

## Homeric Metaphors in Thucydides' account of the Athenian Plague (Book 2.47-54)

Thucydides' account of the "Athenian Plague" in Book 2.47-54 of his *History* remains as much a fascinating episode as a complex one. Many scholars have studied the structural and linguistic architecture of this episode by focusing especially on the way it resonates with Thucydides' earlier and contemporary sources. For instance, on account of its linguistic precision in the description of both the symptoms of the disease in the human body and the spreading through the Athenian population, this passage has been compared with Greek medical texts at Athens in the V century BC (Page 1953). Other scholars (Conford 1907; Macleod 1983; Hornblower 2009) discussed whether Attic tragedy might have represented a model for the Thucydidean passage. Parry (1969) was the first to suggest a relationship between Thucydides' Plague and Homer's *Iliad* 1: his linguistic analysis in fact highlights several remarkable parallelisms, especially centering around the thematic pair plague-war, which arises both in Thucydides' Book 2 and *Iliad* 1.61 (εἰ δὴ ὁμοῦ πόλεμος τε δαμᾶ καὶ λοιμὸς Ἀχαιοῦς, "if indeed war and pestilence alike are to subdue the Achaeans"). However, Parry and others too after him (Morgan 1994; Bruzzone 2017) do not explore further associations between the "Plague" passage and Homer, with the result that Thucydides' possible reworking of Homeric similes goes unnoticed.

In this paper I explore Thucydides' construction of Homeric metaphors and similes in the "Plague" passage. My aim is to show that in this episode Thucydides is not simply echoing lines from a similar passage in the *Iliad*, but indeed importing Homeric imagery and diction to allude to a literary tradition of plague narratives.

My discussion is based on a close reading of passages from both Thucydides' *History* 2.47-54 and Homer's *Iliad*. In particular, I will focus on two thematically similar metaphors used by Thucydides to describe the development and effects of the Plague in Athens. First, the idea of the disease's "blooming" or "blossoming" in the human body, which is captured by the verb ἀκμάζω at 2.49 (καὶ τὸ σῶμα, ὅσον περ χρόνον καὶ ἡ νόσος ἀκμάζει, οὐκ ἐμαραίνεται...). Second, the description of the citizens' gathering from the fields into the city and amassing of bodies within the Long Walls (ἐπίεσε δ' αὐτοὺς... ἡ ξυγκομιδὴ ἐκ τῶν ἀγρῶν ἐς τὸ ἄστυ, 2.52), which Thucydides enriches by means of "harvest" imagery (the ordinary meaning of the term ξυγκομιδὴ is "gathering in of harvest.") As regards the latter, I will draw particular attention to Thucydides' use of the verb πιέζω ("to press down, oppress"), which appears to describe the 'pressing' action of the Plague on its subjects. Next, I will point out how the metaphorical imageries of "blooming", "harvesting", and "oppressing" in Thucydides' Book 2 have significance in both other parts of the *History*, especially in relation to the "blooming" and "pressing" force of the war, and in selected passages from Homer's *Iliad*.

Finally, I will conclude with an overarching interpretation of Thucydides' development of Homeric metaphors. In my view, Thucydides' engagement with Homer in the "Plague" passage aligns with his ambition to make the *History* a "possession for all times" (κτημιά ἐς αἰεὶ, 1.22) and supports his declaration of the superiority of the *History* over the epic poems of the past. The use of μυνήσκω in his statement on the extraordinary nature of the disease at 2.47, "no plague of such extent nor destruction of humankind of such kind was remembered (ἐμνημονεύετο) to have appeared anywhere," might well in fact have metaliterary aims. The "Plague" passage therefore becomes a legacy in Thucydides' program in the same way as the *History* is. By enriching the historical account of the Athenian Plague with Homeric references,

Thucydides creates a work of art resonating with and perpetuating Greek literary history and traditions.

#### Works Cited

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