

Robin Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination. Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 209. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-521-87345-1) \$99.00.

Of the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C.E., Thucydides writes sparsely that words can hardly express the suffering to which it gave rise. Nevertheless, the historian's account served for centuries as the primary record of the catastrophe. Fifteen or so years ago, our picture changed: archaeologists discovered evidence from the early 420s that corroborates Thucydides' observations about the epidemic's disruption of burial customs, thereby opening up a new perspective on the plague's impact. In his new monograph, Robin Mitchell-Boyask argues that further traces of the plague's effects can be excavated—not in the dirt of ancient Athens but in its cultural imagination and, more specifically, within extant Attic tragedy from the last decades of the fifth century. He organizes these traces into three increasingly distant waves of impact: first, the immediate aftermath of the plague; then, later in the decade, the construction of an Asklepieion on the south slope of the Acropolis, behind the Theater of Dionysus; and, finally, the political turmoil of the late fifth century, which appears to imbue the concept of a diseased polis with particular resonance. These last two waves nearly eclipse the epidemic itself as Mitchell-Boyask builds his case for the argument that, after his arrival in the environs of the theater, Asclepius begins to function within tragic drama as a metonym for the genre's own healing powers. *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* thus operates with a wider lens than its main title suggests. But while the more expansive outlook is better suited to the language and imagery of tragic disease, it becomes difficult, as we move away from the plague—and, in fact, even when we are presumably in the thick of it—to gauge how its impact reshaped the Athenian imagination and how its affective residue changes our understanding of the tragedies it marks.

What makes such a project difficult is that the traces left by the plague and the healing god are decidedly faint. Accordingly, the book's arguments are, by Mitchell-Boyask's own admission, largely speculative, built on "network[s] of conceptual associations" (7) that extend well beyond the plays themselves. Such an approach is not without peril. Yet it also addresses the difficulty of interpreting tragic disease narrowly. Mitchell-Boyask rightly signals the limits of analyses that try to pin down medical language or diagnose characters without also mapping "a larger, or more metaphorical, structure of meaning" (18). And, on a number of occasions, he succeeds in producing persuasive evidence that the language and imagery of disease has been electrified by the Athenian plague.

One place where this argument is most persuasive is in the metaphorical domain of *miasma* and contagion. It is *miasma* that drives the flight of Theseus from Athens to Troezen in the *Hippolytus*; it colors allusions to Phaedra's tainted family history. It structures the movement of disease from Nessus to Deianeira to Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, and from

the city of Thebes to Heracles in the eponymous play. Not coincidentally, contagion is uniquely suited to the book's aims. For it is least likely to be overdetermined by naturalizing medicine (whose growing influence is noted but largely sidelined by Mitchell-Boyask): the Hippocratic texts rarely speak of *miasma*, a concept that sits uncomfortably within humoral medicine. Mitchell-Boyask is thus free to locate the sources for *miasma*'s imaginative power elsewhere. The plague, whose contagious nature did not escape Thucydides' notice, is an undeniably attractive candidate.

At other points, however, the plague's ghostly presence proves more elusive. In the first of two chapters entitled "Materials," Mitchell-Boyask argues that a powerful taboo explains the near absence of the word *loimos* from texts post-dating the plague. The lexical argument is vitiated, however, by the earlier demonstration that *loimos* is already a rare word in archaic poetry: if this is the case, the infrequent usage of the word after the plague is hardly meaningful. In that same chapter, two tables (1, 2), which rank our extant tragedies according to the frequency of *nosos*-language and their probable dating, respectively provide numbers that point to a more lacunose and complex story than Mitchell-Boyask acknowledges. Take, for example, the following conclusion: "The language of disease achieves almost startling prominence in Euripidean drama, especially after 430, when the plague begins" (35). While Euripides may very well have grown increasingly interested in disease over the course of his career, the fact that we have only two dramas produced before 430 B.C.E., *Medea* and *Alcestis*, invests this date with a significance that has little or nothing to do with the plague. More surprisingly, the plague is never brought to bear on the most dramatic spikes in Euripides' *nosos*-language. Of the twenty-four cases in the *Hippolytus* (probably 428 B.C.E.), twenty-two occur in roughly the first half of the play and describe Phaedra's lovesickness, a disease that receives virtually no attention. Nor does Mitchell-Boyask analyze the play with the highest concentration of *nosos*-words (45), the *Orestes* (408 B.C.E.), beyond the brief suggestion that the disease metaphor gains potency from the civic strife of 411 B.C.E. In the end, then, the numbers contribute little to Mitchell-Boyask's story about the plague's impact and the subsequent influence of the Athenian Asklepieion. Indeed, the absence of the densest nodes of disease from his story suggests that other factors may be at work behind the lexical frequencies, such as what pseudo-Longinus recognized as Euripides' fascination with the dramatic potential of love and madness (*De subl.* 15).

To be fair, Mitchell-Boyask never claims his readings exhaust the meaning of disease in the plays under consideration. In fact, he stresses their compatibility with other readings (183). In practice, however, he often severs the evidence from other networks of meaning to relate it narrowly to plague or Asclepius. This approach is especially evident in the sixth chapter. There he argues that Heracles' symptoms in the *Trachiniae* precisely mimic those of the plague, while ignoring or discarding other factors relevant to Sophocles' representation of Heracles' suffering (e.g., the hero's trouble with skin diseases, the effeminization of male tragic heroes more generally).

In a particularly striking example of literalism, Mitchell-Boyask defends at length the view that Heracles suffers actual castration. It is not clear why he needs this argument. It seems only to defer an analysis of the plague's deep impact on the play that never comes. The chapter does close, after an excursus on Heracles' voracious desires as a mirror for Athenian imperial ambitions, with the claim that "the audience's own experience of the plague was essential...for creating a Heracles who suffers on such a scale believably" (104). But this conclusion leaves us with too much and too little. If we accept Mitchell-Boyask's dating of the play and, thus, his argument that Heracles' disease channels the emotional intensity associated with the plague, we gain further evidence of the epidemic's effects at Athens. But it is a leap to claim that the experience of the plague is *essential* to the plausibility of Heracles' suffering. At the same time, plausibility is a modest pay-off for the speculative arguments about castration. Mitchell-Boyask here seems to be courting the very problem that had led him to dismiss most earlier scholarship—namely, that the "focus on individual maladies can be an interpretive dead-end, as it often remains decoupled from the larger patterns of thought in a text" (22).

Of course, readings of tragedy always pay attention *strategically*. They have to, given that no reading can reproduce the plenitude of a play's meaning. If readings, almost by design, overplay their hand, one can forgive Mitchell-Boyask's relentless mining of his chosen plays for references to plague and Asclepius, however oblique. Nevertheless, the readings grow stronger when they move beyond plague to take in civic strife, the health of the city, and Asclepius, not just as a concrete presence in the vicinity of the theater but also as a symbolic presence within tragedy. These themes culminate in the reading of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, which closes with the bold proposal that Heracles, here appearing *ex machina*, gestures to the still relatively new Asklepieion behind the spectators at the moment he prophesies, contrary to the epic tradition, that Philoctetes will be healed by Asclepius. The gesture, Mitchell-Boyask suggests, implicates Athens in the hero's cure and, perhaps, in its own.

We will never know whether the actor playing Heracles pointed to the sanctuary at this moment: doubt remains intrinsic to this project to the end. But doubt is also suggestive of the larger questions the books leave us with, questions about how to track the influence of a trauma like the plague in tragedy, about the interpretive machines we can build to catch such historical ghosts. If *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* is an imperfect machine in this respect, Mitchell-Boyask has nevertheless persuasively established the plague and Asclepius as frames of reference for the extensive disease language and imagery in later Greek tragedy.

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Benjamin Acosta-Hughes, *Arion's Lyre. Archaic Lyric into Hellenistic Poetry*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. xv + 252. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-691-09525-7) \$39.50.

The recently discovered Milan Posidippus papyrus (P.Mil. Vogl. VIII 309) preserves an epigram (37 A-B) that commemorates the dedication of a lyre to Queen Arsinoe II in her shrine at Cape Zephyrium. Brought to the shore of Egypt by "Arion's dolphin" (v. 2), this lyre symbolically stands for the transfer of Hellas' literary heritage—in particular its great lyric tradition—to the new cultural center of the Greek-speaking world, Ptolemaic Alexandria. (This reading was first elaborated by P. Bing, "Posidippus and the Admiral: Kallikrates of Samos in the Milan Epigrams", *GRBS* 43 [2003] 243-66 [=P. Bing, *The Scroll and the Marble* [Ann Arbor 2009] 234-52].) As such, "Arion's Lyre" is a fitting emblem for Benjamin Acosta-Hughes' study on the reception of Archaic lyric in Hellenistic poetry, which is an intriguing sequel to his earlier work on the reception of iambic poetry during the Hellenistic period (*Polyeideia: The Iambi of Callimachus and the Archaic Iambic Tradition* [Berkeley 2000]). The book is divided into five chapters, the first two of which deal with the intertextual presence of Sappho in hexameter and elegiac poetry, while the remaining three are dedicated to Alcaeus, Anacreon and Ibycus as well as Simonides and followed by a brief epilogue.

Examining allusions to earlier authors, whose works have only been fragmentarily transmitted, in Hellenistic texts (some of which are themselves not fully extant), is not an easy task and occasionally involves a good deal of speculation, but Acosta-Hughes is certainly right in observing "that the imitations that we can attest are well worth the frustration of working through sometimes (very) tenuous traces" (9), and the often fascinating results of his analysis undoubtedly prove the point. Even if one might at times feel a bit lost in the dazzling array of echoes, adaptations, and rewritings presented in the course of this study, it is mostly a rewarding and thought-provoking read.

Acosta-Hughes repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that Hellenistic poets encountered Archaic songs as written texts, gathered, edited and divided into books; significantly, we may find their familiarity with such editions reflected both in their ways of alluding to specific lyric poets and in the ordering of their own material. In this context Acosta-Hughes offers very useful surveys of what is known about the Alexandrian editions of Sappho (92-104), Alcaeus (134-40), Anacreon (160-63), and Simonides (210-13). Worthy of note in particular is his suggestion that Sappho's poem on *The Wedding of Hector and Andromache* (fr. 44 V), which ends with a reference to the songs in honor of bride and groom (ὑμνην δ' Ἐκτορα κ' Ἀνδρομάχην θεοεικέλοις, v. 34), might have been put at the end of Book 2 with "a conscious gesture of acknowledgment to the ending of the final book of the *Iliad*," whose last words famously are ὧς οἱ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἐκτορος ἱπποδάμοιο: "Each poem," he remarks.