Changing the Body, Changing the Body Politic: Plague in Vergil and Ovid

This paper considers Vergil’s treatment of the Noric cattle plague in *Georgics* Three and Ovid’s account of the plague on Aegina (*Met*. 7.490-660) as dialectical responses to concerns of civil strife and the individual’s relation to the larger Roman community during the late Republic and early Empire. Drawing on scholarship that has posited a link between representations of plague in Athenian literature and political destabilization of the fifth century B.C.E. (Mitchell-Boyask 2008; cf. Padel 1992), this discussion contextualizes the often acknowledged links between Vergil’s account of cattle plague and Ovid’s narrative of the disease that decimates the Aegineans, before Jupiter restores the community by transforming ants into a new human population. In particular, language describing the body’s physical dissolution under the assault of plague (*Geor*. 3.482-85; *Met*. 7.538-51) links the two accounts and predicts the inevitable dissolution of human social bonds and boundaries that follow the outbreak of communicable disease.

While both accounts are indebted to Lucretius, who draws heavily on Thucydides’ description of Athenian plague, the two “Augustan” treatments of plague are shaped by the specific concerns of a citizen body in transformation. While Vergil largely restricts his nosological discourse to the impact of disease on the livestock and wildlife populations, both the sympathetic value of his treatment and its potential as metaphor for the human condition, consistent with the poem *in toto*, have been frequently remarked (e.g., Putnam 1979; Thomas 1988; cf. Mynors 1990). This paper interprets Vergil’s *nosos*-inspired reflections on the human condition by considering them within the larger discourses of civil war. In particular, I focus on the poet’s pathetic fallacy that memorably foregrounds fraternal bonds broken in the context of plague (3.515-30), presaging the civil war that will characterize the apian community of *Georgics* Four, a community miraculously restored the poem’s concluding *bugonia*. Ovid mimics Vergil’s harmonics of destruction and restoration that defines *Georgics* Three and Four within a single plague narrative: his innovations on the origins of the Myrmidons in Aegina initially recap the georgic aspects of the *dira lues* (7.523) and then track its progress through the human population (Anderson 1972; Bömer 1979). The *Metamorphoses* poet evokes the civil strife foreshadowed and revealed in *Georgics* Three and Four by embedding his account in the larger context of war between the Athenians and King Minos. While war and *nosos* have been intertwined since Homer’s account of plague in the Achaean camp that opens the *Iliad*, I argue that Ovid’s emphasis on repopulating Aegina (and creating a new group of young men, *iuventas*, readily available for military service, 7.515) reflects on the uniquely Augustan concern of creating a new generation of loyalists in the aftermath of civil war and the advent of the first principate

René Girard has described representations of plague as “...a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities...social hierarchies are first transgressed, then abolished....The plague makes all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment invalid” (1973-74, 833; cf. Cooke 2009). Ovid and Vergil both rely on pathologies of illness to illustrate the collapse of the Roman social order and explore the possibilities of its restoration. Where Vergil will poignantly meditate on the possibilities for (and cost of) recovery, Ovid’s miraculously restored population of Aegineans, lacking the personal history that complicates human lives and loyalties, emphasizes the difficulties, and perhaps impossibility, of an entirely new order.

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