. Turner, Padel, Gardner, and others have noticed a similar trend.²¹ Turner notes that, "all disease is disorder—metaphorically, literally, socially and politically."²² Through the plague, Thucydides devastated the citizens and city of Athens; the symbol he set up for his ideal.

²¹ B.S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (London and New Delhi, 1984): 77–114; Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton, 1992): 52–3; Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 17–44.

²² Turner, *The Body and Society*, 114.

Divine and Mortal Attempts to Heal

Through the plague, Thucydides clearly shows that natural and/or divine influences are attempting to tear down Hellenic ideals. This calamity cannot be prevented by mortal nor divine means. The failure of mortal healers and divine methods of healing is explicitly stated in Thucydides' account.

οὔτε γὰρ ἰατροὶ ἤρκουν τὸ πρῶτον θεραπεύοντες ἀγνοίᾳ, ἀλλ' αὐτοὶ μάλιστα ἔθνησκον ὅσῳ καὶ μάλιστα προσῆσαν, οὔτε ἄλλη ἀνθρωπεΐα τέχνη οὐδεμία: (2.47.4).

For the physicians could not ward it off from the start, unaware of any treatment, but they themselves died the worst, being around it the most, no human art could aid them at all.

The plague resists the trained physicians, those whose formalized trade it is to understand and cure these illnesses. It impedes their ability to begin healing those afflicted by the plague. In fact, those who even attempted to cure one another died first. Thucydides is showing that attempting to cure the plague is deadly to mortals (2.51.5). No human art (ἀνθρωπεΐα τέχνη) could do anything at all. The prescribed methods of healing by physicians proved futile for no amount of care, neglect, or otherwise could stay the disease. Throughout his account, Thucydides lists many of these human arts. He observes that no uniform remedy for treating the plague could be found (2.51.2). Dieting and medicines proved useless when combating it (2.51.3). The plague resisted attempts made at describing and defining its character, information which would have aided in healing such an ailment (2.50.1). Even the most basic Greek code of humanly conduct, φιλάνθρωπία, did not serve to help those who were sick. Thucydides allows his plague to combat even this most fundamental idea by stating that it led to the greatest mortality (καὶ τὸν πλεῖστον φθόρον τοῦτο ἐνεποίει) and that even attempting to maintain the custom caused citizens to die in

herds like animals (καὶ ὅτι ἕτερος ἀφ' ἑτέρου θεραπείας ἀναπιπλάμενοι ὥσπερ τὰ πρόβατα ἔθνησκον; 2.51.4). Likewise, mortal attempts to sway divine powers proved futile.

ὅσα τε πρὸς ἱεροῖς ἰκέτευσαν ἢ μαντείοις καὶ τοῖς τοιούτοις ἐχρήσαντο, πάντα ἀνωφελῆ ἦν, τελευτῶντές τε αὐτῶν ἀπέστησαν ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ νικώμενοι (2.47.4).

Supplications in the temples, oracles and consulting them all were of no use. These were ended and abandoned because of the conquering malady.

Thucydides may have included this line to showcase the complete defeat of the Athenian spirit. In his account, the citizens of Athens ceased petitioning the gods for aid in their holy places because they understood that their gods could do nothing to save them. Thucydides chose to include this detail in order to show that there was no divine intervention which could stay the plague. It must be understood in the background of this narrative then that many individuals had sought aid by oracular intervention and sacrificial offerings, but even the most pious realized and were made to see that it availed them nothing, for it was all useless (πάντα ἀνωφελῆ). The temple worshipers had surrendered to the plague and admitted defeat. It no longer mattered whether the individual abided by the laws of the gods or not, for everyone perished (2.53.4).

The temples, where healing took place by the direct intervention of the gods, became mausoleums full of the dead. Sanctuary healing likewise had no power over the plague.

τά τε ἱερά ἐν οἷς ἐσκήνηντο νεκρῶν πλέα ἦν, αὐτοῦ ἐναποθνησκόντων: ὑπερβιαζομένου γὰρ τοῦ κακοῦ οἱ ἄνθρωποι, οὐκ ἔχοντες ὅτι γένωνται, ἐς ὀλιγωρίαν ἐτράποντο καὶ ἱερῶν καὶ ὁσίων ὁμοίως (2.52.3).

The temples too were full of corpses, those who died in them, the malady pressed so heavily that men, not knowing what would happen, neglected all things, sacred as well as profane.

A corpse in the temple was improper in its own right, but having those seeking refuge die mid-incubation appears to go beyond this. These sacred places availed the sick not at all. Thucydides has described citizens dying in their homes whether surrounded by friends (2.51.4–5), physicians (2.47.4), or completely alone (2.51.2). He has described the populace drowning themselves in the waterways (2.49.5), collapsing dead in the streets (2.52.4), and perishing in hoards in the slums (2.52.2). He displayed the funerary pyre burning with foreign and strange corpses piled high (2.52.4) and now broadcasts the death within Athens' most sacred places. The temples, the homes, and the city of Athens itself became a crypt for Greek citizens because of this plague. It is one thing to realize that Thucydides is using the plague as his final example to conclude his thesis that the Peloponnesian War is an attack against Hellenism, and another to show how he does this. An understanding of Greek medical philosophy helps to illuminate this very question.

The Divine in Thucydides

While the nature of deity in Thucydides' larger work is not the primary focus of this paper, the historian's treatment of the divine does weigh upon the presentation of the plague. Understanding his approach allows us to illuminate the attention given to divine shortcomings. William Furley "Thucydides and Religion," observes that the absence of the gods in Thucydides' record, "must constitute a deliberate policy on the part of the historian, as no other literary genre of the period dispenses with the gods in the same way."²³ In Thucydides' silence of the gods we may rightly see either a form of atheistic humanism or an attitude of great respect for the pantheon.²⁴ While it may be too speculative at this time to weigh in on Thucydides' general

²³ William D. Furley, "Thucydides and Religion," *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed. by A. Tsakmakis and A. Tengakos, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006): 415.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

attitudes toward divinity, we can see clearly his positions on Delphic prophecy and on sacred space.

When approaching the subject of oracles, Thucydides provides two examples of prophecies and the results of their interpretations. One of these prophecies is recorded in direct relation to the plague.

ἐν δὲ τῷ κακῷ οἷα εἰκὸς ἀνεμνήσθησαν καὶ τοῦδε τοῦ ἔπους, φάσκοντες οἱ πρεσβύτεροι πάλαι ἄδεσθαι “ἥξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἅμ’ αὐτῷ.” ἐγένετο μὲν οὖν ἔρις τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μὴ λοιμὸν ὀνομάσθαι ἐν τῷ ἔπει ὑπὸ τῶν παλαιῶν, ἀλλὰ λιμὸν, ἐνίκησε δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος εἰκότως λοιμὸν εἰρησθαι: οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο. ἦν δέ γε οἷμαί ποτε ἄλλος πόλεμος καταλάβη Δωρικὸς τοῦδε ὕστερος καὶ ξυμβῆ γενέσθαι λιμὸν, κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς οὕτως ἄσονται (2.54.2–3).

In this distress, they naturally remembered this prophecy which the elders said was sung long ago, “A Dorian war will come and plague with it.” Though strife arose among the people that it was not λοιμὸς (plague) in the prophecy of the ancients, but λιμὸς (famine). Yet λοιμὸς being the word obviously prevailed, being in a plague; for men, because of their suffering, changed their remembrance. But I think if some other Dorian war should occur after this one and famine happen to come about, the prophecy will be told in that manner.

This commentary on the swaying message of prophecy places Thucydides in opposition to the idea that absolute truth is communicated through oracles. He makes it obvious that the message contained in this prophecy is negotiable and will change according to circumstance.²⁵ It is clear that Thucydides cares more about how the Athenian populace reacted to oracular prophecy and

²⁵ Furley, “Thucydides and Religion,” 419.

less about the validity of the prophecy itself.²⁶ For Thucydides, divine messages are given to humans and their interpretation is the aspect of the message he cares to write about. He does not discuss whether he believes that the utterances of an oracle are actually divine in origin, but chooses to write about how humans acted in regard to these mandates and prophecies. Neither does he discuss the attitudes of the gods nor the history of oracles being right or wrong. He chooses to record man's interpretations and the attempts given to uphold these utterances.

When approaching the subject of sacred space, Thucydides highlights both the attitude of the populace to venerate specific locations and the futility involved with adhering to this custom. One of the more poignant examples of Greek attitudes toward sacred space arises in the understanding of another of Thucydides' recorded prophecies. The oracle stated that it would be better that the Pelargikon be empty (τὸ Πελαργικὸν ἀργὸν ἄμεινον; 2.17.1). Here is a finite instance of a divine mandate to leave a particular space unblemished. Yet during the Peloponnesian war this space was not only occupied but inhabited. Thucydides goes on to refute those claims that the pestilence and war were caused by this breach of sacred space and stresses that those disasters necessitated its inhabitation (2.17.2). "Thucydides is questioning the commonly held view at the time, that the Athenians incurred guilt by camping on sacred land, a guilt that *led* to their subsequent sufferings, in favor of a rationalistic interpretation of the Delphic *mot* according to which it merely *foresaw* that it would be an evil day when the Pelargikon came, by force of circumstances, to be occupied."²⁷ Thucydides leads the reader to see that regarding one space as sacred and another as mundane profits the citizen little when pushed far enough.

²⁶ Borimir Jordan, "Religion in Thucydides," *TAPA* 116 (1986): 130–34.

²⁷ Furley, "Thucydides and Religion," 420.

Thucydides juxtaposes Pericles' funerary oration with the devastation of temples in order to show that observing the restriction in regard to sacred sanctuaries and space does not profit the public. "While it is true that he mentions the occupation of the sacred precincts in order to stress the extent of the emergency, it is also true that by so doing he draws attention to the breach of a strict religious convention: all Greeks knew that no matter what the circumstances or the reasons for it, inhabitation polluted the temples and came close to sacrilege."²⁸ By having Athenian citizens die within sacred space, the temples specifically, Thucydides highlights the futility of adhering to these customs. In times of great distress, sacred space gets compromised. Thucydides sets up the Athenian ideal regarding sacred space through Pericles' funerary oration (2.34–46) and then had the plague show that these customs profited the populace not at all. He emphasizes the new reality that the gods — even if they do exist — cannot save the people in their time of great distress.

Balance as it Relates to Healing

Thucydides' narrative is founded upon three specific medical ideas which serve as narrative foils for the plague to overcome.²⁹ The first, and perhaps most prominent, is that Greek medicine is about balance; the unbalanced become sick and restoring balance restores health.³⁰ This is a common idea that acts as the foundation for later Hellenic medical thought.³¹ The

²⁸ Jordan, "Religion in Thucydides," 130.

²⁹ While these are the three ideas which are needed to argue the point of this paper, others have noted that contagion is a prominent theme in Thucydides' understanding of medicine. See James Longrigg "Epidemic, ideas and classical Athenian society" in T. Ranger and P. Slacks, eds., *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge, 1995): 21–44; J.S. Rusten, ed. *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War, Book II* (Cambridge, 1989); Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 25–28.

³⁰ It might be argued that the foundation of the Greek worldview resides upon balance. See Simplicius, Commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* 24.13; Aetius, *On the opinions of the philosophers* V.30.1; and *Ionian Natural Philosophy*.

³¹ "The Greek masters of medicine observed...that the living organism under natural conditions acts primarily as a whole, and that the actions of its parts are naturally subordinated to this supreme function. The more an organism is acting as a whole, the healthier it is; whereas the more its parts act independently of it-'go odd on their own'- the less healthy it is." Arthur J. Brock, *Greek Medicine: Being Extracts Illustrative of Medical Writers From Hippocrates to Galen* (New York: E. P. Dutton & CO. INC., 1929), 3.

second medical idea is the notion of domains, mortal and divine. Healing can only take place if the source of the healing is the same as the source of the disease. Finally, Thucydides grapples with the notion of sanctuary healing and specifically uses this idea to present the utter destruction of the Greek society.

Maintaining internal balance of humors within the human organism was long considered necessary for individual health. Though the theory of the humors was developed more broadly in the Hellenistic age, Alcmaeon of Croton, writing at the very beginning of the fifth century BCE, had developed a forerunner theory.³² The following is attributed to him.

Ἀλκμαίων τῆς μὲν ὑγείας εἶναι συνεκτικὴν τὴν ἰσονομίαν τῶν δυνάμεων, ὑγροῦ, ξηροῦ, ψυχροῦ, θερμοῦ, πικροῦ, γλυκέος καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν, τὴν δ' ἐν αὐτοῖς μοναρχίαν νόσου ποιητικὴν· φθοροποιὸν γὰρ ἑκατέρου μοναρχίαν. καὶ νόσον συμπίπτειν ὡς μὲν ὑφ' οὗ ὑπερβολῆι θερμότητος ἢ ψυχρότητος, ὡς δὲ πίπτειν ὡς μὲν ὑφ' οὗ ὑπερβολῆι θερμότητος ἢ ψυχρότητος, ὡς δὲ ἐξ οὗ διὰ πλῆθος τροφῆς ἢ ἔνδειαν, ὡς δ' ἐν οἷς ἢ αἷμα ἢ μυελὸν ἢ ἐγκέφαλον. ἐγγίνεσθαι δὲ τούτοις ποτὲ κακὰ τῶν ἔξωθεν αἰτιῶν, ὑδάτων ποιῶν ἢ χώρας ἢ κόπων ἢ ἀνάγκης ἢ τῶν τούτοις παραπλησίων. τὴν δὲ ὑγίαν τὴν σύμμετρον τῶν ποιῶν κρᾶσιν.³³

Alcmaeon taught that health is the equal balance of forces—wet, dry, cold, hot, bitter, sweet and so forth—dominance in any of these creates disease, for the dominion of any is deadly, and disease occurs when on the one hand there is excess heat or cold, or on the other through excessive nourishment or hunger, or being in the blood, marrow, or brain. It may arise from outside yourself, from the water quality, country, fatigue, violence, or a similar thing. Health is the equal blending of the qualities.

³² Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 47.

³³ Aetius, *On the Opinions of the Philosophers* 5, 30, 1 = Alcmaeon DK 24 B 4.

The idea is a holistic approach to healing. There are forces in the body which represent the extremes, and health is found by avoiding those extremes. While Alcmaeon is discussing qualities of the body, others ascribe these qualities to bodily fluids. Hippocrates, Polybus, and later Galen are credited with defining the humors as yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm,³⁴ but the overall idea is the same. An excess of any of these traits, or fluids, creates an unhealthy state. Thucydides' description of the plague shows that this was a well-known medical idea at the time of his writing. He recorded that there was a purging of all the biles of the body (ἀποκαθάρσεις χολῆς πᾶσαι; 2.49.3). This would have been inexplicable within the medical worldview Alcmaeon produced. Later medical writers expand this idea of balance to universal extremes producing medical philosophies such as pneumatism, physiognomy, later humorism, and others, but it does not appear that Thucydides' worldview is as tied to equilibrium as later writers.

Placed beside Alcmaeon's description, Thucydides' shows obvious parallels. Alcmaeon stated that equality (ἰσονομία) is required between the cardinal qualities. Thucydides is intentionally using the medical ideas of his day concerning what we would name humors to state that his plague, the one which is the greatest attack on Greek citizens ever remembered, cannot be cured through ἰσονομία. Thucydides' plague creates imbalance starting with an excess of heat and dryness. This is where Alcmaeon stated diseases would arise, writing that the agent of the disease would be either excess heat or cold (καὶ νόσον συμπίπτειν ὡς μὲν ὑφ' οὗ ὑπερβολῆ θερμότητος ἢ ψυχρότητος). In addition to this, Thucydides and Alcmaeon both named the head as a possible starting point for disease. While Alcmaeon uses the term ἐγκέφαλον meaning brain and Thucydides uses κεφαλή meaning head, Thucydides has already stated that the disease is

³⁴ Water replaces black bile in some texts, though Polybus' *De Natura Hominis* states black bile.

working inside the body and thus inside the head. Thucydides takes Alcmaeonian ideas of medicine, for we cannot be sure that it was Alcmaeon himself or those who believed the same as he did about medicine who influenced Thucydides' view of medicine, and exploits them to create an inexplicable situation. The sufferers are too hot, apparently from no cause, and yet they are also cool to the touch. They desire to fill themselves with excess cold and wet, while burning. It is an excess in opposites at the same time.

Thucydides' initial description of the plague's symptoms, 2.49.1–5, is written in a way which directly relates to Alcmaeon's record. The imbalance of biles and excesses in temperatures can be seen as a broader, more abstract theme which follows a humoristic approach to medical thought. In addition to this, the stifling conditions and general heat of the populace unbalanced the environment around the individual. An imbalance was being created both within and without the Athenian populace and no restoration of balance could be attained; for there was no source within, without, of man, or of divinity, that could restore order.

The plague (νόσος and λοιμός) which Thucydides presents creates imbalance within the individual, the city, and the society at large. He further showcases how medical practices of his day were useless when attempting to relieve the suffering. By overlooking the political and philosophical implications of this passage one elects to render it as irrelevant to his argument; a string of events unrelated to the larger work.³⁵ It shows a lack of attention given to Thucydides' choice to include the passage altogether. The manner in which Thucydides describes the plague shows that it works contrary to the very fundamental perceptions of Greek medicine by creating imbalance within and without the individual body. While Thucydides was certainly influenced

³⁵ S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* I, 63, calls the lack of attention given to the connections between the historical and political crises “an embarrassment to his commentators.”

by contemporary medical ideas reported with his own narrative, he was also clearly impacted by traditional medical thought as archaic as Homer's texts.

Balance Elsewhere

While Alcmaeon's account is perhaps the clearest example of the theory of balance before Thucydides, there are an abundance of writings which support this view of healing throughout antiquity. Both the Hippocratic Corpus, with origins in the fifth century BCE, and Galen, writing in the second century CE, express this same notion of healing. When commenting on the specific procedures in the Hippocratic Corpus generally, one scholar records that, "underlying these practical actions were the physician's assumptions about humors, and about the functions of medical care in restoring the balance (krasis) of those basic liquids of the living human body" and that, "By the fifth century B.C., physical and physiological theories depended heavily upon assumed notions of pairing, opposition, mixing, and balancing."³⁶ This view can be seen throughout the Hippocratic Corpus, and is expressed succinctly in the *Nature of Man*.

Τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔχει ἐν ἑωυτῷ αἷμα καὶ φλέγμα καὶ χολὴν ξανθὴν καὶ μέλαιναν, καὶ ταῦτ' ἐστὶν αὐτῷ ἢ φύσις τοῦ σώματος, καὶ διὰ ταῦτα ἀλγεῖ καὶ ὑγιαίνει. ὑγιαίνει μὲν οὖν μάλιστα, ὅταν μετρίως ἔχη ταῦτα τῆς πρὸς ἄλληλα κρήσιος καὶ δυνάμιος καὶ τοῦ πλήθεος, καὶ μάλιστα μεμιγμένα ἢ· ἀλγεῖ δὲ ὅταν τούτων τι ἔλασσον ἢ πλεόν ἢ ἢ χωρισθῇ ἐν τῷ σώματι καὶ μὴ κεκρημένον ἢ τοῖσι σύμπασιν.

The body of man has in it blood and phlegm and yellow bile and black bile, these are the nature of his body, and through these he feels pain and is healthy. On the one hand, he is healthy in the most then when these are portioned in due measure to each other in blending both power and quantity, and mixed perfectly. On the other hand, pain occurs

³⁶ Michael Grant and Rachel Kitzinger, eds., *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (Gale: 1988): s.v. "Medicine."

when any one of these is deficient or in excess or separates in the body and does not combined with the others (Hipp. *Nature of Man*. 4.1–10).

Health, defined humoristically, is about avoiding excess in any degree. The four humors are given by name here and health is described as an equal blending of the four elements. Sickness and pain are caused when any one of these qualities is not blended in proportion to the others.

Galen likewise discusses healing in reference to the blending of qualities and temperatures.

εὐκρατότατος δ' ἐστίν, ὃς ἂν τῷ μὲν σώματι φαίνηται μέσος ἀκριβῶς ἀπάντων τῶν ἄκρων, ἰσχνότητός τε καὶ παχύτητος, μαλακότητός τε καὶ σκληρότητος, ἔτι δὲ θερμότητός τε καὶ ψυχρότητος. ἔστι γὰρ εὐρεῖν ἀψάμενον ἐκάστου τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων σωμάτων ἢ χρηστήν καὶ ἀτμώδη θερμασίαν ἢ πυρώδη καὶ δριμεῖαν ἢ τούτων μὲν οὐδετέραν, ἐπικρατοῦσαν δέ τινα ψῦξιν (Galen, *De temperamentis* 2.576.1-13 Kühn).

The most temperate is he who appears in the body to be exactly in the median of all extremity—both thinness and thickness, softness and stiffness, and moreover hotness and coldness. For it is found when touching each of the human body there is either productive and vaporous heat or combustive and fierce heat, or neither of these, whenever chilling prevails.

Galen regards healing as the equal distribution of temperatures and qualities. He states that to be in the middle of all qualities is health. Both the author of the *Nature of Man* and Galen echo Alcmaeon's notion that health is attained through balance. While health attained through balance is an extremely pervasive medical idea, it is not the only with which Thucydides grapples.

Homeric Medicine

Homeric medicine is a reactionary medicine. There is little defined which can be considered preventative. When medicine is explicitly discussed in Homer, it is attempting to resolve a perceivable issue, not work as a defense for further malady. Machaon, one of the sons of Asclepius, is the primary example of healing in the *Iliad*.³⁷ Both he and his brother are called ἰητροί, a term specific to healers and physicians (2.732, 11.833). Machaon is shown to apply drugs and salves, remove arrows, and extract blood and poison (4.193–219). Homer also records that a physician is worth many men because they can remove arrows and apply soothing salves (ἰητρὸς γὰρ ἀνὴρ πολλῶν ἀντάξιός ἄλλων ἰούς τ' ἐκτάμνειν ἐπὶ τ' ἥπια φάρμακα πάσσειν; 11.514–15). The value of the *iatros*, at least to Homer, lies in his ability to cure malady and not in his knowledge of cures.³⁸ Achilles is mentioned to have some of the same knowledge as Machaon and Podalirius, but it is Patroclus who is noted for putting to use this information (11.822–48). In fact, when Apollo, chief among the gods of medicine, is recounted performing an act of healing, Homer has him perform the same actions and in the same language as the mortal healers (5.401, 5.900).³⁹ While the actions of physicians in Homer are simple, the designation of what ailments they are able to heal is a bit more complicated.

In early Hellenic thought, the divine can cause and cure all illness. The conditional is purposefully employed for it is clear that, even in early stages of Greek medical theory, there were conditions cured and caused by humans alone. One need only recite the myths of Asclepius to see early Greek preoccupation with moving healing from the divine sphere into the mortal. Diseases both roam freely throughout the world and are sent by divinity.⁴⁰ Prometheus' test and

³⁷ His brother Podalirius' actions, while he is also considered a great healer, are discussed to a much lesser extent.

³⁸ E. D. Phillips, *Greek Medicine* (The Camelot Press LTD: London and Southampton, 1973): 16–27.

³⁹ Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 38; The terms used are a derivative of the verb πάσσω with the noun φάρμακον.

⁴⁰ Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 39.

the subsequent consequences that led to a box of woes being released by the hands of mortals can help to show that fault for malady lies with both man and divinity.⁴¹ Homer appears to stress that the origin of the ailment dictates what kind of healing must be used. The illness and the healing are domain dependent. When there was a plague rampant throughout the Greek camp, Machaon and Podalirius could do nothing to stay its spread. Rather, it was a seer who was able to deduce its cause and cure (1.8–474).⁴² The ἰητρός could not give aid when the μάντις was required. Because the plague was divine in origin, shot from the bow of Apollo himself, only the divine could bring about its cure. In the same way, the multiple acts of mortal healing performed by Machaon bear no mention of the gods nor supplication for assistance in the endeavor. Strife that rises from the mortal sphere in the *Iliad* is cured by mortals.

Thucydides describes the dual origin of the disease and thus creates a plague which neither the gods nor man could properly cure. Had Thucydides recorded the plague narrative in reverse, one might see more plainly the attacks Thucydides makes against Hellenic medicine. He closes his account by discussing the veracity of oracles and their prediction of the coming epidemic, citing explicitly the Lacedaemonian petition sent to the oracle at Delphi. Apollo's oracle stated, according to Thucydides, that if they should go to war the god himself would contribute to their victory (ὅτε ἐπερωτῶσιν αὐτοῖς τὸν θεὸν εἰ χρὴ πολεμεῖν ἀνεῖλε κατὰ κράτος πολεμοῦσι νίκην ἔσεσθαι, καὶ αὐτὸς ἔφη ξυλλήψεσθαι; 2.54.4).⁴³ This is a direct parallel to the beginning of book one of the *Iliad*. The plague which Thucydides presented is meant to be as great an onslaught as the one which incited Achilles' rage. Even Apollo, a prominent medical

⁴¹ See Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 90ff.

⁴² Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 39.

⁴³ In regard to the use of τὸν θεὸν, Jordan observes that Thucydides' "respect can be inferred from the fact that he bothers to quote Apolline oracular pronouncements, either verbatim or in paraphrase, but above the respectful language which he, like Herodotos, uses: "the god in Delphi" or simply "the god" or "Apollo." Borimir Jordan, "Religion in Thucydides," 131–2.

deity in his own right, seeks to destroy the Greeks as he did on the beaches of Troy. Thucydides, in the same way, names geographical sources of his plague. He details its course from Ethiopia to Egypt, then Libya to Athens (2.48.1–2). By beginning his account with a mortal explanation of the plague’s source and concluding it with a divine origin of the malady, Thucydides is balancing his epidemic in between the mortal and divine realms. Because the plague is somewhat divine, mortals cannot heal it. Because its origin is somewhat mortal as well, divinity cannot stop it.

This idea, namely that mortal healing is done in abstraction from the divine’s sphere of influence, is advanced further in subsequent Greek medical thought and leads some to the conclusion that “for the most part, within the sphere of medicine as they define it there is no place for divine causation or divine cures.”⁴⁴ While there is clear evidence for this view, Thucydides does not appear to completely remove divinity from healing in his narrative. A trend toward the separation of religion and medicine is certainly established within the Hippocratic Corpus, but it appears to be a fraction later chronologically than Thucydides’ writings.⁴⁵ However, the role of the physician, which is carefully addressed in the Hippocratic Corpus, does impact the professionalization of medicine Thucydides presented in his narrative.

Hippocratic Medicine

Perhaps the most influential physician of the ancient world was Hippocrates of Cos, to whom is attributed the Hippocratic Corpus.⁴⁶ Little to nothing is known at this time of

⁴⁴ Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 43.

⁴⁵ G. E. R. Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1987); idem, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990):135–45; J. N. Logrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine: Philosophy and Medicine from Alcmaeon to the Alexandrians* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁶ While it is largely agreed that Hippocrates did not compose all the Hippocratic writings, the fact that significant medical writings were attributed to him, regardless of their authenticity, shows what a pivotal position he played in the advances of ancient medicine.

Hippocrates himself, though many ancient authors casually mention him.⁴⁷ His name was evidently known to the educated, but specific details are not available. While Thucydides and the historical Hippocrates were alive during the same period, Hippocratic ideas of medicine could not have been seen as completely authoritative in their onset, for Thucydides includes ideas contrary to them.

Writing more than five-hundred years after Hippocrates' birth, Pliny the Elder records in his *Natural History* a brief description of the man's rise. Pliny's claim, while of uncertain veracity, serves to illustrate succinctly a common view of early Hellenic medicine in hindsight.

sequentia eius, mirum dictu, in nocte densissima latuere usque ad peloponnesiacum bellum. tunc eam revocavit in lucem hippocrates, genitus in insula coo in primis clara ac valida et aesculapio dicata. is, cum fuisset mos, liberatos morbis scribere in templo eius dei quid auxiliatum esset, ut postea similitudo proficeret, exscripsisse ea traditur atque... templo cremato iis instituisse medicinam hanc, quae clinice vocatur (29.2).

The next thing, a strange story, lay hidden in thickest night until the Peloponnesian War, at the time when Hippocrates called it back to the light, who was born on the first bright and strong island of Cos, consecrated to Asclepius. It had been the custom for those who had been freed from illness by him to engrave what was helpful upon the temple of the god, so that similar means could profit those hereafter. And it is said that Hippocrates made a copy of these... and after the temple burned down, he established here the art of medicine, that which is called clinical.

Pliny includes a couple of early medical ideas when describing Hippocrates. First is the association of Hippocrates, the mortal, with the god Asclepius. The divine nature of healers has

⁴⁷ The historicity of the Hippocratic Corpus will not be discussed in this paper, but have been addressed elsewhere. See Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 53–114.

been addressed elsewhere,⁴⁸ though the connection to divinity must be understood in order to interpret Thucydides' subsequent narrative. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, is given first credit in and through his relationship with divinity. Hippocratic medicine, at its inception, was divine. However, it used this position as a catalyst to move the field of medicine away from divinity and toward a more sophisticated, rhetorical realm.⁴⁹

Sanctuary Healing

The other, and more striking, point Pliny highlights is the function of the Asclepion.⁵⁰ The pattern of mortals pursuing refuge from ruin in the religious rights of temples is ubiquitous and the Asclepion provides an ideal example. The sufferer would, upon entering the temple, begin the process of incubation. He would sleep under the care of Asclepius, hoping to receive a vision of how he could seek healing or receive a miraculous healing outright. Once whole, the patron could offer as a gift a cast of their aspect which had been healed and might inscribe the method by which they received healing upon the walls of the Asclepion itself. Thus, the Asclepion became decorated with healing. It is worth noting that temple healing plays a significant role in Thucydides' narrative and that we have evidence for a temple of healing dedicated to Asclepius being on the Athenian acropolis during Thucydides' own lifetime.⁵¹

The plague Thucydides described filled the temples of the gods not with trophies or healing, but with corpses (2.52.3). While Thucydides does not directly anthropomorphize the plague in this section nor does he place it as the subject of the verbs, it is clear that the plague is the reason for the temples being full and the reason that men abandoned divine decree.⁵² The

⁴⁸ Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 1–114.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 61. Demonstrably false that this is where Hippocrates got his remedies.

⁵¹ George Hinge et al., edd., *Aspects of Ancient Greek Cult: Context, Ritual and Iconography* (Aarhus University Press, 2009): 91.

⁵² Lucretius does go on to anthropomorphize his narrative aggressor.

sleep which would have led the sick to healing instead leads them to death. The temples in Thucydides' account cease to be places set apart to receive divine intervention and instead become mausoleums for those who died holding out for intercession.⁵³ Not even the Greek pantheon could sway Thucydides' plague.

Thucydides, writing his narrative during Hippocrates' mortal career, was influenced by both ideas of medicine. He includes herbs, sanctuaries, divinity, and mortality into his plague narrative; for that is the medicine with which he was familiar. Writing in the fifth century BCE., Thucydides predates many of the surviving medical treatises which might otherwise further illuminate his thoughts on medicine. However, there are a handful of accounts which have delineated boundaries sufficiently to further assert that Thucydides, in addition to the Homeric and Hippocratic ideas expressed previously, believe that healing could come in and through balance. With these evidences, it is clear that Thucydides is using the plague as the means by which he can combat Greek thought regarding medicine. Other authors, such as Lucretius, used the plague in a similar fashion to undercut their own philosophical opponents.

Lucretius' Plague

Thus far, the scope of this argument has been limited to the work of Thucydides and his literary and intellectual predecessors. One of Thucydides' successors, Lucretius, will be discussed in order to illustrate a clear example of an author utilizing the historical plague as a literary device. Lucretius not only used Thucydides' content in his work *De Rerum Natura*, but also his methodology. Many have studied Lucretius' plague narrative, not looking to recreate a historical event, but attempting to understand how he used a historical event to make a philosophical argument. He was not the first to use the plague in this way. Lucretius drew from

⁵³ Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 166; notes that this, "mirrored the collapse of social boundaries."

Thucydides' record in order to craft his argument and then proceeded to manipulate the events into shape. It is clear that Lucretius' plague narrative, found in book six of his poem, is philosophical and was written in order to show the superiority of Epicurean living.

Lucretius knew Thucydides' narrative and adapted Thucydidean methodology to fit his own argument. This work will not attempt to prove Lucretius' use of Thucydides, for, to quote Commager, "to exclaim over every similarity would be fatuous."⁵⁴ Some scholars, such as Peta Fowler, argue that Thucydides' narrative can even be used to correct textual corruption in Lucretius' plague narrative because it leans so heavily on *The Peloponnesian War*, with others arguing that some of the most famous episodes in his poem are expansions on Thucydidean themes.⁵⁵ Instead, narrative notes are presented in order to demonstrate Lucretius' reliance on the text. He highlights some of the same episodes as Thucydides, including the origin of the disease (6.1090–102, 1118, 1138–44), the description of the illness' effects (6.1163–77, 1182–98), the abandonment of burial rites (6.1215–22), and the complete collapse of sacred space (6.1272–1286).⁵⁶ He constantly adapts Thucydides' narrative to fit his own agenda.

When discussing the origin of disease, a subject which Thucydides intentionally left ambiguous, Lucretius records the following.

*Nunc ratio quae sit morbis, aut unde repente
mortiferam possit cladem conflare coorta
morbida vis hominum generi pecudumque catervis,*

⁵⁴ H. S. Commager, Jr., "Lucretius' Interpretation of the Plague" *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 62 (1957): 105.

⁵⁵ Peta Fowler, "Lucretian Conclusion" In *Oxford Readings in Lucretius*, edited by Monica R. Gale (Oxford University Press, 2007): 201. The Iphigenia passage and mourning of the dead father in book 3 are attributed to expansions on Thucydides' 2.52.2 theme. Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 103; D.F. Bright, "The Plague and the Structure of *De Rerum Natura*," *Latomus* 30 (1971): 615.

⁵⁶ While Bailey's commentary begins the plague's epilogue at 1138 not 1090, Lucretius does discuss the inception of disease and pestilence in great detail before beginning his narrative. This in-depth discussion on the origin of this calamity mirrors Thucydides' preoccupation with the mortal and divine origins of the plague.

*expediam. primum multarum semina rerum
esse supra docui quae sint vitalia nobis,
et contra quae sint morbo mortique necessest
multa volare. ea cum casu sunt forte coorta
et perturbarunt caelum, fit morbidus aer.
atque ea vis omnis morborum pestilitasque
aut extrinsecus, ut nubes nebulaeque, superne
per caelum veniunt, aut ipsa saepe coorta
de terra surgunt, ubi putorem umida nactast
intempestivis pluviisque et solibus icta (6.1090–102).*

Now I will set out what reasoning there is to disease or whence, the deadly power having come forth, it is able to stir up suddenly deadly destruction for the generations of man and herds and masses. First, there are seeds of many things, which I taught above, which promote living, and on the other hand it is necessary that there be many which fly about which are for disease and death. Perhaps when these have been thrown together and disturb the heavens, the air becomes deadly. And all this power of disease and pestilence are either come from above from the sky like clouds of mist, or often they, having come together, rise from the earth itself, when by moisture it has become putrid, having been cast into untimely rains and suns.

Because Lucretius is an atomist, he argues that the origin of diseases, plagues, and pestilences lie in their component pieces. He discusses this in order to provide context for the plague narrative which is to follow. Lucretius' preoccupation with the causes of his narrative plague mirror Thucydides'. While Thucydides argued that the origin of his plague was a combination of divine

and mundane forces, Lucretius chose to eliminate the divine force completely from his genesis. This was done not only to continue Lucretius' attacks against *Religio*, but also to address a topic which Thucydides so carefully considered.

Lucretius' description of the plague parallels that of Thucydides. He discussed the effects of the plague in terms of excess heat internally and cold externally (6.1163–77). Biles and other symptoms are used throughout his account, intentionally mimicking Thucydides' preoccupation with medical ideas (6.1182–98). The burial rites which, Thucydides set up in order to undermine, are also addressed in Lucretius' poem (6.1215–29). One of Thucydides' key traits of the plague is further echoed by Lucretius.

*Nec requies erat ulla mali: defessa iacebant
corpora, mussabat tacito medicina timore,
quippe patentia cum totiens ardentia morbis
lumina versarent oculorum expertia somno* (6.1178–81).

There was not any rest from the malady: the bodies having fainted
lay sprawled out. Medicine stammered silently because of fear,
because they turned so often the pupils of their eyes,
opening them and burning from within, being unable to sleep.

Lucretius reiterates Thucydides' claim that the healing arts could not avail the sick. Lucretius anthropomorphizes medicine into a representation of healing and creates the striking image that medicine, whose duty it is to tend to the sick, cannot meet the gaze of the afflicted. Medicine is useless against this narrative aggressor.

Lucretius expands upon Thucydidean descriptions of the dead and dying in order to highlight the contrast between his view and those who believed otherwise. This parallels

Thucydides' own descriptions which were used to display the entire collapse of Greek society through Athenian metaphor. Gardner observed that, "Thucydides had succinctly demonstrated the Athenian plague's power to intermingle living and dead bodies, a process dramatized in the crowded enclaves and huts of the city where, 'dead and dying were piled on top of each other, and half-dead creatures staggered around every fountain' (2.52.2). Lucretius expands and innovates by staging (and initially confining) the transgressive confusion of life and death within the body of the individual plague victim."⁵⁷ Death for Lucretius resided in the infected individual. The descriptions of the sick demonstrate this by displaying the victims as walking corpses (6.1199–214, 1230–51). Lucretius' plague does contain the same imagery Thucydides used to punctuate his thesis, the temples and city itself crowded with corpses of the dead, but the individual being sick with the terminal disease of mortality follows Lucretius' larger argument (6.1259–86).

Lucretius understood Thucydides' plague narrative to be extra-historical. Other scholars have observed that, "Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* draws on the metaphoric relationship between plague and war in the Greek tradition, especially Thucydides."⁵⁸ It appears as though Lucretius utilized the Thucydidean narrative as a representative instrument in the same way as its original author. The adaptations Lucretius made to the narrative follow his own themes and arguments, but can lead to the conclusion that he believed Thucydides to be doing something similar. Commager observed that, "these changes betray something more than carelessness, poetic elaboration, or the inevitable consequence of writing in Latin rather than in Greek. We have seen Lucretius describe physical ills in a psychological vocabulary, treat clinical phenomena as

⁵⁷ Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 88.

⁵⁸ Adam Parry, "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague" *BICS* 16 (1969): 106–18; Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 116.

emotionally motivated actions, change medical data to ethical commentary, and broaden the plague's area in defiance of historical fact. In simplest terms, his additions and alterations display a marked tendency to regard the plague less in physical terms than in emotional, moral, and psychological ones. These changes might be seen as a sort of verbal weathervane, pointing the direction towards which Lucretius' imagination seems to be heading. They not only allow but encourage us to inquire if Lucretius might have felt the plague to represent something more than a historical event.”⁵⁹ Lucretius' use of the plague displays an inherent understanding that the record from which he received many of the plague's episodes was not recreating a historical event.

The final sections of the last book in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* contain a detailed description of the plague at Athens. This plague narrative is used to describe the superiority of Epicurean doctrine. Lucretius' narrative plague attacks a very different enemy than Thucydides' did. While Thucydides combated Greek medical thought, Lucretius was condemning his philosophical opponents. “Thus, although Lucretius purports to describe the same calamity that afflicted Athens in 430 BCE, included in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war, he imagines a very different epidemic; in his account, victims of disease suffer in a way that addresses the chaotic world of Rome in the 50s BCE and promotes his Epicurean agenda as a means of achieving equanimity in the face of such chaos.”⁶⁰ Lucretius describes the plague's effects with direct reference to the fear of dying. He utilizes the plague to conclude his argument that Epicurean doctrine frees a person from this fear and inherent suffering. It is by acknowledging and internalizing Epicurean thought that victims of the plague called mortality can cease to suffer.

⁵⁹ Commager, “Lucretius' Interpretation of the Plague,” 108–9.

⁶⁰ Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, 3.

Conclusion

Thucydides' narrative plague is presented in direct opposition to Hellenic medical thought of the 5th century BCE. He explained what the plague did to the individual in terms of balance. Likewise, he showed the failure of healing attempts with reference to mortal and divine domain. He purposefully used his plague narrative to show that no part of Greek culture, not even their ability to heal, was safe in his larger work. This often-misinterpreted portion of Thucydides' narrative is not a historical aside, but a final example to showcase that the Peloponnesian War was an affront to all things Greek. Thucydides primarily recorded his plague to combat Greek medical understanding. While Thucydides is not arguing against anyone in particular with his narrative, he is still using the narrative to argue for the greatness of the Peloponnesian War. Lucretius then utilized this metaphorical approach to the plague in his narrative to combat philosophies different than his own. Thucydides' narrative must be understood and studied in a similar fashion as scholars study Lucretius'. It is a narrative utilizing historical events as tools to argue against Greek medicine rather than unbreachable boundaries.

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