

**Ovid and the Classical Plague
Narrative Tradition**

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the tradition in classical literature of writing about plagues, with particular emphasis on this tradition as it is handled by the Roman poet Ovid. Narratives in Greek and Latin which describe the attack of plague on a community, along with its physical, psychological and social effects, are traced from their origin in Homer's *Iliad* through Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Lucretius' *On the Nature of the Universe* and Vergil's *Georgics* to the plague at Aegina in Book Seven of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is demonstrated that by the time Ovid writes the *Metamorphoses*, the early first century AD, a recognisable convention has developed, incorporating certain elements common to all the preceding plague narratives, along with some that are common to several. The conventional elements are shown to be of two types. On the one hand, there are conventional details, including plague as punishment and the collapse of social and religious custom arising from the plague's devastation. On the other hand, there are conventional uses of the plague narrative as a literary device. These include the use of a plague narrative to mark a major change of era, to establish certain key themes in the work as a whole, to establish important character relations, and to create a certain tone or mood. Once the plague narratives of his predecessors are examined, both individually and as part of this literary tradition, Ovid's Aeginetan plague is evaluated in terms of its detail and its place in the *Metamorphoses*. It is established that unlike the plague narratives of his predecessors, Ovid's has no significance to the work as a whole; it is inserted therein for its own sake as a convention. The details of Ovid's plague are then examined, and it is shown that Ovid's plague is thoroughly informed in content, vocabulary, syntax and style by each of the preceding plague narratives, and especially by those of his Latin predecessors in the tradition, Lucretius and Vergil. Rather than simply reproducing these elements of earlier plague narratives, however, Ovid generally exaggerates their essential features and embellishes them to the point of absurdity and grotesqueness. This is shown by several examples. It is argued that the resulting plague narrative therefore lacks the pathos and gravity of its ancestors. Its effect, rather, is amusing, witty, technically ostentatious, and parodic. It is concluded that in Ovid the plague narrative passes from convention to cliché.

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Abbreviations

- E-M Ernout, A. and A. Meillet. Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine: Histoire des mots. 4th ed. Paris: Klincksieck, 1959.
- LSJ Liddell, H. G. and R. Scott. A Greek-English Lexicon. 9th ed. revised by H. S. Jones. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
- OLD Glare, P. G. W., ed. Oxford Latin Dictionary. Oxford: Clarendon, 1982.

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Introduction

The following paper is concerned with the tradition of plague narratives in classical literature, as it is represented in the writings of Homer, Sophocles, Thucydides, Lucretius, Vergil and in particular Ovid. A plague narrative, for the purposes of this paper, is a description of the causes and effects of a plague on humans or animals that is significant either in its length and detail or in its importance to the work as a whole. I use the term 'plague' not to mean the specific disease caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*, which manifests itself as bubonic, septicaemic or pneumonic plague as in the Black Death of the Middle Ages, but in its broader sense: an epidemic or epizootic of contagious disease infecting a large proportion of the inhabitants of a given area (Dirckx 197). This is the sense in which 'plague,' in its Greek and Latin equivalents, is understood in the works with which I will be dealing.

The tradition itself is significant in that it is represented in the extant works of these five authors, who are among the most celebrated of classical antiquity. They represent several different genres and two distinct but connected cultures over approximately seven centuries. The plague narrative's first appearance in the written literature of ancient Greece and Rome is in Homer's *Iliad* (8th cent. BC). The subsequent authors develop the tradition, adapting it to their own generic and ideological needs but retaining several key elements. By the time Ovid writes his *Metamorphoses* (early 1st cent. AD), the plague narrative is recognised as a fully developed literary convention and this makes it ripe for parody. My purpose is to show that Ovid's treatment of the plague narrative tradition is indeed parodic, though the parody is of a particularly Ovidian kind.

In the course of this investigation, I will examine each of the examples from the authors listed above in turn. Each plague narrative presents its own problems, and these will be dealt with both for their own sake and for the sake of establishing the pattern of imitation and innovation that characterises the tradition. Varying amounts of work have already been done on each of the passages under consideration. All of them are discussed at least briefly in the standard commentaries for each work, and in the cases of Thucydides, Lucretius and Vergil a significant number of scholarly articles focussing on the plague narrative itself has been published.

Many such commentaries and articles have been incorporated into this paper, precedence being given to the most recent and the most cogent. A few surveys of classical plague narratives exist already, but apart from Grimm's these are too general and superficial to be of use. In the case of Ovid, nothing that I know of has been published exclusively on his plague narrative, and so, in addition to my own ideas, I have incorporated the relevant material from the general commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* by Anderson and Bömer, as well as the chapters on Ovid's plague in Grimm and in Vallillee. My bibliographical practices, as I have described them here, are reflected in the list of works cited.

I will address questions of vocabulary, style and tone within each passage, its relation to the rest of the work as a narrative device, and its ideological, philosophical or religious function within the work. It will be seen that with each successive author there

is more detail of discussion. This is the result of an increasing sophistication in the employment of the plague narrative, which itself arises both from the increasing number of earlier models available for reference and allusion, and from the crystallisation of the plague narrative into conventional form. Furthermore, with each succeeding generation of authors, there is a growing recognition of the plague narrative's emotional resonance, thematic adaptability and usefulness as a narrative device. It is also rich in semiotic possibilities. It is with Vergil's *Georgics* that this sophistication reaches its peak, owing to the skill of the poet and the sophistication of the poem itself.

Ovid's plague will be discussed last of all and in the greatest detail. More attention will be paid to the poetic technique and to the intertextuality of his plague narrative than of his predecessors'. This is not only because Ovid is the focus of this paper, but also because his poetry lends itself especially to a study of poetic technique and intertextuality. This study, then, will be of use in several ways: it will examine the individual plague narratives of the six authors in question, thereby furthering our understanding both of the passages themselves and of their authors; it will consider how a literary tradition begins and develops into a recognised convention; it will delineate the elements of this particular convention and consider how they lend themselves to adaptation; and it will examine how this convention is both respected and parodied by Ovid. This last part will go into as much detail as possible, and owing to the scarcity of research on Ovid's plague much of it will be original. But it can hardly be exhaustive, and a more thorough study will need to be done in future.

Chapter 1: The Plague Narrative Tradition before Ovid

A. Homer

The *Iliad*'s plague narrative comes early in the poem's first book. Having stated his theme, the wrath of Achilles, and his starting point, the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, the poet asks the muse: 'which of the gods was it that made them quarrel?' (*Iliad* 1.7).¹ The response comes in the next line: 'it was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto, who started the feud, when he punished the King [Agamemnon] for his discourtesy to Chryses, his priest, by inflicting a deadly plague on his army and destroying his men' (*Iliad* 1.9-12). The details of this 'discourtesy' follow, and then the plague is described:

Phoebus Apollo heard [Chryses'] prayer and came down in fury from the heights of Olympus with his bow and covered quiver on his back. As he set out, the arrows clanged on the shoulder of the angry god; and his descent was like nightfall. He sat down opposite the ships and shot an arrow, with a dreadful twang from his silver bow. He attacked the mules first and the nimble dogs; then he aimed his sharp arrows at the men, and struck again and again. Day and night innumerable fires consumed the dead.

(*Iliad* 1.43-52)

The plague continues for nine days before the Greeks discover the cause of Apollo's anger, and then the appropriate steps are taken to end it. Achilles compels Agamemnon to surrender his concubine, the priest's daughter; in recompense, Agamemnon takes

Achilles' concubine, and the quarrel of line seven is initiated. The story proper of the *Iliad* is now underway.

The plague narrative, quoted above in its entirety, is short but important. It motivates the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, and is therefore essential to the mechanics of the plot. The theme of the poem is the heroic wrath of Achilles; the starting point of the plot is the argument between him and Agamemnon, a conflict of heroic passions. The emotions involved are human in nature but superhuman in magnitude. They demand to be situated in and precipitated by a circumstance of uncommon emotional impact. This is provided by the plague, which is not only of an appropriately superhuman origin, sent by the angry Apollo, but which wreaks an extraordinary havoc among the Greek army. The terrible image of Apollo sitting calmly and continually shooting his invisible arrows conveys with great effect the helplessness of the Greeks. The plague's devastation is suggested by the 'innumerable fires' upon which the corpses burned 'day and night' (*Iliad* 1.52).

The demoralising effect of such circumstances can easily be imagined; it is made explicit by Achilles when the afflicted Greeks meet in Assembly² to discuss how the plague might be stopped: 'Agamemnon, my lord, what with the fighting and the plague, I fear that our strength will soon be so reduced that any of us who are not dead by then will be forced to give up the struggle and sail for home' (*Iliad* 1.59-61). Of the two reasons given here for the army's loss of heart, the fighting and the plague, the second would

seem to be of more immediate relevance; the fighting has been going on for the previous ten years, and no description of it has occurred in the poem at this point.

That the thoughts of the army, and of its leading warrior Achilles, turn to the abandonment of the cause for which they have fought for ten years suggests a breakdown not only of morale, but also of accepted social mores. Achilles' words are faintly mutinous; as the Assembly continues, he becomes more critical of Agamemnon, the acknowledged leader of all the Greeks. He ends by openly abusing and disobeying his commander, removing himself and his followers from the Greek cause with a prediction of the slaughter his absence will bring to his former comrades (*Iliad* 1.62ff.). In light of this it is clear that one important function of Homer's plague is to destabilise the social foundations of the Greek army to such an extent that this major change, the withdrawal of Achilles and his soldiers from the siege of Troy, can come about. That such a change is unprecedented in the ten-year war lends the resulting story greater impact. The importance of the plague to the story as a whole lies in this. In effect, it raises the emotional stakes.³

The words for plague in this passage are *nousos* (10), *loimos* (61), and *loigos* (67, 97). The first of these, *nousos*, is the Ionic form of *nosos*, the standard Attic word for 'disease,' with the wider meaning 'plague.' *Loimos* means 'plague' exclusively. *Loigos* simply means 'ruin' or 'havoc,' either by plague or by war (LSJ). Blickman (1-5) points out that *loigos* is used to mean 'plague' three times in the *Iliad*, all in the first book (67, 97, 456); otherwise it refers to the destruction of the Greeks in battle without Achilles.

Outside of Homer, it is a rare word, never used to mean 'plague.' The point of its use here is to link Apollo and Achilles; *mēnis*, 'wrath,' is also attributed to both Apollo and Achilles early in Book One (1, 75), and the *mēnis* of each brings *loigos* to the Greeks, first in the form of plague, later as a result of battle. These verbal parallels in the plague episode between the god and the hero establish Achilles' 'ethical paradeigmata,' for the rest of the poem. In other words, they define his 'relationship to the gods, as one important factor in the ethics of his choice' (Blickman 9). In short, the use of certain words in the plague episode, including *loigos*, explicitly draws attention to the similarities between Apollo and Achilles: both are angry at Agamemnon because of his treatment of a woman, and both as a result bring destruction upon the Greeks. Whereas Apollo is appeased by the Greeks' supplications, Achilles, for the rest of the poem, is not.

Apollo sends the plague in his capacity as Apollo Smintheus. This title (emphasised by enjambment, 39) is related to the Greek word (from the Mysian) for 'mouse,' *sminthos*. A connection between rodents and bubonic plague seems to have been recognised by 1050 BC, as an episode in the bible illustrates (1 Samuel 5, 6) (Griffin 449). All the Sminthia (shrines to Apollo as 'mouse-god,') that we know of were located on coasts or islands, whose ports would be the dissemination points of bubonic plague (Bernheim and Zener 12). Apollo, then, would likely have been the god not only of bubonic plague but of pestilence in general.

In attempting to diagnose the Homeric plague, Bernheim and Zener (14) point out that the area surrounding the Greek camp would have been marshy in places and

therefore an ideal breeding ground for disease-bearing mosquitoes. The 'whine' of these may be connoted by the Greek word *klangē* (49), used to describe the sound of Apollo's bow as he attacks the Greeks. A connection between flying insects and the god's deadly arrows is also posited, and the Greeks' being predeceased by dogs and mules leads to a tentative diagnosis (acknowledging that no symptoms are given) of equine encephalomyelitis (13-14).

Whether or not this can be accepted, it is at least relevant that an infectious disease may afflict certain animals as well as humans. In the case of equine encephalomyelitis, there is even an interval (of seven to fourteen days) between the infection of animals and of humans, consistent with Homer's description. Presumably Apollo destroys the animals only to heighten the terror and material loss wrought by the plague, as they cannot be held to account for the insult to Chryses. There is also a dramatic crescendo in the shift of destruction from animals to men. The death of apparently guiltless animals occurs in later plague narratives also,⁴ perhaps suggesting an aitiological retro-fitting of the divine wrath motif.

The plague's origin in an angry divinity is one of several elements of Homer's plague narrative to be imitated by later writers. Others are the death of animals preceding that of people, the helplessness of the afflicted population, and the demoralisation which precipitates a departure from accepted social practices. The plague at Troy may not necessarily have been purely a literary invention, but its literary value is clear. For the *Iliad* itself it establishes the plot, a mood of tension and frustration, and certain central

themes; for the classical tradition it establishes an emotionally potent and narratively useful set of conventions.

B. Sophocles

Like the *Iliad*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* begins with a plague. In the opening sequence, a priest stands with a group of children before Oedipus and appeals to the king to save the city from its afflictions (14-57). These are in fact of two distinct kinds: a blight, which kills crops and cattle and prevents childbirth, and an epidemic, which directly attacks Thebes' human population. These calamities, which I will consider as combined under the label 'plague,' are described twice. The first description occurs in the course of the priest's appeal:

[T]he city, as you see, is now too sorely vexed, and can no more lift her head from beneath the angry waves of death; a blight is on her in the fruitful blossoms of the land, in the herds among the pastures, in the barren pangs of women; and everywhere the flaming god, the malign plague, has swooped on us, and ravages the town; by whom the house of Cadmus is made waste, but dark Hades rich in groans and tears.

(22-30)⁵

Its brevity is appropriate, since the king could hardly be ignorant of his city's ruin, as Oedipus tells us himself (58ff.). The second makes up part of the parodos, the first choral ode, in which the Theban elders pray to the gods for help:

[A] plague is on all our host, and thought can find no weapon for defence.
The fruits of the glorious earth grow not; by no birth of children do

women surmount the pangs in which they shriek; and life on life may you
 see sped, like bird on nimble wing, swifter than resistless fire, to the shore
 of the western god. By such deaths, past numbering, the city perishes:
 unpitied, her children lie on the ground, spreading pestilence, with none to
 mourn: and meanwhile young wives, and grey-haired mothers with them,
 uplift a wail at the steps of the altars, some here, some there, entreating for
 their weary woes. The prayer to the Healer rings clear, and, blent
 therewith, the voice of lamentation. (168-77)⁶

The two situations are parallel, and the second description essentially repeats and amplifies the first; being in the lyric metre, in song, and in the context of a prayer, it gives an emotional intensity to the facts already laid out in the iambics of the prologue (Dawe 105). Following its account of the plague, the chorus concludes its prayer, initially addressed to Athena (159), with an appeal to Zeus, Apollo, Artemis, and Dionysus to join forces against Ares, who is named (190) as the source of the plague. From this Roussel (quoted in Daux 118) interprets the plague as a Titanomachy (a battle amongst the gods), and attributes to the 'sens mystique' of the choral prayer 'la création d'une sorte de mythe grandiose, fort eschyléen.' The image of clashing gods makes the Thebans' plight a universal catastrophe, suggesting that the social chaos of Oedipus' city extends even to Olympus.

That Ares is the source of the plague is surprising. At the outset of the play, the plague would likely be connected with Apollo in the minds of the audience, through

recollection of the *Iliad* plague and of the widely-known oracle, reported at Thucydides 2.54, which connected the Athenian plague with the attack of the Spartans at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war. However, no particular god is associated with it in the prologue, and its source is not named until 190. Apollo, as it turns out, is not the sender of the Theban plague, and is in fact called upon, with others, to help avert it (149-50).⁷

Ares is identified with plague nowhere else in Greek literature (Knox, 'Date' 139). Furthermore, he is 'perhaps the most important patron deity of Thebes' (Knox, 'Date' 138), which makes it surprising that the chorus of Theban elders would call upon Zeus and company to defeat Ares, 'unhonoured among gods' (215). Knox concludes, reasonably, that Sophocles is thinking in this passage of Athens, not Thebes ('Date' 139). The Athenians, in 430 BC, suffered not only a Spartan invasion of Attica, but also a devastating plague: 'the plague attacked them and the war too' (Thucydides 2.59, quoted in Knox, 'Date' 139). To Sophocles' audience,⁸ plague was part of war, another guise of Ares, who 'amid cries as of battle wraps me in the flame of his onset', and who the chorus prays will 'turn his back in speedy flight from [their] land' (191-2) (Knox, 'Date' 139).

War and plague, of course, are also connected in the *Iliad*. The Sophoclean plague would likely have put the Athenian audience in mind of the Homeric, creating an association between Oedipus and Achilles. The two are heroic, one in his intellectual prowess, the other in battle, but the similarities go further than this. Achilles is 'a haughty young man [who] discovers to his horror that his obsession with protocol and his own prestige has cost the life of his aptly named surrogate father, Patroclus' (Griffith 40). He

is therefore 'a fit analogue for Sophocles' Oedipus' (Griffith 40), whose similar obsessions lead to the death of his father Laius, to his conflicts with Creon and Teiresias, and ultimately to his own unfortunate self-exposure.

But Oedipus has another parallel in Agamemnon, as the latter appears at the outset of the *Iliad* before his clash with Achilles. In the case of both Oedipus and Agamemnon, the fault of the king brings devastation upon the people under his rule. The cause of the plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the murder of Laius (106-7), perpetrated by Oedipus alone, not the incest in which Jocasta is his accomplice. Although it might be asking too much of any audience to spot these parallels at first sight, it is at least clear that in Sophocles, as in Homer, the plague represents catastrophe on the grand scale which reflects the status of the hero who causes it; as Daux puts it, the omnipotence of the plague in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* emphasises the grandeur of its opponent, Oedipus (121). Like Agamemnon, Oedipus causes the plague by his transgression; like Achilles, he is humbled in its aftermath.

On a more technical level, the role of the plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is identical to that in the *Iliad*: it sets the plot in motion. None of the pre-Sophoclean accounts of the Oedipus story mentions a plague or any other specific factor that led to the revelation of Oedipus' crimes (Knox, 'Date' 134). The plague serves this need very well while evoking the appropriate horror in Sophocles' plague-shocked audience. Then, after the Parodos, the plague is forgotten, except for allusions to it at 636 and 665; having served to set the plot in motion, it gives way to the story of Oedipus' self-discovery (Dawe 10). As in the *Iliad*, then, the plague not only motivates the plot and sets a mood of foreboding, but also

heightens the impact of the action: from an extraordinary and horrifying cause comes an extraordinary and horrifying sequence of events.

That the circumstances of the play's beginning are extraordinary is clear even from the two short descriptions of the Theban plague quoted above. Its scope is universal: the blight kills crops and herds and thwarts childbirth, thereby destroying the means of sustaining and perpetuating life; the epidemic inflicts immediate death on the Thebans themselves (Daux 107). It is also worth noting the dramatic crescendo, as in Homer, of the things affected: crops, animals, unborn humans, the Thebans.⁹ The degree of its devastation is suggested by the uncountable number of the dead (179), reminiscent of the *Iliad's* ceaselessly burning pyres.¹⁰ Beyond the simple loss of citizens, there is also some suggestion that the usual social structure is severely disrupted. For instance, at 180 we hear that the corpses are left 'unpitied' and 'unlamented.' The first of these represents the failure of a simple emotional response which would ordinarily occur, the second the neglect of ceremonial customs of mourning and burial (Jebb 35; Dawe 110).

That these are both neglected tells us how drastically the normal functioning of Theban society and even of individuals' feelings has been subverted. Desperation reigns, and while such practical observances as burial are neglected, the Thebans (specifically the women) nevertheless throng the gods' altars (181-2), since 'thought can find no weapon for defence' (170). Paradoxically, this desperation culminates in an appeal to Oedipus, the actual cause of the plague. At the play's opening, Oedipus is confident and rational, a stark contrast to his subjects. But in fact the plague represents the 'externalised sign of Oedipus' internal disorder' (Van Nortwick 27): the city's demoralisation and

disorder at this point are external and manifest, those of Oedipus internal and latent. With Oedipus' banishment at the end of the play, this situation is reversed.

Initially, then, we see an outwardly admirable Oedipus, 'renowned of all' (8), whose intellectualism and confidence reflect the same qualities in Sophocles' Athens. Like the riddle of the Sphinx, the solution of which won Oedipus the crown, the plague is conceived of as an intellectual problem (Van Nortwick 22). Even before the priest appeals to him for help, he has 'gone many ways in wanderings of thought' (67) to find a solution. The Greek word here for thought is *phrontis*, which is a key term associated with the new intellectualism of Periclean Athens (Knox, *Thebes* 126); we have already seen that the chorus despairs of finding any 'weapon of thought,' (*enkhos phrontidos*) (170).

The scientific attitude of the age is also reflected in certain terms of a mathematical nature. The chorus calls its plague-inflicted sorrows *anarithma*, 'uncountable' (168), (echoed by *anarithmos* (179)), which suggests that this calamity, in spite of Oedipus' confidence in his mental agility, is 'something beyond the power of "number, outstanding among intellectual achievements"' (Knox, *Thebes* 151, quoting Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 159). Similarly, there are several terms in the descriptions of the plague which may be considered part of the specialised vocabulary of medicine. *Anakouphisai*, 'raise up' (23), 'appears in medical texts with the meaning 'relieve,' especially of a fever, which is evoked by the recurring images of burning and flame. *Agonois* (27) is the standard term for 'barren' in Hippocratic and other medical writings, and is used by Sophocles only here. *Thanatophora*, 'death-bringing' (180), is another

example, which also illustrates Sophocles' familiarity with the idea of contagion - something generally acknowledged to be found in no writer before Thucydides (Knox, Thebes 151).

Sophocles appears to have had a strong interest in medicine. He not only held the priesthood of the healing hero Amyntus, but also wrote a hymn to Asclepius, the doctor god, whose image he hosted at his house before a shrine was built for it (Griffith 39-40). In Oedipus' approach to the plague, then, we see both the delineation of his character and something of the Periclean ideal in action. It is hard to avoid seeing a criticism of the latter in the former's failure.

The plague in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, to conclude, serves many of the same functions as that in the *Iliad*. It is a heaven-sent punishment and it undermines the morale and the social conventions of the afflicted population. It begins the play, setting in motion the actions of a hero who is made to appear larger than life by the magnitude and universality of the calamity. It creates a mood of desperation and doom, amid which Oedipus stands with confidence and clarity of thought, but to which he ultimately succumbs.

The *phrontis* in which the king trusts succeeds in revealing the source of the plague and its eradication. It cannot, however, save him from himself, that is, from the irrational nature which prompted him to murder Laius in a transportation of rage. The intellectual aspect of Sophocles' plague narrative, more specifically the futility of thought cited by the chorus, will become a convention of later plague narratives.

C. Thucydides

The *Iliad* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus* are works in verse, the one an epic and the other a tragedy. The plague narrative tradition, even at this early point, is not limited to a particular genre. Nor is it limited to verse, for in the second book of his *History* (47.2-54) Thucydides gives a detailed prose account of the plague that struck Athens in the summer of 430 BC. It is introduced as follows:

[The Spartans] had not been many days in Attica before the plague first broke out among the Athenians. Previously attacks of the plague had been reported from many other places in the neighbourhood of Lemnos and elsewhere, but there was no record of the disease being so virulent anywhere else or causing so many deaths as it did in Athens. At the beginning the doctors were quite incapable of treating the disease because of their ignorance of the right methods. In fact mortality among the doctors was the highest of all, since they came more frequently in contact with the sick. Nor was any other human art or science of any help at all. Equally useless were prayers made in the temples, consultation of oracles, and so forth; indeed, in the end people were so overcome by their sufferings that they paid no further attention to such things. (47.3-4)¹¹

The plague's geographical origins and progress into Athens are briefly mentioned and then, declining to speculate on its causes, Thucydides catalogues the typical symptoms of this disease which he himself had suffered. He concludes this section: 'Words indeed fail

one when one tries to give a general picture¹² of this disease; and as for the sufferings of individuals, they seemed almost beyond the capacity of human nature to endure' (50.1).

With the following he moves from physical effects to psychological:

Some died in neglect, some in spite of every possible care being taken of them. As for a recognised method of treatment, it would be true to say that no such thing existed: what did good in some cases did harm in others. Those with naturally strong constitutions were no better able than the weak to resist the disease, which carried away all alike, even those who were treated and dieted with the greatest care. The most terrible thing of all was the despair into which people fell when they realised that they had caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness, and, by giving in in this way, would lose their powers of resistance. (51.2-4)

From individual reactions the account moves to more general tendencies: indifference 'to every rule of religion or of law' (52.3), abandonment of ordinary burial rites and adoption of the 'most shameless methods' of burial (52.4), and a state of 'unprecedented lawlessness' (53.1) in the face of calamity. The episode ends with the Athenians reconsidering old oracles which seem to have predicted the plague, and concludes succinctly: 'such were the events connected with the plague' (54.5).¹³

This account is overwhelmingly pessimistic. The elation felt by those who caught the disease and survived (51.6) offers the only brief respite. The gloom is all the more keenly felt because the plague is described immediately after Pericles' confident and optimistic Funeral Oration (34-47.2). This juxtaposition suggests a deliberately literary choice on Thucydides' part, as do the vocabulary and style of the whole plague passage.¹⁴

Like most Athenians of his time, Thucydides was familiar with Homer and would also have been in Athens when Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* was produced. These may have provided models for his own literary treatment of the plague; it may also have been suggested to him by the devastation he witnessed. Either way, there are elements in Thucydides' plague which put it in the tradition of Homer and Sophocles. This tradition may even be said to be crystallised in Thucydides; his plague narrative is longer and more detailed than the others, allowing for fuller development of the Homeric and Sophoclean elements. As well as being historical and accurately observed it fully realises its literary potential, both in the harrowing description itself and in its significance to the *History* as a whole. It becomes the most famous and most imitated of the classical plague narratives.¹⁵

Thucydides' plague is not sent by a divinity to punish the Athenians. But it does represent something 'superhuman' and 'irrational' (Parry 116). It is said to overcome all 'human skill,' *anthrōpeia technē*; the phrase implies an opposite, namely the skill or power of nature or of the gods. Its description comes right after Pericles' Funeral Oration, 'the strongest assertion of the power of the mind to control the world' (Parry

116). Shortly after its description Pericles, representing Thucydides' ideal of human rationality, in his final speech encourages the Athenians in their struggle against the plague (2.60 ff.). He refers to its ravages as *ta daimonia*, 'what the gods send' (64.2) as opposed to *ta...apo tōn polemiōn*, '[those which] come from the enemy' (my translation). Pericles succumbs to the plague soon after this speech, and the irrational triumphs.

The irrational may be considered both superhuman and subhuman, as in the case of animals. Animals play a small but interesting role in Thucydides' plague, as they do in Homer and Sophocles. In Homer Apollo's arrows attack first mules, then dogs, then humans; this represents a dramatic crescendo and illustrates the all-destructive power of the plague. In Sophocles, there is a progression from crops to grazing animals to humans, again suggesting universal destruction. Of the Athenian plague, Thucydides says that the birds and quadrupeds which normally feed on human bodies would no longer do so or, if they did, would die. The absence of such birds testifies to this, he continues, 'but dogs, being domestic animals, provided the best opportunity of observing this effect of the plague' (50.1-3). Elsewhere he describes the Athenians dying 'like sheep' (51.4). The reference to dogs evokes Homer, while their death along with that of the birds illustrates both the totality of the destruction and the disruption of all natural order. It may be that the Athenians are said to die like sheep because of the 'more numerous fatalities associate with diseases of livestock' (Rusten 188); the simile at least dehumanises the Athenians and emphasises their helplessness.

The dehumanisation, that is the reduction of Pericles' paragons of civilisation to an animal or simply non-human state, is reflected in the use of 'corpses' (*nekroi*)¹⁶ to refer to the still-living plague victims who lie 'heaped one on top of the other.' The same sentence goes on to speak of people 'half-dead' (*hēmithnētes*), who 'rolled about in the streets' (52.2, tr. Smith), but in fact there is no pronoun or noun representing the 'people,' just the adjective. Warner translates 'half-dead creatures,' which succeeds in conveying Thucydides' effect. The once proud Athenians are no longer even human, and their abandonment of social norms (see below) for a state of nature follows inevitably.

While himself refraining from any attribution of the plague to gods, the historian reports the following as an addendum (54.2ff.). The Athenians in their suffering recalled an old oracle which said that 'a Dorian war [would] come and pestilence with it,' and another that the god would side with the Spartans if the Spartans fought with all their might. This god is Apollo, the god of the oracle and the source of the plague in Homer. Thucydides himself simply reports these popular reactions with little comment, besides a cynical suggestion that an old oracle might be misremembered to suit present circumstances (54.3); this report takes the place of the direct attribution of plague to a divinity, as in Homer and Sophocles.

Also in keeping with Homer and Sophocles, Thucydides casts the plague as a major turning point. It marks, with Pericles' death, the beginning of Athens' rule by men of ordinary ability and character (2.65.10). Athens at its peak is described in Pericles'

Funeral Oration. The plague, following immediately on that speech, signals the beginning of Athens' ultimate moral and military failure.

The military connection, too, is worth noticing. Like Homer's plague, this one takes place in the context of war. This is simply a matter of historical circumstance, but Parry (115) suggests a deliberate echo of Homer in Thucydides. In the *Iliad*, Achilles tells Agamemnon 'we'll soon be struggling home if we escape death at all, if war and plague alike are to overwhelm the Achaeans' (1.59-61, quoted in Parry 115). To be compared is Thucydides 2.54: 'such a disaster caught up the Athenians and crushed them as the men died within [*sc.* from the plague] and the land without was wasted [*sc.* by the enemy]' (tr. Parry). As in Homer we have here an emphasis on the twofold nature - plague and war - of the people's suffering.¹⁷ Thucydides emphasises this connection through his use of military vocabulary to describe the plague's attack, such as *epipiptein*, *espiptein*, *nikān*, and *xunairein* (Parry 116). In the *Iliad*, Homer's purpose is to show the Greek army brought by war and plague to an extremity that leads to dramatic change; Thucydides has the same purpose. The Athenians' perplexity in the face of their double calamity soon leads to demoralisation and social collapse (see below).

The literary aspect of Thucydides' plague episode is its most important, but many commentators have chosen to see it rather as a piece of medical journalism. Similarities in method and vocabulary to those of contemporary medical writers have been posited, but on closer inspection they are superficial (Parry 106ff.). Many authors have followed Page in arguing for specifically medical usage in Thucydides, but the ultimate purpose of

Page's article is to identify Thucydides' plague. This makes his connection between the historian and the medical writers tendentious. Nevertheless, Thucydides was apparently acquainted with medical writings, as suggested by 49.3: 'vomits of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued....' Also suggested here, however, is a disinclination to follow the practice of medical writers, who would have scrupulously named such 'vomits.' Thucydides' real purpose in his catalogue of symptoms is to emphasise the rapid and devastating onslaught of the disease (Parry 113).¹⁸

In addition to the close attention paid to the physical symptoms of this plague, Thucydides is especially interested in its social effects. The introductory paragraph (47.3-4) quoted above emphasises this aspect, and the gruesome catalogue of symptoms serves mainly to establish both mood and context for the social chaos that follows. Moving from the individual and physical to the general and social, Thucydides creates a dramatic crescendo while at the same time illustrating one of the ideas central to his *History*: human society responds in a predictable way even to the most unpredictable stimuli. The suddenness, unexpectedness and unpredictability of this particular attack of plague is stressed both explicitly and through rhetorical technique.¹⁹

The social collapse that ensues is illustrated by the abandonment or perversion of customary funeral rites²⁰ and by the desperate pursuit of lawless hedonism that prevails:

All the funeral ceremonies which used to be observed were now disorganised, and they buried the dead as best they could. Many people, lacking the necessary means of burial because so many deaths had already

occurred in their households, adopted the most shameless methods. They would arrive first at a funeral pyre that had been made by others, put their own dead upon it and set it alight; or, finding another pyre burning, they would throw the corpse that they were carrying on top of the other one and go away (52.4)

No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence. As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately. As for offences against human law, no one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial and punished: instead everyone felt that already a far heavier sentence had been passed on him and was hanging over him, and that before the time for its execution arrived it was only natural to get some pleasure out of life. (53.4)

The temples in which they took up their quarters [because of the crowding caused by the influx of people from the countryside into Athens] were full of the dead bodies of people who had died inside them. For the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law. (52.3)

Thucydides' plague, then, is central to the *History*. The first mention of it (at 1.23) occurs at the end of a list of the natural disasters attending this greatest of wars and

suggests that it was in fact the greatest of these disasters (Parry 115-6). As a narrative device, it marks a sudden and drastic change of fortune for Periclean Athens. It is also one of the most vivid illustrations of Thucydides' bleak view of humanity, whose response to calamity is neither rational nor noble. In it we see several elements from Homer's and Sophocles' plagues: the futility of human knowledge; the demoralisation of the people and their consequent abandonment of custom; the universalisation of destruction to include animals with, in this case, the reduction of humans to an animal-like state in their irrationality, helplessness and loss of human civilisation.

D. Lucretius

In the first century BC, the Roman poet Lucretius wrote a didactic poem in six books called *On the Nature of the Universe* (*De Rerum Natura*). In it he sets out the teachings (excluding ethics) of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, covering everything from the behaviour and nature of atoms to the causes and effects of climate change. His ultimate purpose is to expose the irrationality of most human behaviour and to guide his audience towards philosophical peace through true understanding. This is acquired through sensory perception. The poem ends with the description of a plague,²¹ essentially a translation of the Athenian plague narrated by Thucydides. In Lucretius we have yet another genre, didactic verse, represented in the plague narrative tradition. It is the fourth genre among the four works containing plague narratives so far considered, which testifies to the utility and the adaptability of the plague motif. At this point it crosses also into another language, although Latin literature can generally be seen as a continuation of Greek, so that this change is not particularly significant.²²

Thucydides, being a perceptive and rational eyewitness to what he relates, represents the empirical approach favoured by Epicureans²³ and is therefore a good candidate for adaptation by Lucretius (Vallillee 10-11). The powerful impact of Thucydides' plague makes it well-suited to end the sixth book, on climate and the diseases it causes, as well as to end the entire poem. For in the plague, Lucretius finds not only an episode of high drama, but also a suitable symbol for much of the human weakness against which his poem and Epicurus' teachings are aimed.

There are several noteworthy variations in Lucretius' version, however, which have led some scholars (*e.g.* Bailey) to believe that Lucretius has misunderstood Thucydides' Greek. Recent scholarship has been more willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and to see his departures from Thucydides as intentional and consistent with the purpose of the whole poem. As an ending to the work, it is striking enough to have provoked speculation that it is not the ending the poet intended, but rather that he died before finishing the work. I follow Bright (623-32) in accepting that Lucretius did intend his poem to end as we now have it,²⁴ but with the transposition of the troublesome lines 1249-51 to the very end of the poem.²⁵

Lucretius' plague functions on one level as an illustration of the phenomena discussed in Book Six: the sky, the earth, and epidemics. But whereas Lucretius normally incorporates such illustrations into the scientific explanations of the relevant phenomena, in this case it comes afterward. This, along with its length and the particular moral angle

Lucretius gives it (see below), 'strengthen the feeling that the passage is somehow special, that Lucretius intended it to stand out': a reasonable explanation for this is that it is intended as the conclusion both to Book Six and to the entire poem (Bright 624). It is linked to the beginning of Book Six by the name of Athens (6.2); by the images of disease (*corrumpier*, 6.18) and contagion (*conlata foris*, 6.19) representing human irrationality; and by the mention of fear (*anxia corda*, 6.14, cf. *anxius angor*, 6.1158) as the result of this irrationality (Bright 631).²⁶

The horrors of the plague at the poem's end contrast sharply with the opening of the first book, where the imagery is of springtime, abundance and general happiness under the influence of Venus. The ending can be seen to represent in all finality the poem's recurring theme of 'coming-to-be and passing-away' (Fowler & Fowler 889). The position of the plague narrative at the end of Book Six is therefore justified by its balancing against not only the beginning of that book but also against the beginning of the poem. Besides this formal utility, the emotional impact of the plague allows Lucretius to give his poem a resounding finale.

In order to see how he maximises this impact, it is useful to compare the differences between his account and his Thucydidean model. According to Bright (608-18), there are ten examples of material found in Thucydides but left out by Lucretius, seven of material retained but altered, and nine of material new in Lucretius or 'significantly' expanded. In spite of his various departures, 'the order of the text is strictly in accord with Thucydides' (Bright 608).

Regarding the first of these three categories, there are ten points from Thucydides' plague which Lucretius omits. Three relate specifically to Thucydides' time and place (47.3, 48.1, 48.2), and so are irrelevant to Lucretius. One is simply Thucydides' statement that he himself had suffered from the plague (48.3), another is a minor clinical detail.²⁷ Thucydides' refusal to consider the plague's causes (48.3) is also left out by Lucretius, who has already given them at 1090-1137. More significantly, there are four points in Thucydides' account omitted by Lucretius which may be considered 'touches of hope and relief' (Bright 609): the year's being otherwise free of disease (49.1); the surprising resistance of the body against the disease (49.6); the absence of ordinary diseases during the plague's tenure (51.1); and the joy and sympathy of those who survived, who never suffered a fatal second attack (51.6). Closely related to this category is Thucydides' report that doctors were especially susceptible because they were constantly exposed to the disease (47.4). The doctors' 'selfless humanitarian action' (Bright 610) have no place in Lucretius' unremittingly negative account. For it is clear, considering what Lucretius has omitted from his model, that his purpose is to remove from Thucydides' plague 'the setting, the unnecessary and the optimistic, leaving a tale of timeless, pointed and unrelieved horror' (Bright 610).

As to the second category, a striking example of how Lucretius retains but alters Thucydides' material occurs at 1205-12:

If [the victim] survived this malignant stream of foul blood, the disease
had still to make its way into his joints and sinews and right into the

genital organs. Some in their overwhelming dread of death saved their lives by having their male organ cut off with a blade. Others stayed alive after a fashion minus hands and feet or with the loss of their eyesight: so completely were they mastered by the dire dread of death.²⁸

Compare Thucydides 49.8:

[The disease] affected the genitals, the fingers, and the toes, and many of those who recovered lost the use of these members;²⁹ some, too, went blind.

Bailey (1734) accuses Lucretius of misunderstanding his source in assuming that human action, not the disease, was responsible for the loss of the 'members' in question. Bright counters that Lucretius' attribution of this loss to amputation 'can hardly be due to a misreading of his source, which is clear enough' (612). Rusten, however, in his commentary on the Thucydidean passage recognises that 'the participle [*steriskomenoi*] is vague enough' to include the possibility of amputation (186). Clearly the text of Thucydides permits, perhaps even demands, Lucretius' interpretation, and he makes the most of this opportunity to embellish the already discomfiting original. He enthusiastically seizes on the possibility of amputation, and attributes it emphatically to fear (Bright 612). Bailey points out (1734) that the poet has already, at 3.31-93, represented fear as the 'cause of most evil actions in life.'

Fear (*timor*) is one of the two 'chief demons of [Lucretius'] psychological pantheon' (Bright 614); the other is desire (*cupido*)³⁰ and he alters another detail of Thucydides' account specifically in order to introduce this second chief demon.

Thucydides tells us that 'if people were unwilling to visit one another out of fear, they died alone' (51.5).³¹ The Greek is slightly confusing; most translators and commentators make a distinction between those who decline to visit the sick and those who die alone as a result of having no visitors. It is, however, possible to interpret the Greek, with Lucretius, as saying that those who decline to visit the sick are the ones who eventually die alone. In Lucretius, they do not want to visit because they are 'excessively desirous [*cupidos*] of life and fearful [*timentis*] of death'³² (1240). Here again, as in the previous example, Lucretius exploits an ambiguity in Thucydides' text (or misunderstands it again, according to Bailey (1737)) in order to introduce one of his own philosophical themes.

The third category of Lucretius' deviation from Thucydides, the inclusion of material not found in the latter, is well represented by the following examples. Firstly, what Thucydides refers to simply as 'the tongue' (*glōssa*, 2.49.2), Lucretius calls 'the mind's interpreter' (*animi interpretes*, 1149); in Commager's words, Lucretius shows here a 'movement away from a biological statement towards one with mental or psychic connotations' (106). Commager argues persuasively that this is Lucretius' tendency throughout the plague passage, and that most if not all of his departures from Thucydides can be justified in this way.

Another way to put it is that Lucretius focuses on the reactions of those afflicted rather than on the nature of the disease itself (Bright 619); in fact the nature of the disease is confused by Lucretius' addition to Thucydides' list of symptoms several new ones, which have been attributed to a Hippocratic source.³³ The effect of this is to 'blur the

exact picture of the disease,' so that '[t]he reader finds himself confronted not by a particular disease but by Disease' (Bright 617). The reactions of the sick are reflected in the tone of the passage as a whole: Bright (619) counts four instances of the word *maeror* (grief), and three each of *metus* (dread), *timor* (fear) and *maestus* (sad).

A second example of new material in Lucretius occurs at 1151-3: translating Thucydides' report of the disease's progress from the head to the torso (specifically the stomach, if the conventional translation of *kardia* is retained³⁴), Lucretius says that 'when the sickness passing down the throat had filled the victim's chest and flowed into his sad heart - then indeed all the bolts of life began to shake.' Two points of interest are involved here. First, Lucretius has made 'the stomach' (without descriptive adjective) into 'the sad heart,' a clear shift from the physical to the psychological. Secondly, he has added a full line to what he finds in Thucydides: '*omnia tum vero vitae claustra lababant*,' translated above as 'then indeed all the bolts of life began to shake.' Commager takes this to be part of the 'cumulative effect' of Lucretius' 'remarkable imaginative progress away from Thucydides' clinical description' (107). A less enthusiastic vindicator of Lucretius might simply attribute this change to the sort of poetic elaboration which would not be out of place here. Nevertheless, Commager's thesis, that Lucretius interprets his model's physical symptoms in psychological or moral terms, is well supported by the text, and Lucretius' plague narrative benefits from an understanding of it in this light.

It is important to note that Commager sees these changes as resulting more from Lucretius' 'imaginative habit' than from 'a deliberate verbal dexterity.' 'Rather he seems to

be himself responding imaginatively to a half-felt similarity between the victims of the actual plague at Athens and the sufferers from the psychic plague of fear and desire' (110-111). Vallillee (65-70) declines 'to accept fully' Commager's thesis, arguing that '[i]t is possible to cite numerous examples of phrasing cited by Commager as 'ethical,' where no such intention exists in the poet's mind,' and going on to give several examples. Referring to 'the three main points at which Lucretius is charged with deliberate mistranslation,' that is, by the editorial tradition before Commager,³⁵ Vallillee points out that 'all the disputed phrases have been accepted by some Lucretian scholars as perfectly accurate translations of Thucydides' (67). Vallillee maintains instead (70) that Lucretius has 'carefully but not slavishly' transmitted Thucydides' plague narrative, and that his deviations result from 'the ambiguity of Thucydides, the influence of Epicurean physics, the need for poetic embellishments, or finally, [from] an unconscious tendency to describe Roman, rather than Athenian, scenes.'

Supporting Commager's hypothesis, Bright (619) notes that 'the moral element... is almost entirely lacking in Thucydides (at least outwardly),' and that although he describes the collapse first of individual morale then of social order, these come after a full description of the disease's physical manifestations. In Lucretius, on the other hand, the decay of morality is described simultaneously with the physical symptoms. Lucretius follows Thucydides closely in his description of the abandonment of law, religion and proper burial custom, but with two particularly telling additions. 'The whole nation was beside itself with terror' (1280) again internalises the mass confusion wrought by the plague and emphasises the Epicurean preoccupation with that most destructive of

emotions, fear of death (Bright 618). Secondly, we learn that in the Athenians' struggles over funeral pyres, 'often they shed blood in these disputes rather than abandon their dead' (1285-6). Nowhere is human irrationality more evident than in these two lines, where in their attempt to honour the dead, people try (perhaps successfully) to kill each other.

Another noteworthy departure from Thucydides occurs at 1252-71, where the effects of the plague on people in the country are discussed. In Thucydides, country people have gathered in Athens before the outbreak of plague in order to escape the invading Spartans, and the consequent crowding of the city makes the plague spread more quickly and manifestly. Lucretius says that while the city folk are suffering, the 'shepherd and herdsman and the sturdy pilot of the curved plough [are] among the victims' (1252-4), and a few lines later that 'to no small extent did the affliction flood in from the countryside into the city [. . .]' (1259-60). In introducing the plague, he calls it 'the fatal tide of pestilence that once laid waste the Athenian fields, turning highways into deserts and draining the city of citizens' (1138-40): here the affliction of countryside and city seem to be simultaneous.

This can be attributed partly to the Epicurean theory on the spread of diseases through infectious mists (6.1119ff.), which leads Lucretius into some incongruity. In his desire to follow Thucydides as closely as possible while maintaining his mist theory, he transfers Thucydides' scenes of refugees crowded into makeshift huts in Athens into the countryside, where there is no reason for crowding. Only after these scenes are described

(1252-8) does Lucretius mention the relocation of people from the countryside into the city (1259-61), with no mention of any reason for it (Vallillee 16-17). It is possible that the poet describes the ravages of plague in the country in order to make the catastrophe more widespread, even universal (Commager 108); this would make the plague's 'symbolic potentialities' (Commager 114) more potent.

In this context it is worth noting the similarity between 6.1252, *et robustus item curvi moderator aratri* ('and the sturdy pilot of the curved plough'), and 5.933, *nec robustus erat curvi moderator aratri* ('there was no sturdy pilot of the curved plough').³⁶ the latter concerns an idyllic golden age where Nature supplies food of her own accord, while the former refers not only to a more corrupt age, but to a corrupt age coming to a catastrophic, plague-ridden end. This contrasts also with an earlier passage in Lucretius which idealises the country life:

What matter if the hall does not sparkle with silver and gleam with gold,
and no carved and gilded rafters ring to the music of the lute? Nature does
not miss these luxuries when men recline in company on the soft grass by
a running stream under the branches of a tall tree and refresh their bodies
pleasurably at small expense. Better still if the weather smiles upon them,
and the season of the year stipples the green herbage with flowers.

(2.27-33)

The decline and destruction that await all things come, with the plague, even to this pleasant scene.

Particularly interesting are the two lines following those quoted above: 'Burning fevers flee no swifter from your body if you toss under figured counterpanes and coverlets of crimson than if you must lie in rude homespun' (2.34-6). Having eulogised the simple life in the previous lines, the poet switches to a negative and rather ominous argument: riches will not save you from disease and death. The medical imagery anticipates his description of the Athenian plague, where we see in action what is only threatened here, the simultaneous destruction by disease of country- and city-dweller, poor and rich. It is unlikely that the reader would be expected to recall these lines when reading about the plague four books later. This is, however, the philosophical seed of the plague episode. We see here in miniature what will be elaborated there: fatal disease exposing the vanity of human desires.

Animals have played a part in all the plague narratives discussed so far, and they do in this one too. Lucretius tells us that although human corpses lay about in heaps, carrion birds and other predators either avoided them, 'repelled by the disgusting stench,' or would taste them and die a quick death (1215-18). This is consistent with Thucydides (2.50.1), who then cites as evidence of this the 'complete disappearance of all birds of prey: they were not to be seen around the bodies or anywhere else. But dogs, being domestic animals, provided the best opportunity of observing this effect of the plague' (2.50.2). Lucretius differs from his source here, saying instead that '[i]n those days scarcely a bird was to be seen, nor did the sad species of wild beasts emerge from the forests. Most of them were stricken with the plague and died' (1219-22). The plague, then, affects animals as well as humans, and apparently at the same time. This is at odds

with Thucydides' account, where only those few creatures who succumb to the temptation of diseased carrion die, but accords with Lucretius' own deadly-mist theory (Vallillee 13). Furthermore, this deviance, like the last one discussed, universalises the plague's destructive powers, and adds a further touch of pathos.

This universalising tendency in Lucretius' plague can also be seen in his treatment of its location. Nominally this is the Athens of 430 BC, but Athens is mentioned only at the very beginning of the account (1139). Even this might have been dispensed with, except that Athens has been discussed at the beginning of Book Six as the source of civilisation and of Epicurus himself. By having Athens devastated at the end of the book, the poet effectively illustrates his theme of coming-to-be and passing-away, and of the inevitability of destruction. Nevertheless he appears to distance his plague from Athens once the description begins. In spite of the ostensible location, certain details, like the 'wild beasts emerg[ing] from the forests' (1220-21) strike a distinctively non-Athenian and non-Attic note.³⁷ The omission of several Thucydidean details which might fix the plague in time and place, such as the war and the enemy's actions in the countryside, make it less a one-time Athenian phenomenon and more a potentially universal one (Bright 618-9). Vallillee (69) sees it rather as shifting its location from Athens to Rome, which would make it more relevant to Lucretius' immediate audience. Either way, the effect is much the same: this plague, whether actual or symbolic, might affect anyone.

The traditional role of plague as punishment sent by the gods is clearly not feasible in Lucretius, since he has argued in Book Five that the gods do not intervene in

human affairs. As discussed above, Thucydides makes no claim that the gods are to blame for the plague of Athens, but does record popular rumour to this effect, so that the pairing of plague and punishment is at least indirectly maintained. It can be argued that Lucretius too, despite the constraints of his Epicurean beliefs, retains this pairing in a subtle and possibly unconscious way. At 6.1239-42, he says that those who refuse to visit the sick out of 'excessive love of life and dread of death' are 'punished before long by slaughtering Neglect with a death as painful as it [is] disgraceful' (*poenibat paulo post turpi morte malaque ... incuria mactans*). As noted above, fear and desire are the two main causes of human suffering; the punishment here results not from the gods' anger but from the victims' own irrationality (Commager 108, Bright 613-4).

An account of the Athenian plague might easily have come in the fourth book of *De Rerum Natura*, where Lucretius discusses human physiology and psychology in detail; that it comes at the very end of the poem suggests, along with its unique separateness from the physical phenomena it seeks to illustrate (see above), that Lucretius has a special purpose in mind for it (Vallillee 9). It balances with the beginning of Book Six and with the beginning of the poem. It provides not only a vivid episode with which to conclude the work, but also an appropriately violent one; Epicurean philosophy - the exposition of which is the point of the poem - posits inevitable dissolution for all creatures and things. Lucretius apparently understood the dramatic potential of adapting Thucydides' plague account to his own didactic poem, and felt that Thucydides' credentials as a rational observer made him a worthy model, perhaps the only worthy model, as Lucretius draws on no other historical source that we know of (Vallillee 10).

His own purposes, however, lead to some deviations from Thucydides: he separates the plague gradually from its purported setting, obscures the nature of the disease by embellishing its symptoms, and focuses on its emotional or psychological impact on its victims. All of this helps to make Lucretius' plague more generally applicable to people anywhere and at any time. Nature can destroy us randomly, but the greatest suffering comes from our own irrationality, particularly from our excessive fears and desires. But in spite of his unique purpose, it is possible to see in Lucretius' plague narrative several of the traditional elements. The plague marks the end (and therefore the beginning) of an era. It illustrates human helplessness against the forces of nature. The affliction of animals is included and serves to point to the essential animal nature of humans. The latter comes out especially in the details of social collapse and of the abandonment of civilised customs. There is the suggestion of punishment, though not from the gods. In short, Lucretius follows his predecessors in adapting the plague to his own ends while retaining its terrifying impact.

E. Vergil

Lucretius had promised (6.1090-3) to 'explain the reason of diseases... [and] of deadly destruction for mankind and for flocks and herds.' But having explained how disease affects humans, he simply says at 1131 that '[i]n like manner pestilence often comes to cattle also.' Then in the course of his Athenian plague he discusses animals only incidentally (Vallillee 12). Vergil, an admirer of Lucretius, fills this gap and in the process does for plague among animals what his predecessor (and Thucydides) does for

plague among humans. At the end of the third book of his *Georgics*,³⁸ a didactic poem like *De Rerum Natura*, he gives a long and detailed account of what happens when, through careless husbandry, cattle are afflicted by an epizootic. Like Lucretius' plague, it serves to illustrate principles discussed earlier in the book, namely the causes, signs and treatment of disease (440-77), by means of a historic example. Thomas (130-1) does well to point out that while 'Vergil's plague is not a rhetorical response to that of Lucretius, but a vital component of the *Georgics*,' nevertheless, 'nowhere else does Vergil draw so deeply from a single source.' A comparison of the two, the focus of this section, is therefore a valid means of examining how the plague-narrative tradition is consciously propagated and adapted by Rome's most highly regarded poet.

Having expressed his intention to discuss the symptoms and causes of disease in animals (440), Vergil describes these along with various preventive and remedial measures to be taken by the farmer (441-69). If certain symptoms appear, then the animal must be slaughtered before contagion can spread (468-9). This leads to some general comments on the effects of plague on herds or flocks. As evidence of these, Vergil points to the hills of Noricum, which, though struck by plague long ago, are still devoid of sheep and other animals (470-77).

Here begins the plague narrative proper. Climatic conditions, namely a 'sickness of the sky' and heat, are briefly mentioned (478-80), as is the scope of the devastation: 'the whole tribe of cattle, the whole tribe of wild beasts it gave over to death'³⁹ (480-1). We are told of the general symptoms, namely thirst and an excess of internal fluid (482-

5), and then of the plague's interference with religious rites, particularly with sacrifice and haruspicy (486-93). The effects on calves, dogs, pigs and a racehorse follow (494-508), then the failure of an attempted cure by means of wine; this is promising at first, but in fact drives the recipients (horses) to madness and self-mutilation (509-14). The sad scene of a bull which dies at its post under the ploughman's yoke follows⁴⁰ and prompts some sorrowful reflection by the poet (515-30). Further details of the plague's interference with religious practice (531-3) leads to scenes of humans forced to do their animals' work (534-7).

Then the wild animals are considered: wolves, deer, fish, seals, snakes and birds all abandon their usual ways (537-47). We learn of the futility of all attempts at treatment (548-50). Then there is a dramatic image of the fury Tisiphone spreading destruction and driving Diseases and Fear before her (551-3), and of the sound of dying animals over the landscape (553-5). In ending his account, Vergil turns again to the plague's impact on humans: their disposal of the dead creatures (556-8); the uselessness of, and the danger of contamination from, the hides, flesh and fleeces to humans; and the first symptoms, heralding a quick and certain death, of such contamination (569-66). It is significant, as will be discussed below, that though it is the animals who die, there is constant reference to the impact of their deaths on humans. Religious rituals are disrupted and people are reduced to scratching the earth with their fingernails in order to plant seeds. They are unable to make use of the dead animals' pelts or wool, or are poisoned if they do.

Thucydides' plague, and therefore Lucretius', actually happened, but the same cannot be said of Vergil's. He invites the reader to examine the site of the plague, Noricum,⁴¹ as proof of its devastation:

Of this may one be witness, should he see - even now, so long after - the
towering Alps and the forts on the Noric hills, and the field of Illyrian
Timavus with the shepherds' realm derelict, and their glades far and wide
untenanted. (474-7)

The area involved is simply too vast to have been ravaged by an actual plague, and no evidence of such a wasteland has ever been found by historians or archaeologists (Harrison 2). There is a poetic arrangement of the details from higher elevation to lower, and from North to South (progressively closer to Italy). There are also several parallels between the activity of the plague in this Northern region and the effects of extreme cold in another Northern region, among 'the tribes of Scythia' (3.349-83); this last, along with a much shorter passage on the extreme heat in Libya (339-48), is juxtaposed with pastoral scenes implicitly describing Italy itself (322-38). The plague at Noricum is in effect a continuation of this comparison between Italy and the climatically troubled North (Harrison 2-3). Harrison also suggests that Vergil intends the river Timavus,⁴² here at the end of Book Three, to act as a parallel to the Nile, which plays a prominent part in a parallel episode at the end of Book Four; though much smaller, the Timavus was known to have several characteristics in common with the Nile (3-4). The point of these observations is that Vergil had poetic effect in mind when locating his plague at Noricum.

Furthermore, arguments supporting the view that the Noric plague really happened, including appeals to Plutarch and Dio and the positing of an unknown source, are far from convincing and often mired in speculation⁴³ (Harrison 4-6). Vergil's text itself undermines the ostensible historicity of the plague, for example through its catalogue of symptoms: 'no disease of comparable complexity [to Vergil's plague] is known to modern veterinary medicine' (Harrison 5). The sheer variety of species affected, including not only land mammals but also fish, seals, snakes and birds, is also cause for suspicion.

More significant in refuting the historical value of Vergil's plague is the poet's dependence on Lucretius, not only on the latter's plague narrative but on his work as a whole; Harrison concludes his detailed evidence for this (some of which is to be discussed below) 'by emphasising... that so much of the plague account is clearly the product of Vergil's poetic imagination at work on known sources (including his own poetry) that there is simply no room left for some unknown veterinary work of any significance to have served him as guide' (23). In light of all this, it is clear that Vergil's aim in setting the plague at Noricum is poetic, not historic;⁴⁴ so, therefore, are the details of his account. Before these can be dealt with, it will be useful to consider the position of the plague episode within the *Georgics*.

In the first book (1.125-32), Vergil describes the Golden Age. The plague, and 536-40 in particular, represent a 'travesty of the Golden Age' (Wilkinson 208). It is a 'diseased Golden Age': whereas the first had ended when Jupiter introduced the age of

labor, this grotesque return arises from the failure of the 'operations of [Jupiter's] age' (Thomas 141). There is also a strong contrast with the idealised picture of rural life at the end of the previous book (2.458-540). The plague episode's contrast with these earlier passages, and with the Aristaeus episode at the poem's end, is part of a pattern in the *Georgics*: Books Two and Four end on a positive note, while Books One and Three end pessimistically. The horror at the end of the first book is of a political nature, which is to say that it is caused by internal human failings; that at the end of the third comes from external, natural forces. It conveys 'a sense of the puniness of men and animals in the face of the inexplicable calamities of nature' (Williams 177). This manner of ending the third book is part of the poet's attempt to convey, in form as well as in content, the cyclical nature of his subject. The *Georgics* represents the vicissitudes of the farmer's life in all their variety, from the human (and animal) to the superhuman, from the reassuringly predictable to the devastatingly unpredictable.

The plague is an ideal representative of the latter. Its advent destroys the order for which the farmer strives and for the maintenance of which the poet's advice throughout the *Georgics* is ostensibly aimed at equipping him. The third book up to this point has guided the farmer through all the intricacies of animal husbandry, and now he can only watch in bewilderment as the animals drop dead around him. The deaths of these animals, however, represents more than a simple practical loss; they are described in highly emotional terms. Throughout the *Georgics* Vergil attributes human characteristics to animals and shows great sympathy for them (Liebeschütz 64-5), but this is especially noticeable under the extreme circumstances of the plague episode.

The first thing to be pointed out in this context, as Liebeschütz has, is the possibility that 'Vergil gave his animals personalities [because] he thought they had personalities' (68). Vergil appears, along with Aristotle, whose works he knew, to believe that human and animal behaviour are essentially the same, though the former is to be guided by reason and the latter by proper training (Liebeschütz 71-2).⁴⁵ Whether or not Vergil's early life in the country and sensitivity of soul inclined him to a sympathetic view of animals must remain speculation. But it is reasonable to attribute to the narrator of the *Georgics*, at least, a great familiarity with and love for all aspects of farming life, of which animals are a major part.

As a result, it is not surprising or inappropriate that the sufferings of the plague-stricken animals are described in terms equally suited to humans, or that they achieve genuine pathos. An example occurs at 515-524:

But lo, the bull, smoking under the ploughshare's weight, falls; from his mouth he spurts blood, mingled with foam, and heaves his dying groans. Sadly goes the ploughman, unyokes the steer that sorrows for his brother's death, and amid its half-done task leaves the share rooted fast. No shades of deep woods, no soft meadows can touch his heart, no stream purer than amber, rolling over the rocks in its course towards the plain; but his flanks are unstrung throughout, numbness weighs upon his languid eyes, and his neck sinks with drooping weight to earth.

The cruelty of this loyal bull's death⁴⁶ prompts an existential despair: 'Of what avail is his toil or his services? What avails it, that he turned with the share the heavy clod?' (525-6). The audience is drawn into the speaker's sympathy for the animals; we are made to feel not only our kinship with animals but also the interdependence of human and beast that marks the farmer's life.

How one reacts to these rhetorical questions depends partly on one's interpretation of the plague passage. Freudenburg sees here the poet's own 'loss of self-confidence' as didactic poet, dismayed by 'a situation which seems to him both inexplicable and terribly unjust' (67). According to Harrison (35) the implied injustice is that loyal animals must die because of human religious failure (see below). Gale (426) sees in this scene an example of Vergil's general anthropomorphising of animals in *Georgics* 3; the point of this is to blur the distinction between humans and animals, who are equally subject to the 'ultimately irresistible' and 'chaotic forces of sex and death'. Liebeschütz (74-5) says that Vergil 'amplifies the human implications of his narrative by the very human terms in which he comments on the undeserved sufferings of the animal,' so that 'a chapter on animal husbandry has been broadened to become a statement about the condition of life.' In any case, it is agreed that the audience is moved to pity.

The pathos of the lines quoted above ('No shades of deep woods...') owes something to Lucretius' description (2.361-5) of a cow searching for her calf: 'succulent osiers and herbage fresh with dew and her favourite streams flowing level with their banks - all these are powerless to console her and banish new burden of distress'

(Harrison 11). Yet in Lucretius' own plague episode, the poet's attitude towards the suffering human victims is not so much sympathetic as indignant at their irrational response to their afflictions (Freudenburg 66-7). This brings us to the important question of how Vergil adapts Lucretius.

There can be no doubt that Vergil's plague episode is largely informed by that of Lucretius. In analysing how Vergil adapts his model, I follow West in organising the subject into four categories: aetiology, symptomatology, epidemiology and conclusion.

First, the aetiology. Lucretius' plague narrative is the conclusion and illustration of a scientific hypothesis developed in the preceding forty-seven lines (1090-1137). He first expresses his purpose, namely to explain the cause and provenance of the plagues that kill humans and animals (1090-3). There follows an explanation, in terms of the atomic theory which has formed the basis of *De Rerum Natura*, of the origin of poisonous airs and by what route these come upon unsuspecting populations. He supports his theory by means of analogy, empirical evidence and, finally, the example of Athens. Vergil, in the equivalent passage, simply says:

Here once, through a disease of the sky, there arose a pitiable season
which burned with heat for a whole autumn, giving over to death all
manner of livestock and all manner of wild beasts, polluting their
drinking water and poisoning their food with decomposing flesh.

(478-81)⁴⁷

'As a clinical history this is not satisfactory,' observes West (71), who goes on to point out several ambiguities before concluding that '[t]his is legend, pathos, writing for effect. It is not science, or history' (72). Vergil, unlike Lucretius, is not writing a scientific treatise intended to explain the phenomena of the whole universe.

Nevertheless, these four lines are characterised by echoes of Lucretius. Vergil's *hic quondam morbo* (478) recalls Lucretius' *haec ratio quondam morborum* (1138) (West 76). *Miseranda coorta est / tempestas* (477-8) recalls *tempestas saeva coortast* from Lucretius 6.458 - not part of the plague narrative or its preamble on causes of plague, but from a description of how storm clouds are formed (Harrison 7). *Hominum generi pecudumque* in Lucretius (1092) becomes *genus omne...pecudum..., omne ferarum* (480), where the 'race of humans' (*genus hominum*) is not involved, and so are replaced by the 'race of wild beasts' (*genus ferarum*) (West 76).

Even where there is no 'thematic or dictional repetition' (Thomas 132) of a Lucretian line, there may be syntactical imitation, 'even to the unusual omission of the second coordinating conjunction' (West 76) in the following:

corruitque lacus, infecit pabula tabo (Vergil 481)

vastavitque vias, exhaustit civibus urbem (Lucretius 1140)

In this example Vergil also 'reproduces the exact word-shapes and rhythms [including breaks] of the Lucretian line' (Thomas 132). His overall treatment of Lucretius' aetiology shows that, even where he ignores Lucretius' fundamental ideas and methods, '[h]e is saturated with the poetry of Lucretius, and its words, phrases, thought and rhythms have

merged in his mind, and become transmuted into an original work of poetic art with a tone and intention and poetic thrust which are entirely his own' (West 77).

Second, the symptomatology, where the general course of the plague, without reference to any particular animal, is described. Vergil tells us:

Nor was the path to death simple, but when the fiery thirst driven through
all the veins had shrunk the wretched limbs, there was again an abundance
of fluid into which all the bones collapsed disintegrating with disease
particle by particle. (482-5)⁴⁸

The disease appears to consist of two phases, one characterised by a shortage of moisture, the next by an overabundance of it. There is a rhetorical simplicity and paradox in this summary, which in fact does not seem to pertain to the deaths described later (West 77-8).

Lucretius, on the other hand, has a highly detailed description of symptoms (1145-98) which comprises four phases (West 77-8). The first shows a 'descending liquefaction' (West 78) from head to throat to heart. Breathing disorders make up the second phase, with the accompaniment of internal burning. The 'signs of death' (1182) follow, making up the sixteen symptoms of the third phase. The fourth phase is enjoyed by a select few:

If the victim, as might happen, stopped short of this fatal extremity [*i.e.*
the third phase], before long by way of loathsome ulcers and a black
torrent pouring from the bowels he was overtaken none the less by decay

and death. Or else, in many cases, he was seized by a flow of putrid blood through choked nostrils accompanied by a violent headache, and through this channel all the strength of his body ebbed away. (1199-1204)

The loss to some of the genital organs (by castration) or of hands and feet or eyesight, round out this last phase.

Though very different in detail, there is a clear correspondence between these two symptomatologies. The 'fiery thirst' of Vergil corresponds to a dozen terms in Lucretius (e.g. *ignis*, 1167, and *sitis arida*, 1175), while the 'abundance of fluid' clearly relates to the 'torrent' and 'flow' of Lucretius' fourth phase (West 79). West also suggests that the loss of hands and feet in Lucretius is taken by Vergil to result from the disintegration of bone in the second phase of his plague (79). Harrison (9) sees in the dissolving bones of the animal plague a tendency on Vergil's part to take a simile from Lucretius and turn it into fact. The simile in this case is from Lucretius 1169: '[a] flame was blazing in their stomach as though in a furnace.' Vergil, according to Harrison, takes the image of the furnace and rewrites an earlier line of Lucretius, 'fire liquefies bronze and melts gold; but it shrivels skins and flesh and makes them shrink' (966-7), so that now it is the bones (mentioned just before the furnace simile in Lucretius, 1168) which are being melted by the 'furnace' of the fever. Though convoluted, this idea is not impossible, given Vergil's close familiarity with *De Rerum Natura*. It gains some support also from his similar use of a Lucretian simile in the context of contagion to humans (see below).

Vergil's language corroborates the correspondence of ideas: the only occurrence in all of Vergil's works of the word *minutatim* ('particle by particle') is in 485, where it occurs in conjunction with a form of the verb *trahere*. This is reminiscent of Lucretius (1190-1): '*in manibus nervi trahere et tremere artus / a pedibusque minutatim succedere frigus*' (West 79), though the latter description is of a spreading chill (Harrison 8). As in his aetiology, Vergil shows the influence of his model in his symptomatology: '[he] has eschewed the clinical detail of Lucretius, but has put together words and concepts culled from Lucretius' richly detailed and coherent symptomatology to produce a simplified picture of a disease in two phases which is emotionally effective, rhetorically arresting by means of paradox and pathos, and has no regard for historical or scientific truth' (West 79).

Third, the epidemiology.⁴⁹ Lucretius' account devotes only ten lines to animals (1215-24), compared to Vergil's sixty-four (486-549); the latter, therefore, is without a direct model for much of this material. But he draws upon some of Lucretius' human symptomatology as well as upon material from other parts of Lucretius besides the plague (West 86). When Vergil relates the death of calves (494-5), his expression for 'they die' is *animas...reddunt* (literally 'give up their souls'). Lucretius has the similar phrase *reddebant vitam* (1198), 'they gave up life,' speaking generally of the plague's human victims. The context and the tone, which West calls 'affectionate and sympathetic,' of Vergil's lines are his own, but he draws on Lucretian vocabulary; 'Vergil nowhere else uses *reddere* with any object meaning 'to die' (West 80).

In Vergil's description of the dying racehorse, too (498-508), he draws on Lucretius in order to describe a situation that does not exist in Lucretius. Vergil first mentions four symptoms in the horse, of which two, sweat and hardness of skin, are found among Lucretius' human symptoms (1187 and 1195). The next line (503), *haec ante exitium primis dant signa diebus* ('[s]uch are the signs they yield before death in the first days'), resembles one from Lucretius (1182): *multaque praeterea mortis tum signa dabantur* ('[t]hen many signs of death began to appear'). Four further symptoms all derive from Lucretius, but from the different phases of his symptomatology: the burning eyes (505) from the first phase (Lucretius 1146); the laboured breathing, groans and sobs (505-7), from the second, where they are mentioned in the same order (1154-60); the flow of dark blood from the nose (507-8); combining two symptoms from the fourth phase (1200-3); and finally the blocked throat and rough tongue (508), again from Lucretius' first phase (1148-50). What results is an 'anthologising and reordering of Lucretian symptoms' which vividly illustrate a situation not to be found in Lucretius, the death of a horse (West 80-1). It should be noted also that in describing the champion racehorse's death, Vergil is echoing and reversing his own descriptions, earlier in Book Three, of young, strong and healthy horses (Harrison 12-3).

In the conclusion to his plague episode (548-66), Vergil discusses the failure of veterinary skill, the disposal of the dead animals, and the sickness befalling those humans who clothed themselves in wool from the diseased sheep; Lucretius' conclusion deals with the plague's social effects, and with scenes of stricken people in the countryside and city. Here again there is a marked difference in content, but again several echoes of

Lucretius find their way into Vergil. We learn of the failure of all attempted remedies; in fact, 'new treatments made things worse' (549). This reinforces a point made earlier (509-14) when the apparent success of treating horses with wine turned to horrific failure.⁵⁰ The idea corresponds to Lucretius' '[m]edicine muttered, too scared to speak out' (1179); whereas Lucretius speaks of the abstract *medicina*, Vergil speaks of 'Chiron the son of Phillyra, [and] Melampus / The son of Amythaon' (550); these are also abstractions, but into mythological figures. Harrison (22) points out that the mention of medicine's failure in Thucydides comes at the beginning of his plague narrative; Lucretius mentions it forty-one lines (about a third of the way) into his, having waited 'for the full horror of the attack to be established'; Vergil here uses it only seventeen lines from the end 'to usher in the final catastrophe.'

Treatment proving futile, the fury Tisiphone rages with 'greedy [*avidum*] head' (553), like the 'contagions of the greedy disease'⁵¹ (*avidi morbi contagia*) in Lucretius (1236) (West 87-8). Vergil's only use of *catervatim* occurs in this passage (556), again evoking Lucretius, who has used it at 1144. In Vergil's description of the symptoms which would befall anyone putting on infected clothing, 'almost every word is traceable to something in Lucretius' (West 88). One of these symptoms is the 'sacred fire' (566), familiar from Lucretius (1167); in the latter it is used within a simile, while Vergil has made it an actual symptom (Harrison 8-9) as in the case of the dissolving bones.

The pattern throughout Vergil's plague episode is clear. His vocabulary is often reminiscent of Lucretius', even when his subject matter is very different; his subject

matter often comes from Lucretius, though not necessarily from a directly comparable passage, and often in a reordered and recontextualised form. We see in Vergil a process of carefully selective adaptation rather than simple imitation. The differences are as informative as the similarities: in considering exactly how Vergil manages these adaptations, we are able to pinpoint a number of distinctively Vergilian traits: rhetorical elaboration (*e.g.* antithesis), an emotional tone (especially pity), anthropomorphism, religiosity, and a desire for effect at the expense of realism (West 88). By comparison Lucretius shows a 'greater concern with the accurate description of observable phenomena' (West 88).

It is reasonable to conclude broadly that Vergil stands in relation to Lucretius as Lucretius does to Thucydides (Farrell 85). But in his adaptation of Lucretius, Vergil has a specific purpose, which is to undermine Lucretius' Epicurean views (Harrison 30-2).⁵² Whereas Lucretius expressly denies the intervention of the gods in human affairs and has the plague resulting solely from the accidental combination of atoms into deadly vapours, Vergil adheres to traditional Roman religion, which considers plagues to be punishments from angry divinities. This can be confirmed by a detailed examination of the religious elements in Vergil's plague.

The traditional Roman view of plagues, exemplified by Livy,⁵³ is that they are sent by gods as punishment for some error in proper religious observance.⁵⁴ Such an error might be as simple as a neglected or poorly executed religious ritual. Given the highly ritualistic nature of Roman religion, there were many opportunities for such lapses and

therefore many explanations for adverse natural phenomena ready to hand. The 'breakdown in the relationship between a community and its gods' (Harrison 25) would be evident in the disruption of normal sacrificial ritual.⁵⁵ Julius Obsequens (16, 47) records instances of bulls dropping dead before they can be sacrificed, exactly as occurs near the beginning of Vergil's plague passage (485-8) (Harrison 25; 58, n. 63). We also learn in Vergil that the victim's entrails fail to burn and that the animal bleeds unnaturally little (489-93). These phenomena, coming at the start of Vergil's plague narrative, represent traditional signs of the gods' anger and serve notice that what follows is a result of deviation from proper religious observance (Harrison 25).

The cause of the gods' anger, according to Harrison's thesis,⁵⁶ is to be found in the following:

Only at that time, they say, were cattle in those regions sought in vain for
the rites of Juno and chariots were drawn by ill-matched buffaloes to her
lofty treasure house. (531-4)

This translation follows the traditional assumption about this passage, namely that the phenomena in question are among the effects, as opposed to the causes, of the plague: the plague has so depleted the animal population of Noricum that no specimens suitable to religious ritual can be found. Unsuitable ones have to be commandeered instead. But the introduction to the plague has already told us that the plague killed all animals, both domestic and wild. Buffaloes, however scruffy and ill-matched, must be included among these. It is equally possible to translate the same lines as follows: 'they say it was in those days, in that region, that cows were required for Juno's ritual and her carriage was drawn

to her lofty shrine by badly matched buffaloes' (Harrison 36).⁵⁷ These lines, then, do not refer first to victims ('Juno's ritual' being interpreted as sacrifice) and then to draft animals (to draw Juno's carriage), but to draft animals throughout. *Quaesitas* has the established meaning 'required, demanded' as well as 'sought (in vain)' (OLD, *quaero*). Juno, according to this interpretation, is angered by the defilement of her rite, which should have seen her statue drawn in a cart by specially selected cows.⁵⁸

Several points support this reading. One is that immediately after the lines just quoted we are told that humans 'scratch the earth with harrows, with their own nails bury the seed, and over the high hills with straining necks drag the creaking wains' (535-7). This sequence is introduced by *ergo*, which in Vergil 'follows the usual pattern, and... always introduces the consequence of what the poet has written immediately before it' (Harrison 36). In other words, it is as a direct result of the negligence in Juno's rites that people lose all their animal helpers. This must include the buffaloes just mentioned, otherwise these and not humans would be used to pull 'the creaking wains,' as they had done Juno's carriage. Harrison (37) points out that the mention of Juno's ill-performed rites are introduced by *tempore non alio*, a use of 'negative periphrasis to convey a strong positive,' seen elsewhere in the *Georgics* in contexts concerned with divine anger.⁵⁹ Moreover, the passage switches at 531 from its established narrative pattern to *dicunt... quaesitas* ('they say...'), returning again to ordinary narration at 534. This and the recognised use of *dicunt*, especially in Vergil, as a means of 'interposing a retrospective explanation of what is currently being narrated' (Harrison 38) support the hypothesis that the defilement of Juno's rites is told in flashback, and that this defilement

is the cause of the Noric plague. The plague itself is administered by Tisiphone, the agent of divine vengeance as in the *Aeneid* (6.554ff.), who is 'sent' (*emissa*) from the Stygian darkness actively to inflict the plague on Noricum: she 'drives Diseases and Fear before her'⁶⁰ (*Tisiphone Morbos agit ante Metumque*)(552).

Lucretius, in his generalisations on plagues, tells us that they occur by chance (*forte* 1096, 1119). Though Vergil adapts material from this section - even from these very lines - at the beginning of the Noric plague (478-81), as discussed above, he leaves out the element of chance. Chance is the fundamental principle of Lucretius' universe, but not of Vergil's. For him, piety towards the gods and the proper observance of their rites is the key to a happy and productive life.⁶¹ The plague episode shows what can happen to the impious (513), and it is worth noting that the impious in this case are not Italian but Noric farmers, since Vergil wishes to emphasise the piety of traditional Roman agricultural communities.

In contrast to the plague is the Aristaeus episode at the end of Book Four, where the proper method of appeasing disgruntled gods and the consequent return from ruin to prosperity are enacted.⁶² The plague in effect acts as a foil to this mythological example of proper religious conduct (Harrison 26-9). The plague's prominence within the *Georgics* does not represent Vergil's betrayal of the farmer to chaos 'after establishing a system under which there is hope for [him] provided he duly worships the gods, works hard, and follows divine guidance' (Harrison 39). The chaos represented by the plague is instead 'explicable in terms of the Noric farmers' own negligence, coupled with an

ignorance about his gods that left him incapable either of recognising divine anger when it struck or of taking suitable measures to avert it.' Chaos, and with it Lucretius' Epicureanism, is banished from Italy in the *Georgics*. Vergil himself, earlier in the *Georgics*, says

Blessed is he who has succeeded in learning the laws of nature's working,
has cast beneath his feet all fear and fate's implacable decree, and the howl
of insatiable Death. But happy, too, is he who knows the rural gods...

(2.490-3)

These words might well be taken to summarise Vergil's attitude in the plague passage to Lucretius, both his reliance and his respectful dissent.⁶³

One might argue that a world view as optimistic and unequivocal as that attributed to Vergil by Harrison is not particularly Vergilian. But while it is perhaps true that the Vergil of the *Aeneid* is notoriously ambivalent and often pessimistic, it is also perhaps true that the younger poet of the *Georgics*, writing mostly before the end of the civil wars and long before the costs of the Augustan peace were discernible, could well have been more idealistic and even simplistic in his longing for the blessings associated with traditional Roman piety.

Another objection: if Harrison's idea is valid, namely that the plague is caused by Juno's anger at her botched rites, why did the poet not make this more obvious, and why have so many generations of leading Vergilian scholars overlooked the fact? The answer to this lies, I believe, in the plague's dual function. It must be remembered that on the

surface the *Georgics* is a practical instruction manual for farmers, and that the plague is originally introduced (464-9) as the consequence of lax husbandry. After sixty lines of lurid detail, the apparent cause of the plague is safely forgotten and its supernatural character is established by means of its magnitude and of several hints at divine origin. Only then can its true cause, the wrath of Juno, be introduced without glaring incongruity. Vergil must reconcile the apparent and true causes by means of poetic legerdemain. The subtlety of his method throws off those who approach the plague passage with certain preconceptions, or with Lucretius, on their minds.⁶⁴

In recasting the plague as divine punishment, Vergil takes the plague narrative back to its origins. In Homer and in Sophocles the plague is unequivocally punitive. Thucydides plays down this aspect of his Athenian plague, merely reporting its popular attribution to the gods. Lucretius, in separating the gods altogether from the human sphere, makes the plague a purely random occurrence, although he retains the element of punishment as discussed above. The patterns of Vergil's adaptation of Lucretius show that, rather than incongruously adopting an Epicurean view of the universe in this part of the *Georgics* alone, his intention is to subvert Lucretius in favour of traditional Roman piety. His many echoes of Lucretius in vocabulary and in detail are intended to draw attention to the essential contrast between the two passages.

In most ways Vergil's plague narrative conforms closely to the tradition as it has reached him. There is the element of divine retribution just discussed, and also the suggestion that plague punishes the farmer who fails to take proper care against

contagion (464-9). There is the conventional failure of human skill and the discussion of the plague's effect on animals, complete with the reduction of humans to an animal state as in Thucydides. There is also the ending of an era, namely the era of animal husbandry in Noricum. Social collapse is seen not only in the disruption of religious ritual and of agriculture, but also in the wild animals' 'forgetfulness' of their usual pursuits (537-40).

There is, however, one noteworthy departure from convention. It is a difference of emphasis. In Homer and Sophocles the plague as a narrative device marks a point of departure: in Thucydides it is a major turning point in the fortunes of Athens in the Peloponnesian war; in Lucretius it is the end of the poem and a symbolic end of all things. In Vergil, the plague does not stand out as a singular beginning, end or turning point in the poem as a whole. Though it does mark the end of the third book of the *Georgics*, thereby capitalising on the plague narrative's potential sense of finality as in Lucretius, this ending is only one part of the overall balance of the *Georgics*. As discussed above, the ending of Book Three echoes in its pessimism the ending of Book One; Books Two and Four end on a noticeably more optimistic note. It balances more particularly with the ending of Book Four, the Aristaeus episode, to which it acts as a foil. The plague shows relentless and agonising loss, the story of Aristaeus shows rebirth from death. As a result, the plague narrative is one among several equal elements in the balanced world of the *Georgics*.

Chapter 2: Ovid's Treatment of the Plague Narrative Tradition

Ovid's plague narrative occurs at lines 523-613 of the seventh book of his epic poem,⁶⁵ the *Metamorphoses*. Since it is the focus of this paper, it will be discussed in greater detail than its predecessors. A summary will be followed by a discussion of the episode as a whole and its place in the poem. The text will then be examined in detail; for this purpose I will include both the Latin text and a translation of each passage as it comes under consideration. Some general comments on Ovid's place in the tradition of plague narrative writing may then be fruitfully made.

The story takes place on the Greek island of Aegina, in the Saronic Gulf. Aegina's king, Aeacus, receives a visitor from Athens, Cephalus, who remarks on the absence of those he met on his previous visit several years before. Aeacus explains that his former subjects were wiped out by a pestilence sent by Juno. With this the plague narrative begins. Juno hated the Aeginetans because their home was named after one of Jupiter's former human lovers (523-4). The failure of medicine is recounted (525-7), then the immediate 'scientific' causes: pestilential winds, contaminated water and poisonous snakes (528-35). The effects on animals (dogs, birds, sheep and cattle, wild beasts) follow. Illustrative examples include the deaths of bulls under the yoke, sheep, a racehorse and then, in the wild, boars, stags and bears (536-46). We hear of the abundance of rotting carcasses, which scavengers will not eat and which spread the contagion (547-51).

Humans are affected next, first in the country then in the city (552-3). Symptoms are catalogued (554-60) and the especially quick deaths of physicians and others who attend the sick are lamented (561-4). We learn of the desperation of the afflicted: they indulge their desires with no regard for shame by lying (often drowning) in fountains and streams, by jumping or weakly rolling out of their unendurable beds and by fleeing their homes only to wander the streets, eventually collapsing and dying in the open (564-81). Aeacus breaks off here to report his own reactions with a pair of rhetorical questions and a pair of similes (582-6). Pointing out a temple of Jupiter to his visitor, he then returns to the narrative and relates his people's futile supplications and the disruption of sacred ritual (587-601). He recalls the heaps of bodies at the temples (602-3), the rash of suicides (604-5) and then the disruption of normal funeral rites (606-13). This marks the end of the plague narrative. At this point Aeacus tells of his prayer to Jupiter, either to restore his people or to kill him as well, and of the consequent transformation of a nearby colony of ants into a new race of humans called Myrmidons.⁶⁶

In the overall narrative scheme of the *Metamorphoses*, and even of Book Seven, the plague is very loosely connected and unimportant (Grimm 66). It serves ostensibly as an introduction to the metamorphosis of the ants. The ant story is a digression from Cephalus' mission to Aegina, which itself is a digression from the story of the war between Athens and Minos, one of the major narrative structures of Books Seven and Eight. The plague narrative is therefore four times removed from the main narrative thread. Dramatically speaking, the plague-ant episode is self-sufficient (Grimm 67); this is emphasised by its narration in flashback and in the first person by Aeacus. As the detail

and drama of the plague narrative increases ('on the sly,' as Grimm says⁶⁷), and as its layout becomes clearer - half animal plague, half human plague - the audience gradually becomes aware that this is indeed a self-standing work of art intended to bring Vergil and Lucretius to mind (Grimm 67). This impression is confirmed by several details (see below) distinctly reminiscent of Ovid's predecessors, but with an equally distinct Ovidian touch: they are exaggerated, and ornamented with a certain lightness and smoothness of style (Grimm 67).

The ant transformation is slightly anticlimactic, and it is obvious in retrospect that the plague narrative is intended to be the focus of the Aegina sequence. It draws attention to itself, and demands comparison in particular with those of Vergil and Lucretius. The more acute reader will have been tipped off to parallels with Vergil and Lucretius before the plague narrative even begins, when Aeacus says 'I shall now tell you in sequence [the story of the plague and its aftermath]' (*ordine nunc repetam*, 520); this is reminiscent of the didactic method of both Lucretius, 'now I shall explain the reason for disease' (*nunc ratio quae sit...expediam*, 6.1090-3), and Vergil, 'I shall teach you also the causes and signs of diseases' (*morborum quoque te causas et signa docebo*, *Georgics* 3.440).⁶⁸

The kernel of the story told by Aeacus goes back to Hesiod (Bömer 331).⁶⁹ Ovid is the first to have the transformation of ants to men preceded by a plague, though Strabo mentions and rejects such a version⁷⁰ (Bömer 331). Strabo's *Geography* was mostly written before the publication of the *Metamorphoses*, but some of it was written in the reign of Tiberius, after the publication of the *Metamorphoses* (Purcell 1447). It is

possible, therefore, that the version Strabo refers to is that of Ovid. It used to be thought that Ovid had a Hellenistic source for this version of the story, but this has been generally discredited (Bömer 333). In any case, the story is of a clearly mythological nature, and in choosing it Ovid makes it clear that although his plague account is intended to compete with those of Vergil and Lucretius, his intentions are purely poetic rather than historical or scientific (Bömer 332). This mythological context gives him a great deal of freedom, as does the use of a first person narrator. Of this freedom he takes full and enthusiastic advantage.

In pursuit of his poetic aims, Ovid takes over a known story and dispenses with inconvenient details. He ignores the tradition, going back to Hesiod, that Aeacus was alone on the island before the ant miracle. In Ovid, at the time of the plague's arrival, the population of Aegina is so great that a plague is able to rage through it with as much effect as in the Athens of Thucydides and Lucretius (Bömer 332).⁷¹ It might be argued that with the plague's sudden removal of his subjects Aeacus is alone, as in Hesiod, but in fact Ovid has Aeacus' sons Telamon, Peleus and Phocus also survive the plague (476-7, 647), presumably with others.

From Hesiod's version, however, Ovid retains the metamorphosis of ants into humans on Aegina. This metamorphosis is the ostensible point of the Aeacus episode, in keeping with the theme of the poem as a whole. The presence of the plague narrative is justified in the following way. Cephalus, an Athenian, has come to Aegina seeking aid in Athens' war against Minos, and has been impressed 'to see so many young people, all of

an age and all so handsome' (513-5). To account for these and to explain the absence of faces familiar to Cephalus from his last visit is Aeacus' purpose: 'I only wish that I could give you an account of the one without the other. But as it is, I shall tell you the whole story in the order in which it happened' (519-20, trans. Innes). The plague story, then, is cast as a necessary preamble to the actual changing of ants into men. The plague is narrated in ninety lines; the rest of the story, from Aeacus' prayer to his decision to call his new subjects Myrmidons, is told in only forty (614-54). The actual metamorphosis takes up only seven (635-42).

This discrepancy in length between the introduction to the metamorphosis and its actual occurrence clearly shows that Ovid was less interested in motivating the change of ants into humans than he was in trying his hand at the plague-narrative tradition. Later in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid tells how Aesculapius is brought to Rome as the result of a plague (15.626-744). The plague in this case takes up only four lines:

Once, long ago, a dreadful pestilence tainted the air of Latium, and its
pallid inhabitants were ravaged by a sickness that drained away their
blood. Weary with funeral processions, when they saw that human efforts
were of no avail, and that doctors' remedies could do nothing, they sought
the help of heaven. (626-30, trans. Innes)

The rest of the story takes one hundred fourteen lines. This would seem to represent a more appropriate distribution of weight between the establishing of context and the narration of the climactic episode.

As an introductory episode, it would be perfectly appropriate for the plague at Aegina to take no more than the four lines quoted above on the plague at Rome. In fact a plague at Rome would seem to have offered all kinds of narrative possibilities, but the migration of Aesculapius to the Tiber island may have been too important in itself to share the spotlight. Like Aesculapius' journey, the transformation of ants into men and the description of the Myrmidons' ant-like qualities certainly posed no obstacle to Ovid's imagination, and might easily have been elaborated after a brief description of the plague. But the relative insignificance of the ant story itself provides a convenient opportunity for the ambitious Ovid to take on the plague narrative tradition that so many of his illustrious predecessors have developed. That Ovid would go out of his way to write a plague narrative suggests that it is in fact, by Ovid's time, a recognised literary convention. As such, it contains recognised conventional elements, and Ovid's task is to put his own unique spin on these, just as he has on the conventions of love elegy and didactic poetry.

His desire to take on the plague narrative tradition and his insertion of the plague into the Aeacus story leads Ovid into some incongruities. Minos visits Aegina before Cephalus does, also to ask for aid in the coming war, but Aeacus declines to help him because 'no land is more closely allied to [Athens] than this land of mine' (485-6). Yet in spite of this close alliance and the geographical proximity of Aegina to Athens, Cephalus comes from Athens having never heard of the catastrophe that has occurred since his last visit a generation earlier (Vallillee 105). Cephalus may well have been struck too by the scarcity of animals on the Aegina, since Ovid has these destroyed by the plague before the humans, and only the human population is replaced through the transformation of ants

(Vallillee 104). The reader is left to assume, if he or she gives it any thought at all, that not all of the animals die, just as there are at least four human survivors. Typically, however, Ovid is untroubled by such details: his poetic purpose is paramount (Bömer 332).

Whatever the problems its insertion into the poem may cause, the plague narrative is an appropriate target for Ovid's 'iconoclastic wit' (Kenney 436), for it has been handled by several of his most iconic predecessors from Homer to Vergil. The latter is acknowledged in Ovid's time as the greatest Roman poet of all time; he is therefore the ultimate target for respectful rivalry by the leading poet of Rome in his own day (Hinds 1084-5), and one who in his earliest work 'manifests astonishing confidence in himself and his professional future' (Kenney 420).⁷² The plague narrative tradition by Ovid's time has partaken of several genres, and is therefore well-suited to the *Metamorphoses*, which 'includes samples of all the important genres' of classical literature (Kenney 432). The tradition's transgeneric nature makes it ideal fodder for Ovid personally, as a poet whose work as a whole is informed by 'an unprecedented range of Greek and Roman writing'; he is 'one of the finest readers' of antiquity, rivalling Callimachus in his 'understanding in depth and in detail of the literary traditions of which he was the inheritor' (Hinds 1086).

Though there is no obvious physical metamorphosis involved in the plague, either Ovid's or his predecessors', it fits thematically into the poem as a whole insofar as 'what most interested Ovid [. . .] was human behaviour under stress' (Kenney 436). Many of the preceding stories in the *Metamorphoses* have involved people being turned into animals,

prompting examinations of their residual human feelings (Anderson 6-7). In a similar manner Vergil anthropomorphises his animals throughout the *Georgics*, and especially in the plague episode. This correspondence, whether or not it occurred to Ovid, shows at least the appropriateness of his adapting Vergil's plague to the *Metamorphoses*.

It may also be argued that the social and psychological effects of the plague represent some sort of metamorphosis. This is not particularly convincing, since any change in emotion or behaviour, as found in any literary work, could then be classified as 'metamorphosis,' and the poem's unifying theme would be rendered pointless. Ovid is clearly concerned in the *Metamorphoses* with physical change and the resulting psychological effects; the plague at Aegina, like its much briefer counterpart in Book Fifteen, serves to introduce such a physical change but does not represent one itself.

It is worth noting that the plague in Book Fifteen is introduced by the same words as the plague at Aegina: *dira lues* ('a dreadful pestilence'), at the beginning of the line (15.626, cf. 7.523). It is unlikely that the repetition is mere coincidence since these are the only two places in all of Ovid where the word *lues* occurs (Deferrari, Barry and McGuire 1054), and the word itself is rare in Augustan Latin (OLD). Its identical position in the two lines preceded by *dira* in each case makes it very likely that a deliberate effect is intended. One possibility is that the poet wishes to contrast his two very different ways of describing a plague, thereby showing off his equal abilities in compression and elaboration. A second possibility is that he wishes the reader to apply all the associations

of the first plague with the second, thereby efficiently adding resonance to the brief second plague.

A more interesting possibility is that Ovid has in mind Vergil's *Georgics*, specifically its contrast of the plague episode at the end of Book Three with the Aristaeus episode at the end of Book Four. In the interpretation espoused above, Vergil's Noric plague is an example of the horrors that result from poor religious observance, while the Aristaeus episode illustrates correct procedure when divine anger is aroused, along with the resulting return to prosperity. The correct procedure is to seek divine guidance in restoring the goodwill of the gods. There is a similar parallelism in Ovid. The first plague is sent by an angry Juno (also the source of Vergil's plague), and although the Aeginetans pray and attempt to sacrifice, it is all in vain; the island is ravaged before Jupiter, hitherto deaf to entreaty, grants Aeacus' prayer. In Book Fifteen, Rome is struck by a plague but sends an embassy to Delphi for guidance; it goes in turn to Epidaurus, where a snake which forms part of the god's statue comes to life and is brought by ship to Rome, where it takes up residence on the Tiber island. The two episodes contrast the successful religious response to a plague with the unsuccessful, just as in the parallel episodes of the *Georgics*.

The two Ovidian plague episodes have other correspondences: in the first, snakes are listed as one of the causes of the plague (533-5) - an apparently original idea of Ovid's (see below); in the second, it is a snake that delivers Rome from the plague. In the first it is non-Romans who are involved and who are ignorant of proper procedure, in the second

it is Romans who show proper piety; the same correspondence exists in Vergil, where the contrast is between Noricans (non-Romans) and the pious Roman ideal found throughout the *Georgics* (though not explicitly in the Aristaeus episode). If Ovid's two plagues can be understood in this way, it lends credence to Harrison's thesis on Vergil's plague. There are many other correspondences between Ovid and Vergil both in the plague passage (see below) and throughout the *Metamorphoses* (Anderson 18). Obviously Ovid, as a native Latin speaker and a thoroughly well-read poet, was more attuned to the subtleties of Vergil than even the most diligent modern scholars.

Ovid, unlike Vergil, is not known for his piety. He 'does not believe in standardised Augustan morality' (Anderson 11) as does its official - though perhaps ambivalent - poetic representative, Vergil. Neither is Ovid a philosophical poet (Kenney 443). Furthermore, besides the superficial motif of metamorphosis, there is no clearly identifiable unifying idea to the *Metamorphoses* (Kenney 434). It may or may not be significant that the Aeacus episode occurs almost exactly halfway through the whole poem: the *Metamorphoses* runs in generally chronological order from the creation of the world to Ovid's own times, and in the plague narrative - halfway between these poles of mythology and history - we see elements drawn from both historical and mythological sources.

Each of Ovid's two most obvious models, on the other hand, has a clear philosophical or moral purpose as well as a unifying theme: atomic theory and its randomness in the case of Lucretius, agricultural instruction and traditional Roman piety

in the case of Vergil. Lucretius and Vergil both use plague narratives to exemplify the larger themes of their poems, but for Ovid the plague narrative is simply a literary exercise on which to test his poetic dexterity. How exactly he does this may now be examined in detail, by means of a close and sequential analysis of Ovid's text.

I begin with some observations on the metre of the plague passage. According to Duckworth, the *Metamorphoses* has an average ratio⁷³ of twelve spondees to twenty dactyls (6).⁷⁴ This is 'designed to support the swift pace of his narrative' (Anderson 24). In the plague passage, however, the number of dactyls and spondees is nearly equal: dactyls make up 51.6% of the feet between lines 523 and 613, compared with the 62.5% represented by Duckworth's ratio. This unusual prevalence of spondees is particularly noticeable in the first part of the plague narrative: in the first four lines (523-6), dactyls represent only 31.25%; only after the dactylic line 548 does the cumulative number of dactyls pull even with that of spondees, and from this point on the cumulative ratio is roughly one to one.

Leaving aside the repugnance of statistics, the pattern is instructive; Ovid seems to be aiming for a particular effect in this passage. Given the usual characterisation of spondees as slow and sombre and of dactyls as lighter and quicker, the most obvious interpretation is that he wishes to make the metre match its subject, which could hardly be more sombre. Another possibility is that he is consciously imitating the versification of Vergil or Lucretius. Vergil's *Georgics*, according to Duckworth (6), averages a ratio of twenty spondees to twelve dactyls,⁷⁵ i.e. 37.5% dactyls. More specifically, in the Noric

plague passage (*Georgics* 3.478-566) dactyls are at 44.7%.⁷⁶ But it seems unlikely that Ovid is consciously imitating Vergil's metre, for in that part of Ovid's plague, namely the animal plague (536-551), which is most directly based on Vergil, the ratio is 26S/37D (58.7% dactyls).

As for Lucretius' metre, the overall ratio of spondees to dactyls in *De Rerum Natura* is 18S/14D (Duckworth 6),⁷⁷ or 43.75% dactyls. The Athenian plague passage (6.1138-1286) is close to this average, with 45.6% dactyls. Ovid's metre in the introduction to the plague (523-35) corresponds closely with Lucretius' overall metrical tendencies, with dactyls counting for 42.3%. Immediately after the introduction, however, with the beginning of the animal plague, Ovid's proportion of dactyls quickly increases until it reaches 50% at line 548, never dropping below that level for the rest of the passage.⁷⁸

The conclusion may be cautiously made that in his plague narrative Ovid departs from his usual metrical tendencies, employing more spondees than usual. In so doing he is influenced by the metre, as by the subject matter, of Vergil and Lucretius. Both of these, generally and in their plague narratives, use a higher proportion of spondees than Ovid normally does. The greater frequency of spondees also corresponds to the sombre tone appropriate to Aeacus' harrowing tale. I would go so far as to say that the metre, and the tone of the whole passage, is deliberately lugubrious. Its solemnity is as exaggerated as are the details of the narrative. Ovid distances himself from the narrative, and therefore

allows himself greater freedom to exaggerate, through the device of a first person narrator.

This is the aged Aeacus, who as the survivor of this traumatic episode would perhaps tend toward embellishment, and who may be modelled on another aged teller of tall tales, Homer's Nestor. There are several connections between Ovid's Aeacus and Homer's Nestor which, taken together, are suggestive. Ovid introduces Aeacus at *Metamorphoses* 7.478-9 as follows: *ipse quoque egreditur tardus gravitate senili / Aeacus* ('Aeacus himself also comes out, slow with the weight of old age'⁷⁹). His great age is emphasised, being in fact the only characteristic explicitly applied to him. Likewise, one of Nestor's chief defining characteristics is his advanced age (*e.g. Iliad* 1.250-2, 8.102-3, 23.623). With this comes great influence and authority: though Agamemnon is the acknowledged leader of the Greek army, Nestor is the 'warden of the people' (11.840, 15.370, 659), the 'shepherd of the people' (2.85, 10.73, 23.411), whose 'advice always seemed best' (7.325) and who generally speaks first in the Greeks' council of leaders.⁸⁰ The *gravitas senilis* ('weight of old age') which defines Ovid's Aeacus has a secondary meaning which corresponds to these attributes of Nestor. Besides its basic meaning 'weight,' *gravitas* means 'authority,' 'influence' and 'importance' (OLD).

In the limited introductory characterisation of Aeacus, then, it is possible to see at least these two resemblances to Nestor. It might be added that where Nestor rules over a third generation of subjects in Pylos, having seen the two previous generations pass away in his reign (*Iliad* 1.250-2), Aeacus is now ruling over his second generation, having seen

the first pass away as a result of the plague. There is also a noticeable similarity between the beleaguered Aeacus' prayer at the end of the plague narrative and Nestor's prayer in the *Iliad*, when he and the rest of the Greeks have been pushed back to their own ships by the surging Trojans:

'Father Zeus, if ever any of us, over in the wheatlands of Argos, burnt for you the fat thigh of an ox or sheep as he prayed for a safe return, and you promised it to him with a nod of your head, remember now, Olympian; save him from this fatal day; and do not let the Trojans overwhelm us so completely.'

(*Iliad* 15.372-6)

"O Jupiter,' I said, 'if what they say is true, that you entered the embraces of Aegina, daughter of Asopus, and if you are not ashamed, great father, to be my parent, either give me back my people or lay me in the tomb as well."

(*Metamorphoses* 7.615-8)⁸¹

The sequel in each case is the same:

Thus Nestor prayed, and Zeus the Thinker thundered loudly when he heard the prayer of the aged son of Neleus.

(*Iliad* 15.377-8)

'He gave me a sign through lightning followed by thunder.'

(*Metamorphoses* 7.619)⁸²

It is reasonable to conclude by means of these parallels that there is at least an implicit correspondence between Nestor and Aeacus. A further point of similarity will have made itself felt by the time the audience hears of Aeacus' prayer. For if Nestor is 'a highly respected statesman,' he is 'much given also to long, rambling stories of the distant

past' (March 1039).⁸³ These stories often give the distinct impression of exaggeration.⁸⁴ As Aeacus' lurid story unfolds and its details, familiar from the sober treatises of Vergil and Lucretius, are increasingly embellished to the point of absurdity, this aspect of Nestor in Aeacus becomes evident. It is in fact this more comical aspect of Nestor's character which applies most of all to Aeacus; his age and authority are described in only half a line (478), but his tale goes on for one hundred forty-four (517-660).

Apart from amusing Ovid's Roman audience, whose familiarity with Homer must be assumed, the character of Aeacus serves a useful literary purpose. Aeacus in effect acts as a filter for Ovid's plague narrative, which could just as easily have been told without an intermediary. This allows for a change in tone and frees the poet himself from full accountability either for consistency of detail or for excess of effect. With this and the metrical peculiarity of the passage in mind, the details of the narrative may now be considered.

Dira lues ira populis Iunonis iniquae

Incidit exosae dictas a paelice terras. (523-4)

(A grim pestilence befell my people through the wrath of malevolent Juno, who loathed this land named after Jove's mistress.)⁸⁵

Juno's jealous rage is a factor in many of the early episodes of the *Metamorphoses*, as in the stories of Io, Callisto and Semele (Anderson 299), but here it reaches an unprecedented pettiness. She attempts to destroy the entire human and animal

population of the island because Aeacus has named it after his mother, Aegina, once the object of Jupiter's lust. The intensifying prefix in *exosae*, 'extremely hating,' in contrast with the cause of Juno's anger, makes her more ridiculous than awesome. Homer, Sophocles and Vergil have all made divine anger - Juno's in Vergil as in Ovid - the cause of the plague, but it is a particularly Ovidian touch, since Ovid is the poet of love, to attribute this anger to sexual jealousy (Grimm 67). *Iunonis iniquae*, 'of malevolent Juno' (523), occurs in the same verse-position at *Aeneid* 8.292. *Iunonis ob iram*, 'on account of Juno's wrath,' stands at the same point in the fourth line of the *Aeneid's* first book. The comparison which these parallels invite, according to Grimm (67), only emphasises the triviality of Juno's anger in Ovid: its cause is trivial; its significance pales in comparison to what is at stake in the *Aeneid*, namely the existence or non-existence of Rome; and its result, the plague, is quickly forgotten and recompensed through Jupiter's intervention.

*Lues*⁸⁶ may be considered a Vergilian word, occurring twice in the *Aeneid* (3.139, 7.354), while *dira* is found in Vergil's Noric plague episode. It is one of forty words found in Ovid's plague and in Vergil's, but not in that of Lucretius (Vallillee 107-9). At the same time we see in these lines *populis* and *incidit*, two of another forty words which occur in Ovid's and Lucretius' plagues, but not in Vergil's (Vallillee 115-7). Moreover, there is a structural similarity between *dira lues...populis / incidit...* in this passage and *mortifer aestus / ...incubuit...populo* in Lucretius (1138-43) (Vallillee 117). In these opening lines of the plague passage, then, the pattern of equal borrowing from Vergil and Lucretius both in vocabulary and in syntax is established.

Dum visum mortale malum tantaeque latebat

Causa nocens cladis, pugnatum est arte medendi;

Exitium superabat opem, quae victa iacebat. (525-7)

(As long as it seemed to be an earthly ill and the pernicious cause of such destruction was unknown, it was fought with medical theory. Death overcame all aid, which lay vanquished.)

The military imagery of these lines (*pugnatum*, *superabat*, *victa* - Anderson 299) hearkens back to Sophocles (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 190-3), and even to the Homeric image of Apollo attacking the Greeks with the arrows of plague (*Iliad* 1.43-52). The failure of human skill has been a feature of all the plague narratives since that of Sophocles (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 170): Thucydides 2.47.4; Lucretius 6.1179, 1226; Vergil 3.509-11, 549. As in Vergil's plague, Aeacus and his people are unaware that their affliction is heaven-sent, and so fail to take the proper remedial steps. Line 527 ends the synopsis of the disease. Though much more compressed, it is similar to Thucydides' introductory synopsis (2.47.3-4) of the Athenian plague. Thucydides describes its unprecedented destruction, the counterproductivity of treatment, the futility of supplication and finally the people's surrender, 'defeated by the evil' (*hypo tou kakou nikōmenoi*) - another military image.

Principio caelum spissa caligine terras

Pressit et ignavos inclusit nubibus aestus,

Dumque quater iunctis explevit cornibus orbem

Luna, quater plenum tenuata retexit orbem,

Letiferis calidi spirarunt aestibus austri. (528-32)

(First the sky oppressed our land with a dense gloom and trapped the sluggish heat with clouds, and while the moon filled out her orb with horns joined four times, and four times waning emptied again, hot southerlies breathed with poisoned heat.)

Now the physical causes, as distinct from the divine, are described. Aeacus switches here from the imperfect to the perfect tense, which indicates that the generalising summary is over and the historical narrative has begun (Anderson 300). Like Lucretius and Vergil, Ovid attributes the plague to a hot and poisonous air mass, emphasising the sluggishness and gloom it brings through the DSSS pattern of 528-30. He is untroubled by the apparent duality of causes (divine and climatic - though it could be argued that Juno causes the pestilential climatic conditions) and takes no trouble, unlike Vergil, to reconcile the conflicting influences of Homer and Sophocles on the one hand, Lucretius on the other. Ovid openly borrows from his sources with only poetic effect in mind.

The ominous tone is then quickly dispelled by a spectacularly poetic time-expression. In order to say 'four months,' Ovid might have used a much simpler phrase (Anderson 300).⁸⁷ Instead, we have two appropriately parallel lines (530-1) describing the moon's waxing and waning. *Quater* occurs in the same position in each line, as does *orbem* in an end-rhyme which evokes the cyclical nature of its subject. *Luna* appears only

after a description of its waxing, and is postponed to a position between the two clauses describing it. It belongs equally to both clauses, an effect emphasised by asyndeton. This visual and aural joke undermines the (exaggerated) seriousness of Aeacus' narrative.

Similarly, the following line (532) is a 'Golden Line' with alliteration of 's' in imitation of the winds and rhyme across the caesura. It contrasts starkly with its pestilential subject, and in general is 'far too elegant to be serious here' (Anderson 300).

Constat et in fontes vitium venisse lacusque,

Miliaque incultos serpentum multa per agros

Errasse atque suis fluvios temerasse venenis. (533-5)

(We know that the blight also entered springs and pools, and that snakes - many thousand - strayed through untilled fields and tainted the streams with their venom.)

In citing yet another cause for the plague, Ovid appears intent on one-upping his predecessors. The poisoning of the water supply is found in Thucydides (2.48.2), Lucretius (6.1101f., 1125f.) and Vergil (*Georgics* 3.481). That the water supply is poisoned by snakes, however, is not in any of these plague narratives, or in any others that we know of before Ovid. It is not enough for him simply to imitate his predecessors through a conflation of their plague stories. He adds details of his own, however unnecessary, especially if it gives him the opportunity to imitate the sound of snakes with the heavy alliteration of 's' throughout these lines, culminating in 535. This is the first of several examples of details added by Ovid to those of his models. They allow him to

indulge his grotesque imagination and to display, with obvious enthusiasm, his technical genius. According to Anderson (300), Ovid's older contemporary and friend Hyginus mentions the poisoning of Aegina's waters by a single snake (*Fabulae* 52.2); Ovid, typically, exaggerates this detail so that many thousands of snakes are involved. The poisoning itself then becomes less striking than the gruesome image of Aegina being overrun by snakes. The idea of 'rivers' on Aegina (80 sq. km) is itself an exaggeration which allows Ovid the threefold crescendo of 'fontes... lacusque... fluvios' (Bömer 337).

It is left unclear at this point whether the water itself is poisoned by the corrupt air mass or by the snakes (Anderson 300). Furthermore, is it the poisonous air or the venom-tainted water which is most to blame for Aegina's plague, or do they act with equal effect? Again, such details appear to be of much less importance to Ovid than the poetic effect, which is to show how the Aeginetans are overwhelmed by several horrors at once. The air is poisonous, the water is poisonous and their island is a writhing mass of serpents. Ovid no doubt is aware of the incongruities which arise through his piling-up of 'scientific' causes, and it may well be that his intention here is to parody the relentlessly scientific approach of Lucretius, the slightly conflicted approach of Vergil or both. The snakes are ignored in the rest of the narrative, and one aspect of Vergil's plague to which their poisoning of the waters might have had direct relevance, the plague among fish, is omitted by Ovid (Vallillee 129). Their presence here, clearly, is gratuitous.

Strage canum primo volucrumque oviumque boumque

Inque feris subiti deprensa potentia morbi.

(536-7)

(Through the death of dogs first, and birds and sheep and cattle, and among wild beasts, the power of the sudden plague was known.)

Ovid here begins his own version of Vergil's animal plague, though the destruction of animals is not relevant to the depletion of Aegina's human inhabitants which leads to the transformation of ants into humans (Anderson 300). If, as Ovid says (528-35), the plague is caused by poisonous air and water, there is no reason why animals and humans should not be affected simultaneously. But in separating the animal and human plagues Ovid allows himself to focus his own and his readers' attention on his particular treatment of Vergil and Lucretius in turn. He also preserves the Homeric pattern (*Iliad* 1.50-51), in which animals are struck first and humans next in a dramatic crescendo.

In his animal plague Ovid not only invites comparison between himself and Vergil, but also gives himself an opportunity to expand the scope, and therefore the impact, of his plague. Line 536 is rather ludicrously manneristic, with its four *ums* and three *ques*; these last are reminiscent of Vergil's *spemque gregemque simul cunctamque ab origine gentem* (*Georgics* 3.473), but then Ovid caps them with a fourth *-que* in the following line. Bömer (337) compares *Iliad* 1.50: 'it attacked mules first and swift dogs,'¹⁸⁸ pointing out that in Vergil the death of dogs comes only later.

Concidere infelix validos miratur arator

Inter opus tauros medioque recumbere sulco;

Lanigeris gregibus balatus dantibus aegros

Sponte sua lanaeque cadunt et corpora tabent; (538-41)

(The unlucky ploughman gapes as his strong bulls fall on the job and stretch out in mid-furrow. Wool falls of its own accord from the weakly bleating fleece-clad flocks, and their bodies decay.)

There is in 538-9 an obvious retelling of Vergil's bull-death scene (*Georgics* 3.515-24), though compressed and comical rather than touching. Vergil's 'sad ploughman' is 'unlucky' here, and struck with amazement (*miratur*⁸⁹) rather than sorrow as both bulls, apparently 'strong' up to the last second, suddenly drop dead before his eyes. The suddenness of their death is emphasised by *concidere* ('fall') at the beginning of its line. As in the Vergilian episode, the narrator here switches from past tense to present in order to vivify the scene. Ovid makes no attempt to conceal his imitation of Vergil: *concidere*, *arator*, *tauros*, *opus* and *medioque* are taken verbatim from the Vergilian scene in question (with the morphological variations demanded by syntax) (Vallillee 109). Rather, Ovid's intent is to take an immediately recognisable episode and exaggerate its basic features. Both bulls die in Vergil, but not at the same time and not so suddenly as to be described as strong and dead in the same breath. The pathos, perhaps the defining characteristic of Vergil's bull scene, is entirely discarded and a famously Vergilian episode is deftly transformed into a typically Ovidian one.

The sheep, who bleat as they rot alive and lose their wool, are Ovid's own invention (Anderson 301), and as such are more grotesque than moving. They also give

the poet an opportunity for poetic display: there is onomatopoeia in *balatus dantibus*; there is also an uneasy effect created by the use of only five words in the line, each of which ends in 's' and between all of which there is consonant clash. According to Bömer (338), Ovid uses *tabent* (or any form of *tabere*) nowhere else but here,⁹⁰ where its use may have been suggested by Vergil's *cadavera tabo* (*Georgics* 3.557), also at the end of a line. The disintegration of the animals' bodies while they still live is similar to the internal liquefaction in Vergil's account (484-5).

Acer equus quondam magnaeque in pulvere famae

Degenerat palmas veterumque oblitus honorum

Ad praesepe gemit leto moriturus inerti; (542-4)

(The horse, once swift and famed in the races, disgraces his trophies;

forgetting past glories he groans in the stall, soon to die a lazy death.)

With *acer equus*, in the same line-beginning position as Vergil's *victor equus* (*Georgics* 3.498), Ovid introduces another obvious adaptation of a pathetic scene from Vergil's Noric plague (498-514). He makes it much shorter, however, by leaving out the symptoms and attempted remedy and retaining only the basic descriptive elements, the horse's fall from and forgetfulness (*oblitus* = Vergil's *immemor*) of his former vigour (Vallillee 110). He then leaves the horse on the point of death, employing the future participle *moriturus*, reminiscent of Vergil's *moriturus* (501) (Vallillee 110).

Non aper irasci meminit, non fidere cursu

Cerva nec armentis incurrere fortibus ursi.

Omnia languor habet: silvisque agrisque viisque

Corpora foeda iacent, vitiantur odoribus aurae. (545-8)

(The boar forgets to rage, the hind to flee, and the bear to charge at mighty herds. Sluggishness grips everything. Bodies lie rank in forests and fields and roads, the wind is tainted with their odours.)

Ovid now turns to the wild animals. It is unlikely that boars and bears (and wolves, 550) were 'at large on the tiny island of Aegina' (Vallillee 107), but Ovid is under the influence of 537-40 of Vergil's plague story. Vergil speaks of wolves forgetting to menace sheep and of does and stags forgetting to be timid. Ovid retains the 'hinds' and saves the wolves for a different context a few lines later, replacing them here with the more dramatic boar and bear, associated respectively with the more dramatic verbs 'to be enraged' (*irasci*) and 'to charge at' (*incurrere*). The subject of 'charge at mighty herds' is postponed to the very end of this sequence and to the end of 546; when *ursi* ('bears') finally appears, it comes as a surprise, since bears are not generally considered the proverbial foe of livestock (Bömer 339). Nor is 'bear vs. cattle' a part of the conventional oppositions of Latin poetry, which include for example 'wolf vs. sheep,' 'lion vs. deer,' 'eagle vs. dove' (Bömer 339). The bears' presence here is amusingly incongruous, as is perhaps the 'might' of the cattle.

With *omnia* ('everything') and *corpora foeda* ('rank bodies'), which are not necessarily limited to animals, Ovid begins a smooth transition between the animal

plague and the human, *i.e.* between Vergil and Lucretius (Anderson 301). In 547 Ovid again employs three *-ques*, as in 536 (see above on the Vergilian echo). Anderson (301) sees in *vitiantur odoribus aurae* 'a neat hemistich with a clever point,' namely that the air which originally infected Aegina is now being infected in turn by the rotting bodies. We have, then, yet another factor in the plague's spread and consequently further confusion as to the 'science' of Ovid's plague.

Mira loquar: non illa canes avidaeque volucres,
 Non cani tetigere lupi; dilapsa liquescunt,
 Adflatuque nocent et agunt contagia late. (549-51)

(I shall speak of marvels: the dogs, the hungry birds and grey wolves have not touched them; once fallen, they rot, and in vapours spread harm and contagion abroad.)

Mira loquar ('I shall speak of marvels') reminds the audience that Aeacus is telling this tale. *Mira* in particular (an example of Ovid's 'metamorphic vocabulary') accentuates the spectacular nature of what he tells us, both in this sequence and throughout, in contrast to the seriousness and pathos of Ovid's predecessors. The detail of scavengers avoiding plague-tainted corpses is from Thucydides (2.50.1-2) by way of Lucretius (6.1215). These make no mention of the actual rotting of the corpses, but 'Ovid's delight in the grotesque' compels him to include this detail (Anderson 301-2).

Vallillee (111) sees Ovid trying to reconcile conflicting influences in these lines. He follows Homer in having animals affected before humans, but wishes to include the striking detail from Thucydides (2.50.2) that 'though there were many dead bodies lying about unburied, the birds and animals that eat human flesh either did not come near them or, if they did taste the flesh, died of it afterwards.' This is the only point at which Thucydides mentions the plague's effect on animals, the idea being that they are infected on the rare occasions when they eat human corpses but are otherwise unaffected. Since in Ovid animals have already succumbed to the plague, and moreover do not touch carrion - that is the 'marvel' in question - he 'tries to adapt the Thucydidean version to his atmospheric cause by suggesting that a contagious breath emanated from the rotting corpses' (Vallillee 111). It has been shown above, however, that Ovid is not so troubled by conflicting details. His aim here, as elsewhere, is simply to add a gruesome finishing touch to what he has incorporated from his sources.

Pervenit ad miseros damno graviore colonos

Pestis et in magnae dominatur moenibus urbis. (552-3)

(It reaches the miserable farmers, this plague, with greater havoc, and within the great city's walls holds sway.)

In the transition to the plague's effects on humans, doom-laden *ōs* dominate the first line and the subject, *pestis*, is delayed till the beginning of the next, as if only now is the catastrophe fully recognised. The transition appears logical, from animals to farmers to city-dwellers, except that the poisonous air and tainted waters cited as the main causes

(528-35) would surely have affected all living creatures simultaneously. The Homeric influence (*Iliad* 1.50-1: animals to humans) and the Lucretian (6.1261: country-dwellers arriving in Athens already infected) are at play here. Ovid incorporates these, once again heedless of whatever inconsistencies might exist. It may be doubted that Aegina is a 'great city,' a description that casts further doubt on Aeacus' reliability as a witness. It appears that he is prone to exaggeration, like Homer's Nestor, and with each embellishment he undermines the impact of his tale.

With the transition from the animal to the human plague, the influence of Lucretius naturally becomes more evident as that of Vergil recedes. 552-3 are similar to Lucretius' description of the plague's arrival in and rapid conquest of Athens (6.1143-4): *incubuit tandem populo Pandionis omni./ Inde catervatim morbo mortique dabantur* ('It fell at length upon the whole of Pandion's populace. Then in masses they were given over to disease and death'⁹¹) (Vallillee 115).

Viscera torrentur primo, flammaeque latentis

Indicium rubor est et ductus anhelitus; igni

Aspera lingua tumet, tepidisque arentia ventis

Ora patent, auraeque graves captantur hiatu. (554-7)

(The innards burn first, and the signs of the flame within are redness and panting breath. With fire the rough tongue swells, and dry mouths hang open to the warm wind and snatch at the heavy air in gasps.)

Like Lucretius, Ovid follows the plague's arrival in the city with a list of symptoms. His account of these is much shorter and less clinical than those of Lucretius (6.1145ff.) and Thucydides (2.49.2-8); he focuses instead on the symptom of fever with his dramatic metaphor of fire (Anderson 302). *Viscera*, 'innards,' appears abruptly at the beginning of 554, with *primo*, 'first,' postponed, suggesting the suddenness of the symptoms in individuals. The second part of 555, with the cacophony of *est et*, the consonant clash of *et ductus*, the monosyllables on either side of the main caesura and the strong break between the fifth and sixth feet is as awkward and halting as the troubled breathing it describes. Lucretius speaks of 'the breath coming in short gasps, or heavy and laboured' (6.1186) among the signs of approaching death, but Ovid here seems closer to Vergil, whose animals also have trouble breathing (*Georgics* 3.505-6). Vergil, too, employs metrical and sound effects to imitate gasping: in *atque attractus ab alto / spiritus* there is marked alliteration of *a* as well as two elisions (one between *atque* and *attractus*, another between *oculi*, which precedes the quoted phrase, and *atque*).

While Vergil is content with one line that mimics the symptom of panting, Ovid has a second at 557. It is divided by caesurae into three parts, each a syllable longer than the last, and the alliteration of *a* is much like Vergil's. These effects in Ovid are as skilful as Vergil's, and Ovid draws attention to them by indulging in them twice. His inclusion of this symptom among the very few that he gives is perhaps motivated by a desire to show off his skill, even to challenge Vergil, in adapting form to content. The phrase *aspera lingua* is taken verbatim from Vergil (3.508) and Lucretius (6.1149-50) (Anderson 302).

Exclusively Lucretian echoes are found in this passage also. Ovid's *torrentur* and *flammae* are reminiscent of Lucretius' *flagrabat stomacho flamma ut fornacibus intus* (6.1169), and the external symptom from Lucretius, *omne rubere corpus* (1166-7) informs Ovid's *indiciu[m] rubor est* (Vallillee 119). Moreover, of the forty words found in Lucretius' and Ovid's plague narratives but not in Vergil's, six occur in these four lines alone (Vallillee 119)⁹². Only six appear in the seventeen lines of Ovid's animal plague (536-552), which naturally depends more on Vergil (Vallillee 119). From this point on, in fact, Lucretius' influence becomes more evident not only in Ovid's phrasing and vocabulary, but also in the order of his narration (Vallillee 119).

Non stratum, non ulla pati velamina possunt,
 Dura sed in terra ponunt praecordia, nec fit
 Corpus humo gelidum, sed humus de corpore fervet,
 Nec moderator adest, inque ipsos saeva medentes
 Erumpit clades, obsuntque auctoribus artes. (558-62)

(They can endure no covering nor any clothing, but lay their bony⁹³
 breasts on the earth, and the body is not cooled by the ground, but the
 ground grows warm from the body. Nor is any helper at hand; the cruel
 calamity breaks out against the doctors themselves, and their skills harm
 the experts.)

The patient's inability to withstand any covering is mentioned vaguely in Lucretius (6.1170-1), but Ovid appears here to be drawing directly from Thucydides, who

tells us that 'people could not bear the touch even indeed of the lightest linen clothing, but wanted to be completely naked' (2.49.5) (Anderson 302). Ovid invents their desire to lie on the ground and the unexpected consequence that the ground grows warm rather than the bodies being cooled. This witty and rather silly paradox is described in a line beginning with three dactyls, which stand out in contrast to the heavily spondaic line preceding (DSSS), and whose lightness is appropriate to the playful concept. The chiasmic ordering of *corpus humo...humus de corpore* emphasises the paradox.

The next detail (560-2) derives partly from Thucydides (2.47.4), who tells us that physicians are infected most of all, and who found it poignant enough to put into his general introduction of the Athenian plague. Ovid appears to conflate the doctors' illness with Vergil's idea that 'the remedies sought work harm' (*Georgics* 3.549), and to come up with something new: the doctors treat themselves and do more harm than good (Anderson 303). At first glance it appears that Ovid simply reproduces Thucydides' point and that the doctors are harmed by their attendance on the sick. But it is their 'skills' (*artes*), not their bedside assistance, which harm them. Furthermore, we have just been told that 'no helper is at hand' who might become infected: that is, no doctor is at hand, for we soon learn (563) that other people tend to the sick. The clause indicating the absence of doctors is connected to the next, 'the cruel calamity breaks out against the doctors themselves,' not by an explanatory conjunction (*e.g. nam*) but by a simple connective (*-que*).

In other words, we are given no reason to believe that the lack of helpers is owing to the doctors' deaths or that these deaths are caused by the doctors' contact with patients. Instead, and contrary to our expectations, we learn that the doctors are avoiding patients altogether and are plying their skills only on themselves with adverse effect. Ovid's treatment of this inherited detail, then, conforms to his practice throughout the plague passage: he undermines our expectations with a neat twist on conventional material, achieving a comical but slightly unsettling effect. Bömer (344) notes a 'similar pictorial usage'⁹⁴ in Lucretius' *prorumpitur in mare venti vis* (6.436-7) and Ovid's *inque ipsos saeva medentes / erumpit clades* (561-2).

Quo propior quisque est servitque fidelius aegro,

In partem leti citius venit, utque salutis

Spes abiit finemque vident in funere morbi,

Indulgent animis et nulla, quid utile, cura est:

Utile enim nihil est. (563-7)

(The closer and more faithfully each tends to the sick, the more quickly he comes into his share of death, and when hope of salvation is gone and people see the disease ending only in a funeral, they yield to their desires; they do not care what might help, for nothing helps.)

Ovid borrows from Thucydides (51.5) and Lucretius (6.1243-5) the detail that those who braved the fear of contagion were repaid only by a quicker death. He leaves out, however, Lucretius' moralising point that those who refused to visit the sick out of

fear and excessive love of life died anyway, and shamefully (Anderson 303). Also from Thucydides, but going back to the origins of the plague narrative in Homer, is the theme of the demoralisation and lawlessness of the afflicted. Ovid seems to touch on this theme in the vague phrase *indulgent animis*, 'they yield to their desires' (566-7). As it turns out, however (567-9), the extent of their recklessness is to flock, presumably naked (558-9), around any available source of water (Anderson 303-4).

Alternatively, *indulgent animis* may simply stand on its own. Aeacus is narrating the death of his former subjects to a visiting dignitary, and so may be inclined to maintain a tactful silence on the details of their animal indulgences. This line takes on a dirge-like tone in its second half by means of *u* repeated in the longum of the last three feet and an emphatic bucolic diaeresis. Here he recounts his people's despair, and justifies it: 'for nothing helps.' The subject of *vident*, 'see,' and *indulgent*, 'yield to,' is left unexpressed, perhaps to suggest the anonymity of the victims amid their vast number. Thucydides (2.52.2) also uses this device in his account of the plague, using genitive absolutes without accompanying nouns and finite verbs without expressed subjects (Rusten 190).

Passim positoque pudore

Fontibus et fluviis puteisque capacibus haerent,

Nec sitis est extincta prius quam vita bibendo;

Inde graves multi nequeunt consurgere et ipsis

Inmoriuntur aquis; aliquis tamen haurit et illas.

(567-71)

(Everywhere, propriety forgotten, they linger at springs, streams and deep wells, and life before thirst is quenched as they drink. Under their burden, many cannot rise from there and die in the very waters; but people drink even these.)

The subject of the verbs remains unexpressed. 567 is an elegant rising three-folder, all in dactyls, following on the 'excessive alliteration of *ps*' (Anderson 304) in the second half of the preceding line: 'Ovid plainly intends to be clever here' (Anderson 304). The cleverness extends to the zeugma in 569, and to the very idea that people can drink themselves to death with water. None of this can be taken seriously; what comes out most in these lines is not pathos but the obvious enjoyment with which Ovid writes them. His enjoyment is perhaps of a particularly mischievous and iconoclastic nature in the phrase *passim positoque pudore*, whose 'excessive alliteration of *ps*' is not without Lucretian precedent in such phrases as *per populi passim loca prompta* (6.1267 - note especially *passim*) and *paedore et pannis cooperta perire* (6.1269).

Extreme thirst is a symptom in Thucydides' plague, and Thucydides tells us that it caused in patients a strong desire 'to plunge into cold water. Many of the sick who were uncared for actually did so, plunging into the water-tanks in an effort to relieve a thirst which was unquenchable; for it was just the same with them whether they drank much or little' (2.49.5). Lucretius reproduces these details in his version of the Athenian plague, but in terms which lead Commager (112) to see this unquenchable thirst as symbolic:

'The only precedent for the burning thirst of the Athenians is to be found in those suffering from the diseases of fear or desire.'

Both Thucydides and Lucretius talk about the victims' thirst in the context of the burning heat which leads them to spurn all coverings. In Ovid, however, the latter is described several lines earlier, before the intervening discussion of the absence of doctors, the quicker deaths of those who attend the sick and the people's demoralisation. He seems, with the phrase *positoque pudore*, 'propriety forgotten,' to consider the thirst and the heedless quest to quench it as part of the social collapse which has so far been a feature of all the plague narratives discussed in this paper. Ridicule of Aeacus' prudishness is one possible explanation, another is simply that Ovid is not concerned to follow the sequence of his models strictly. Vallillee (120) suggests that Ovid was so taken with an image from Lucretius, *in fluvios partim gelidos ardentia morbo / membra dabant nudum iacentes corpus in undas*, 'Some of the sufferers would immerse their fevered limbs in chilly streams, flinging their bodies naked into the waves' (6.1172-3), as to include it among 'the last, most desperate expedients.'

Ovid certainly seems to have had Lucretius on his mind in these lines, since he conflates here two scenes from Lucretius: 6.1172-7, which describes the general effects of fever and thirst, and 6.1264-66, where Lucretius depicts the abundance of corpses at the public fountains (Vallillee 121). Verbal echoes and equivalents from Lucretius are therefore prevalent: *passim* for *multi* (Lucretius 6.1174), *fluviis puteisque* for *fluvios*. . .

putealibus (Lucretius 6.1172-4), *multi* . . . *ipsis* for *multi* . . . *ipso* (Lucretius 6.1274-5) (Vallillee 121).

Ovid, however, departs from Thucydides and Lucretius, who speak of people throwing themselves into wells, in having the victims drown in the waters they are drinking. Lucretius has people dying 'by the excessive sweetness of the water' (6.1265-6), but Ovid's interpretation of this rather vague phrase, is explicit (Vallillee 121). More disturbingly, Ovid has others so thirsty as to drink the same water, oblivious to the corpses lying therein. In this we see once again Ovid's delight in shocking and revolting his audience: 'Nor would either [Thucydides or Lucretius] have tried such a rhetorical final hemistich as Ovid does in 571' (Anderson 304).

Tantaque sunt miseris invisi taedia lecti:

Prosiliunt aut, si prohibent consistere vires,

Corpora devolvunt in humum fugiuntque penates

Quisque suos, sua cuique domus funesta videtur

Et, quia causa latet, locus est in crimine parvus. (572-6)

(So great are the torments of the hated sickbed to the afflicted that they jump out, or, if strength is lacking to stand, roll their bodies onto the ground. Each flees his own house, to each his home seems deadly, and since the cause is unknown, they blame tight quarters.)

Part of the horror of Thucydides' Athenian plague arises from the crowded conditions of that city caused by the Peloponnesian war. Lucretius, wishing to universalise his plague, had to invent reasons for this crowding without bringing in Thucydides' specific causes. Ovid, too, must invent a reason for the crowded streets of Aegina. He therefore 'weakly suggests,' according to Vallillee (124), that the victims are desperate to flee their beds and homes. If this is indeed Ovid's way of accounting for the street scenes which follow, it is not the first time he has concocted a flimsy premise for the sake of a dramatic image (cf. the 'scientific' causes of his plague, especially the snakes).

The pathetic image of sick people 'rolling around' in their weakened condition goes back to Thucydides (2.52.2), 'they rolled around in the streets'⁹⁵ (*en tais hodois ekalindounto*), through Lucretius (6.1264-5), 'bodies rolled forth over the road'⁹⁶ (*viam per proque voluta / corpora*). The pathos in Ovid, however, is lost in the comical image of these sickly renegades rolling themselves not only out of bed but out into the streets (Anderson 304). *Fugiuntque penates* achieves a significant double meaning, since *penates* originally meant 'household gods,' and then 'home' by metonymy. The people are therefore fleeing not only the confines of their home but the apparent ill-will of their household gods (Anderson 304). The true cause of the plague, Juno's absurd lust for vengeance, is still unknown (576), but the Aeginetans are at this point aware that such an affliction can only be divinely sent. The heightened panic resulting from ignorance of the plague's cause is part of the plague narrative convention, and has the added advantage for

Ovid of allowing him this play on words. To emphasise the people's confusion another physical cause is adduced, namely the closeness of their living quarters.

Semianimes errare viis, dum stare valebant,
 Adspiceres, flentes alios terraque iacentes
 Lassaue versantes supremo lumina motu
 Membraque pendentis tendunt ad sidera caeli,
 Hic illic, ubi mors deprenderat, exhalantes. (576-81)

(You could see the half-living wander the streets, as long as they could stand, and others weeping and lying on the ground: rolling their weary eyes with a final effort they stretch their limbs to the stars in the heavy sky, breathing their last here or there, wherever death had seized them.)

With these lines Aeacus concludes his description of the dying; his sorrow is emphasised by the abundance of spondees in 579-80 and by the metrical effects of the concluding line, 582. This line has a staggering rhythm, with a monosyllabic first word, a monosyllable (*mors*, 'death' - emphasised by its position) before the main caesura, and strong breaks in the second and fourth foot. The latter (bucolic diaeresis) focuses attention on the line's most unusual feature, a spondaic fifth foot,⁹⁷ which mimics the drawn-out dying gasp denoted by *exhalantes* and which lends a conclusive force to this section of the narrative.

The use of the potential subjunctive of the second person singular in *adspiceres*, 'you could see,' is a particularly Lucretian device, perhaps suggested most immediately by Lucretius 6.1268, *videres*, 'you could see,' since from this line also comes *semianimes* (*sem(i)animo* in Lucretius), 'half-living' (Anderson 305). Lucretius employs this term to translate Thucydides' *hēmithnētes*⁹⁸ (2.52.2), and it is ghoulish enough for Ovid to retain. Lucretius (6.1181) adds the symptom of rolling eyes to those of Thucydides, attributing it to sleeplessness. Unburdened by concern for an accurate or logical symptomatology, Ovid makes it instead a dramatic expression of anguish as death finally comes, along with the stretching out of hands to the sky. The latter is a 'gesture of mute appeal, and, as usual in Ovid, futile' (Anderson 305).

Quid mihi tunc animi fuit? An, quod debuit esse,
 Ut vitam odissem et cuperem pars esse meorum?
 Quo se cumque acies oculorum flexerat, illic
 Vulgus erat stratum, veluti cum putria motis
 Poma cadunt ramis agitataque ilice glandes. (582-6)

(What thoughts did I have then? Did I, as I was bound to, hate life
 and long to share my people's fate? Wherever the sight of my eyes
 had turned, a crowd was strewn about there, as when rotten fruit
 falls from shaken boughs, or acorns from a jostled oak.)

The dactyls of 582 contrast sharply with the spondaic line previous, marking the transition to a new sequence. It is as though Aeacus suddenly snaps out of his mournful

reminiscence to address his audience directly. With these two rhetorical questions we are reminded of Aeacus' presence as narrator, as if Ovid wishes emphatically to disclaim responsibility for the bathetic similes that follow. Vergil also employs two rhetorical questions to punctuate his plague narrative (*Georgics* 3.525-6); Ovid adds a third a few lines later (588-9). The comparison between the accumulated dead bodies and heaps of rotten fruit or acorns is both grotesque and comically inappropriate. It derives from the classical trope comparing the ageing and death of humans with the withering and falling of leaves (Bömer 348),⁹⁹ treated here with characteristic Ovidian parody.

Templa vides contra gradibus sublimia longis

(Iuppiter illa tenet): quis non altaribus illis

Inrita tura dedit? Quotiens pro coniuge coniunx,

Pro gnato genitor, dum verba precantia dicit,

Non exoratis animam finivit in aris,

Inque manu turis pars inconsumpta reperta est! (587-92)

(You see the high temple over there with long steps (it is Jupiter's): who has not offered futile incense on those altars? How often has spouse for spouse, father for son, while speaking words of prayer, died on the heedless altars, the unburned remainder of incense found in their hands!)

Having addressed his visitor in the present tense (*vides*, 'you see'), Aeacus begins a series of present perfects (*e.g. dedit*, 'has offered') and presents (*e.g. dicit*, 'speaks'), which emphasise the vividness of his recollections. Also in the name of vividness, Ovid

has Aeacus pointing out nearby a temple which was actually three hours away by foot (Bömer 349). The apparent heedlessness of the gods is a common motif in plague narratives. Ovid therefore includes it here, although it creates an incongruity: Jupiter is deaf to prayer in these lines, but will ultimately grant Aeacus' wish later on.

Thucydides (2.52.3) and Lucretius (1272-5) mention that the temples were full of dead bodies. In Thucydides this is because of the crowded conditions of the city, the need to find room for everyone and the lack of concern for normal religious practice, which would have prevented people from living (and dying) in temples. Lucretius adopts the corpse-filled temples of Thucydides, but is vague about the reasons for this situation. Ovid, however, prefers to imagine that people are simply dropping dead in the temples as they pray. The suddenness of death (as in the case of the bulls) and the futility of prayer are efficiently combined in this way. Supplication in vain (cf. 580) is a favourite theme: 'Ovid likes the irony of futile prayer' (Anderson 305). Here it is emphasised by the *inrita tura*, 'futile incense,' and the *non exoratae arae*, 'heedless altars.' Ovid is able in this scene to indulge his imagination and his cleverness; the detail of the unconsumed stub of incense in the dead suppliant's hand is particularly striking,¹⁰⁰ described in a line heavy with spondees (DSSS). Departing from Lucretius and Thucydides, Ovid takes his cue in 589-92 from Vergil. The interrupted religious rites of Vergil's plague, where the deaths of animals prevent proper religious observance, are extended so as to include humans dying in mid-prayer. He turns to Vergil's failed animal sacrifices next.

Admoti quotiens templis, dum vota sacerdos

Concipit et fundit purum inter cornua vinum,
 Haud exspectato ceciderunt vulnere tauri!
 Ipse ego sacra Iovi pro me patriaue tribusque
 Cum facerem natis, mugitus victima diros
 Edidit et subito conlapsa sine ictibus ullis
 Exiguo tinxit subiectos sanguine cultros.
 Exta quoque aegra notas veri monitusque deorum
 Perdiderant: tristes penetrant ad viscera morbi. (593-601)

(How often, led to the temple, while the priest utters prayers and pours
 pure wine between their horns, have bulls dropped dead from an
 unexpected wound! While I myself performed Jove's rites for me, my
 fatherland and my three sons, the victim gave a frightful lowing, and,
 suddenly collapsing without a blow, wet the waiting knives with a mere
 trickle of blood. The ravaged entrails too had lost the signs of truth and the
 warnings of gods: this sorrowful sickness penetrates to the very core.)

593-5 are slow and heavy, with spondees predominating (SDSS / DSSS / SSDS)
 and with consonant clash throughout, creating an appropriately ominous tone. The
 'wound' which fells the bulls is of course not a wound but the plague. It is 'unexpected'
 both because it anticipates the expected blow of the sacrificial mallet and because the bull
 is apparently in good health - another example of the miraculous suddenness of the deaths
 seen throughout Aegina's plague. Ovid obviously draws here on Vergil's scene of the
 prematurely dying sacrificial victim (*Georgics* 3.486-8).

In thought and in syntax (Vallillee 113) he follows his model closely: *Saepe in honore deum medio stans hostia ad aram, / Lanea dum nivea circumdatur infula vitta, / inter cunctantis cecidit moribunda ministros* ('Often in the midst of divine rites, the victim, standing by the altar, even as the woollen fillet's snowy band was passed round its brow, fell in death's throes amid the tardy ministrants') (*Georgics* 3.486-8). But Ovid alters Vergil's account in several characteristic ways. He emphasises the suddenness of the death (Anderson 306): although Vergil's bull certainly dies prematurely, there is no indication that this death is unforeseen, and when it falls to the ground it is *moribunda*, 'about to die.' Ovid's tone, described above, is exaggerated in comparison to Vergil's; Vergil's metrical pattern in the three lines quoted is DDDS / DDSD / SSDD - dactyls preponderate, and spondees are applied judiciously. Finally, there is the typically Ovidian witticism in the 'unexpected wound.'

Ovid's imitation of Vergil continues in 596-601. Vergil writes:

Aut si quam ferro mactaverat ante sacerdos,
 Inde neque impositis ardent altaria fibris,
 Nec responsa potest consultus reddere vates,
 Ac vix suppositi tinguntur sanguine cultri
 Summaque ieiuna sanie infuscatur harena. (*Georgics* 3.489-3)

(Or if, before that, the priest had slain a victim with the knife, yet the altars blazed not therewith, as the entrails were laid on; the seer, when consulted,

could give no response; the knife beneath the throat is scarce stained with blood, and only the surface sand is darkened with the thin gore.)

Vergil's *sacerdos*, 'priest,' becomes Aeacus himself in Ovid's account; more immediacy is achieved by the narrator's including himself in his story. It is perhaps with a wink that Ovid has Aeacus praying for, in order, himself, his 'fatherland' (not necessarily his people) and his sons - perhaps he is not the ideal ruler and father we might have expected. As it turns out, Aeacus does survive, as does Aegina itself and Aeacus' three sons. The rest of the Aeginetans, not being children of Jupiter and therefore not having their prayers answered by him, are doomed. The idea conforms to Ovid's irreverent attitude to the gods throughout the *Metamorphoses*.

Vergilian echoes extend to the composition and vocabulary of 599, closely modelled on *Georgics* 3.492 (Anderson 306); both lines are marked also by three spondees and bucolic diaeresis. Ovid chooses to leave out of these lines, however, Vergil's detail that only when the animal lived to be sacrificed would its throat be cut and the lack of blood be noticed. Ovid's victims apparently all die before sacrifice, and again suddenly (*subito*, 599), for his is a purely dramatic and miraculous plague.

Ante sacros vidi proiecta cadavera postes;

Ante ipsas, quo mors foret invidiosior, aras

Pars animam laqueo claudunt mortisque timorem

Morte fugant ultroque vocant venientia fata.

(602-5)

(I have seen corpses thrown down before the sacred doors; before the very altars, to make their deaths more spiteful, some choke off their breath with a noose; they banish the fear of death through death and willingly summon their approaching doom.)

The conventional failure of religion to ward off the plague has shocking consequences in Ovid. Lucretius (1272-5), following Thucydides (2.52.3), describes temples full of corpses, though as noted above, this is a consequence of people's being quartered there. Ovid has corpses 'thrown down' before the temple; this could be taken to mean that people have thrown themselves down there before dying, but Aeacus has already spoken of those who died at the altars (591), and Lucretius in his plague passage (6.1155) uses the very same phrase, *proiecta cadavera*, even at the same line position, to denote bodies thrown out unburied. Aeacus' point, therefore, is more serious than that people die at the temple; he is saying that the living dump the bodies of the dead in front of the temple in angry spite at the gods' indifference. Note that Ovid has the corpses dumped 'before the sacred doors,' while in Lucretius and Thucydides the Athenians die inside their temples. This further distinguishes between those who die in the temple (as at 591) and those whose bodies are dumped there, and allows Ovid the emphatic parallelism of *ante sacros. . . postes / ante ipsas. . . aras* (602-3).

This interpretation is confirmed by the next detail, even more horrific: people hang themselves before the very altars 'so that their death [will] be more spiteful' (*quo mors foret invidiosior*). The people's spite is Ovid's own invention, typically extreme, but

in having them hang themselves out of fear he takes his cue from Lucretius (Anderson 306). The latter, altering a detail from Thucydides (2.49.8), speaks of men 'in their overwhelming dread of death' having themselves castrated (1208); that they are driven to such extremes by fear is emphasised a few lines later: 'so completely were they mastered by the dire dread of death' (1212). In spite of the apparent completeness of fear's mastery in Lucretius, Ovid manages to take it further, having people kill rather than just mutilate themselves in fear of death. He thereby manages not only to outdo Lucretius on Lucretius' own terms, but also to create a witty paradox, complete with clever wordplay in *mortisque timorem / morte* (604-5).

Aeacus' horror at the sacrilege is emphasised by the repetition of *ante* at the beginning of successive lines (602-3, see above), by the first person verb *vidi*, 'I have seen,' not used elsewhere, though Aeacus witnessed everything else he describes, and by the isolation at line's end (603) of *aras*, 'altars,' separated from its modifier *ipsas* by the purpose clause *quo. . . invidiosior*. The latter, the most shocking part, is especially sonorous with its 5 *os* and with *mors* emphasised before the caesura (cf. 581). With these lines and the next five Aeacus reaches the climax of his story; the metre becomes more dactylic and the narration more compressed as the final chaos of Aegina is recounted.

Corpora missa neci nullis de more feruntur

Funeribus: neque enim capiebant funera portae;

Aut inhumata premunt terras aut dantur in altis

Indotata rogos. Et iam reverentia nulla est,

Deque rogis pugnant alienisque ignibus ardent. (606-10)

(Dead bodies are seen off with no customary funerals, for the city gates could not accommodate so many processions; either they lie on the ground or are given without ceremony to pyres piled high. And soon there is no decency: they fight over pyres and burn in others' flames.)

From Sophocles (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 180), Thucydides (2.52.4) and Lucretius (1278ff.) comes the motif of neglected or perverted burial customs. Ovid says first that there are funerals, but that they are of an unprecedented kind, and for a surprising reason. Whereas Thucydides points to the scarcity of people and resources as the cause of negligence, Ovid tells us that the city gates, out of which the body and its mourners would normally pass, are clogged with processions. This makes for the ludicrous image of dozens of funeral parties entangled in an unseemly traffic jam, jostling to get out. The image itself is apparently utmost in Ovid's mind, since he leaves it unclear whether the inadequate city gates are the cause of the following details, or whether the various modes of burial are to be seen as simultaneous. The overall impression of chaos, which is the point here, is clear enough however.

Several echoes of Lucretius occur in this passage: *corpora. . . inhumata premunt terras*, 'bodies lie unburied on the earth' (608), cf. Lucretius 6.1215: *cum inhumata iacerent corpora*, 'although bodies lay unburied'; *reverentia nulla est*, 'soon there is no reverence' (609), cf. Lucretius 6.1276-7: *nec iam religio divum nec numina magni / pendebantur*, 'now neither respect for the gods nor divine power were much valued';

deque rogis pignant alienisque ignibus ardent, 'they fight over pyres and burn in others' flames' (610), cf. Lucretius 6.1283-6: *aliena rogorum / insuper extracta. . . rixantes*, 'fighting over the built pyres of others.'¹⁰¹

Ovid's version of this last idea is especially interesting, as it involves a sophisticated play on words. *Deque rogis pignant alienisque ignibus ardent* (610) has two verbs with unexpressed subjects; with nothing to indicate a change of subject, the natural tendency is to supply the same subject for both. If one imagines that 'the living' is the subject of both verbs, the sentence means 'they fight over pyres and burn for [i.e. 'desire'] the fires of others.' This involves a pun on *ardent*, 'burn.' If, on the other hand 'the dead' is taken to be the subject, it means 'they fight over pyres and burn on the fires of others.' In this case we have the gruesomely comical image of battling corpses. Thirdly, there is Anderson's interpretation: 'It is perhaps to heighten the sense of disorder that he abruptly changes subjects in 610 without expressly telling us that in *piignant* he talks of the living mourners, in *ardent* of the corpses' (307).¹⁰² Still another possibility is that there is essentially no differentiation between living and dead: they fight over pyres and they die in others' fires. Those who fight will soon, perhaps immediately, themselves be burning, the object of other people's fights. The parallelism of the clauses, one on either side of the caesura, may be intended to reflect this. The multiplicity of possibilities in this short sentence is itself suggestive of Ovid's approach; it is consistent with Ovid's treatment of his sources in the plague narrative in that he takes a straightforward, serious idea from Lucretius and, through verbal dexterity, make it both clever and playful.

Qui lacrimant, desunt, indefletaeque vagantur

Natorumque virumque animae iuvenumque senumque,

Nec locus in tumulos, nec sufficit arbor in ignes. (611-13).

(There are none to weep, and unmourned wander the souls of children, husbands, youths and elders. There is no room for their burial mounds, nor wood enough for their fires.)

These three lines complete Ovid's plague narrative. In Thucydides' account (2.51.5) we learn that in some cases 'members of the household were so overwhelmed by the weight of their calamities that they had actually given up the usual practice of making laments for the dead,' though the point is that others from outside the household would still visit, as a matter of propriety, and presumably make laments. In Ovid the lack of proper mourning is a result of the great number of the dead. In this he echoes Sophocles: 'unpitied [the city's] children lie on the ground, spreading pestilence, with none to mourn' (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 180, trans. Jebb). Aeacus' tone in reporting this detail is suitably (perhaps paradoxically) mournful: an initial dactyl gives way to three spondees; the line consists of only five words, including *indefletaeque* (found only here in Latin - Bömer 355), comprising five syllables, four of which are long. *Qui lacrimant* 'those who may weep,' sets up an expectation at the beginning of 611 that there are mourners, but it is followed by *desunt*, 'are absent,' isolated by consonant clash and by caesurae on either side: this one word disappoints our expectation and robs the scene of its last possible concession to burial custom.

The image of wandering ghosts represents a conscious departure from Ovid's more rationalistic models, and a reminder that this is a mythical plague. It takes one step further Sophocles' image of bodies lying unburied and unlamented. 612 is highly patterned, again containing only five words, but with the opposite metre (SDDD) to the line previous (DSSS); rather than lightening the mood, the dactyls, along with the unusual elision across the caesura and polysyndeton, emphasise the great number of wandering ghosts and the relentlessness of death. *Animae*, 'souls,' stands as the central word of the line, flanked by two pairs of nouns in the genitive plural (Anderson 307). The effect of the four *-umques* (cf. 536) is lugubrious in the extreme.

Ovid omits any specifically female ghosts, but manages to include all ages of men: children, youths, mature and old men (Anderson 307-8); the mention of 'children and fathers' recalls a detail of Lucretius: 'Sometimes you might see the lifeless bodies of parents stretched above lifeless children, or children in turn gasping out their lives above the corpses of their prostrate parents' (6.1256-8). Lucretius, of course, does not believe in souls that survive our bodies; Ovid is free of the constraints of Epicurean doctrine, and finds in wandering ghosts a suitably dramatic image.

The hyperbole reaches its peak with the last line, where Aeacus claims that there were so many dead bodies that the few survivors (perhaps only Aeacus and his sons) could not find enough room to build burial mounds for all of them, or enough trees for their pyres. The line is neatly divided by the caesura into two halves, each beginning with *nec*, 'nor,' and each ending with parallel phrases: *locus in tumulos. . . arbor in ignes*,

'space for mounds. . . trees for fires.' The earth itself is exhausted by this plague. These final three lines of Ovid's plague, in their artificiality (even to the invented word *indefletaeque*), their hyperbole and the abundance of ghosts which rise from Lucretius' and Sophocles' corpses, stand as a fitting end to what is ultimately an elaborate display of technique, wit and parody.

Conclusion

The tradition of plague narratives in classical literature begins with Homer's *Iliad*. The key elements of the *Iliad*'s plague narrative are as follows. It is a punishment sent by a god. It begins by infecting animals and progresses to humans. Through an unprecedented number of deaths it demoralises the afflicted community, and this leads to the collapse of social norms. It occurs in a time of war. It also serves several functions as a narrative device. For one, it revolves around a particular hero, Achilles, and magnifies his importance. It also sets the plot in motion by marking a change in established circumstances and establishes a particular mood. Homer's plague, then, is significant in itself and integral to the work as a whole. It may be based on an actual, though distantly remembered, plague, but its literary features are clearly paramount.

Sophocles and his Athenian audience of the fifth-century BC were familiar with Homer's poetry. Furthermore they had recently experienced a devastating plague when Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* was produced. Homeric and original elements are therefore to be found in Sophocles' plague narrative. Like Homer's, it describes a plague sent as divine punishment. The connection between plague and war is maintained through the vocabulary of Sophocles' plague narrative and in the plague's attribution to Ares (god of war). It revolves around a particular hero, Oedipus, and emphasises his grandeur. The Thebans are driven by desperation to futile appeals to the gods and by extremity to the negligence of burial customs. Sophocles maintains Homer's escalation from animals to human, but with the addition of crops. As a narrative device, Sophocles' plague establishes a mood of foreboding and initiates the plot. New in Sophocles are the failure

of human thought in combatting the plague, particularly relevant to the rationalistic movement in Athens, and a universalising tendency.

Thucydides lived through the same real-life Athenian plague as Sophocles and was also familiar with Homer. Moreover, he likely attended the production of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. To Homer's influence and to his own experience of plague, he was therefore able to add his observation of the literary uses to which Sophocles put his plague, if these were not already apparent to Thucydides' keen mind. His is a consciously rational and historical work, but with many literary qualities. The connection between plague and war is dictated by the historical circumstances he describes in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but the juxtaposition between Pericles' idealistic funeral oration and the plague narrative capitalises on the plague narrative's power to mark a major turning point. In Thucydides the plague narrative does not initiate the plot, but signals the Athenians' drastic change of fortune in the war.

He includes in his account his predecessors' reference to animals, with the further point that humans are reduced to animalistic behaviour. Thucydides does not attribute the plague to a god, but casts it as a conflict between the rational and the irrational. The rational includes human skill, which is emphatically defeated as in Sophocles. Moreover, popular opinion that the plague is indeed divinely sent is included, though without the historian's own endorsement. With the triumph of irrationality comes social collapse and the abandonment of law, burial customs and finally religion.

It is difficult to say to what extent Sophocles consciously adapts Homer, or Thucydides Sophocles. Lucretius, however, in *De Rerum Natura* clearly adopts and translates Thucydides' plague narrative almost verbatim. Nevertheless, several important differences make themselves felt in Lucretius. His approach, like Thucydides', is scientific, at least in the sense that he espouses a rationalistic and empirical philosophy in his poem. This philosophy blames much of human suffering on the emotions of fear and desire. These are therefore accentuated in Lucretius, who tends to interpret details from Thucydides in moral terms.

The plague, or rather the suffering which arises from the plague, represents a form of punishment in Lucretius, but not from the gods. It is instead the punishment resulting from excessive fear and desire. Among the plague's effects are the familiar social collapse and neglect of burial customs. In order to make the lesson more widely applicable and in spite of the plague's ostensible location in Athens, Lucretius tends to universalise what he describes. As a narrative device, the plague comes at the end of Lucretius' poem, where it symbolises universal dissolution. In this it acts, as in the previous plague narratives, as the marker of a change in era.

Vergil makes it clear through verbal, syntactical and imagistic echoes of Lucretius that he is consciously imitating the latter. This imitation, however, is intended to draw attention to the essential philosophical difference between the two. Vergil subverts Lucretius' Epicureanism in order to assert the supremacy of traditional Roman piety. Towards this end, Vergil subtly blends the conventional element of divine punishment

with the scientific causes to which Lucretius attributes the outbreak of plague. Like his predecessors, Vergil describes the failure of human skill in the face of plague. The effect on animals is naturally considered, since Vergil's plague is an epizootic. Vergil's animals, however, are heavily anthropomorphised, and a conventional feature of human plagues, social collapse, is applied to animals. Human civilisation itself fails when the animals are all gone, and people are reduced to performing the tasks of their former helpers.

Religious ritual, whose neglect is in fact the cause of the plague, also fails.

Vergil's plague again marks the end of an era, since agriculture and therefore civilisation in Noricum come to an end through its ravages. The narrative function of Vergil's plague is different from those of his predecessors in that it is one of several equal elements in the overall structure of the *Georgics*. In particular, it acts as a parallel and a foil to the story of Aristaeus at the end of the poem. Nevertheless, Vergil's plague narrative, like his predecessors', is an integral part of the whole work.

In this respect Ovid departs most significantly from the tradition as it has reached him: his Aeginetan plague narrative is not an integral part of the whole, but is instead a digression within a digression within a digression from the main narrative sequence. Its inclusion is entirely artificial. Moreover the artificiality of its inclusion leads to incongruities, but these are ignored in favour of the opportunities for parody which the conventions of the plague narrative provide. For with Lucretius and Vergil the plague narrative does indeed become a recognisable convention in Latin poetry. It is conventional, but still vital. With Ovid, however, the convention becomes a cliché. Each

of the plague narratives from Homer to Vergil is emotionally potent and narratively significant, reflecting, illustrating or establishing themes important to the work as a whole. This is clearly not the case in Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses*, though entertaining and technically brilliant, has no intellectual, philosophical, religious or ideological themes to speak of. His plague narrative, like the *Metamorphoses* in general, is heavy with allusion and reference to the work of his predecessors. Nearly every line is based on these, with particular reliance on Lucretius and Vergil, but with elements also of Homer, Sophocles and Thucydides.

All of the conventional elements of the plague narrative, therefore, can be found in Ovid. The plague at Aegina is sent as a divine punishment but also partakes of several apparently conflicting 'scientific' causes. Human skill fails against it as it progresses from animals to humans, from country to city. Physicians and those who attend the sick die more quickly than others, but for different reasons. Lawlessness ensues, religion fails, and customary burial becomes impossible. All of which is reported by the 'heroic' character around whom the story revolves, Aeacus. The latter is reminiscent of Homer's Nestor, prone to embellishment and slightly ridiculous.

The manner in which he treats all of these conventional details, however, is what distinguishes Ovid from a mere hack. The technical dexterity of his hexameters, the plays on words, and the wit are distinctly his. He emphasises the miraculous in his account, in keeping with the rest of the *Metamorphoses*, and therefore exaggerates the suddenness and magnitude of the plague's effects. He takes the basic features of a scene from one of

his predecessors, reduces it to its essential parts and exaggerates these. Often he will cap the details of his predecessors with one of his own. This will generally be particularly gruesome, absurd or otherwise extreme, because of both the poet's own tendencies and the nature of one-upmanship.

Ovid grants himself the freedom to exaggerate and to ignore inconsistencies through his mythological setting and his use of a narrator. This narrator speaks in a tone noticeably different from that found generally in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's usually light and elegant verses become heavier with an increase in spondees. This reflects his conscious adoption of a Lucretian and Vergilian tone. It also imparts an incongruous gravity to the plague narrative which is regularly undermined by lines of outrageous elegance or wit, or by a ludicrous image. If Ovid's multiple influences occasionally lead him into incongruities, they also lead him into novelties, as in the image of doctors ignoring their patients to treat themselves, only to be further harmed by their own skills.

The emotional impact of Aeacus' story is minimal. The audience knows at the outset that a happy ending is in store, since Aeacus rules over a prospering city when he tells the story of the plague. Moreover, whatever damage is done by the plague is immediately mended by Jupiter's intervention. Furthermore, Ovid deliberately omits almost every touch of pathos from his adaptations of the plague narratives before him. What most interests him is the dramatic, whether it be an image, a turn of phrase, or a metrical effect. These, where they exist in his models, are highlighted and often embellished by Ovid. Where they do not, but where they are subtly suggested by his

models, Ovid's lurid imagination supplies them. By these various means, then, Ovid puts his irreverent mark on a literary tradition representing the soberest thought of the soberest thinkers over seven centuries, several genres, and two cultures.

Notes

¹ All translations of Homer in this paper are by Rieu, unless otherwise noted.

² The Assembly is called by Achilles at the prompting of Hera, who is moved to pity: 'she was anxious for the Greeks, because she saw them dying.' (*Iliad* 1.56, my translation)

³ This view of the plague episode's function explains why it contains no description of symptoms.

⁴ See also *Genesis* 6.5-7: 'And God seeing that the wickedness of men was great on the earth, and that all the thought of their heart was bent upon evil at all times, it repented him that he had made man on the earth. And being touched inwardly with sorrow of heart, he said: I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, from man even to beasts, from the creeping thing even to the fowls of the air...'

⁵ Trans. Jebb (adapted).

⁶ Trans. Jebb (adapted).

⁷ In not associating any particular god with the plague from the beginning, and in not attributing it to Apollo at all, the playwright makes the events of the story depend upon Oedipus' freewill; though Apollo is important to the plot, he cannot be considered the external factor, i.e. fate, which forces Oedipus' actions (Knox, *Thebes* 9-10).

⁸ There is room for doubt in Knox's precise dating of the play to 425 BC, (e.g. in Kamerbeek 28-9), but I accept his arguments without reservation at least in dating the play to after the first outbreak of plague at Athens (430 BC).

⁹ In Homer, we are given the order in which the different species are attacked; Sophocles lists them in ascending order, but they are not necessarily affected in that order. The effect is nevertheless the same.

¹⁰ The 'ubiquity and unceasing progress of the blight' are also emphasised by the repetition (epanaphora) of *phthinousa* ('perishing') at the beginning of ll. 25-6 (Kamerbeek 37).

¹¹ All translations of Thucydides in this paper are by Warner unless otherwise noted.

¹² *to eidos*: LSJ suggests the translation 'form, kind, nature' for this passage. In its four other instances in Thucydides, *eidos* means 'plan of action' or 'policy' (LSJ on 6.77.2 and 8.56.2), 'form of government' (Warner's translation at 8.90.1, not cited in LSJ) or 'situation' (3.62.3): this last is given by LSJ, citing only this passage; Warner has 'type of government' and A. W. Spratt (*Thucydides: Book III*. Pitt Press Series. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1896, p. 211) 'form of polity,' both of which seem preferable. It is worth noting that each of these other uses denotes a result of rational thought. Thucydides is unable to give a rational account of this disease because it is something beyond rationality (see below). With this in mind, a better translation might be 'pattern.'

¹³ On the identification of the disease, I follow Holladay and Poole's conclusion that it no longer exists, at least in the form in which it attacked Athens.

¹⁴ See Parry 113ff.

¹⁵ '[H]ere begins a tradition of plague-narratives,' says Rusten (179), ignoring Homer and Sophocles.

¹⁶ 'corpse' is the standard meaning, 'but *nekros* may refer to a body in its death throes' (Rusten 190, citing Euripides' *Rhesos* 789 and Antiphon 2.4.5)

¹⁷ The connection is found in Sophocles too: the Theban plague is sent by Ares, the god of war.

¹⁸ For examples of Thucydides' 'dramatic and imaginative' use of vocabulary, syntax and word order, see Parry (113-4), who contrasts as a typical example of the style of the Hippocratic corpus an extract from Epidemics I.

¹⁹ Unexpectedness: 'no pestilence of such extent nor any scourge so destructive of human lives is on record anywhere' (47.3), 'that year... happened to be unusually free from disease' (49.1); unpredictability: 'they at first had to treat it without knowing its nature' (47.4); suddenness: 'it suddenly (*exapinaios*) fell upon the city of Athens, and attacked (*hepsato*) first the inhabitants of the Piraeus...' (48.2), the metaphor of lightning in the verb *enkataskepsai*, 47.3, 'exaiphnes' (49.2), 'aiphnidios' (53.1).

²⁰ A mass grave dated to 430-426BC and identified as that of plague victims was excavated in Athens in 1994-5 (Axarlis)

²¹ His words for plague are *morbida vis* (6.955, 1092), *vis morborum* (1098) and *vis subita* (1282) (Vallillee 12). *Vis* basically denotes physical force: 'Physical strength exerted on an object..., force, violence' (OLD); 'force..., en particulier force exercée contre quelqu'un' (E-M). This choice of vocabulary is in keeping with Lucretius' purely physical model of the universe, in which all activity comes from the movement of atoms with and against one another.

²² Except perhaps in that Lucretius must create Latin equivalents for the terms he encounters in his Greek sources.

²³ 4.479-80: 'You will find, in fact, that the concept of truth was originated by the senses and that the senses cannot be rebutted' (Trans. Latham).

²⁴ One objection is that Lucretius has promised, at 5.155, to write at length about the home of the gods, and that no such description occurs; Bailey (35) wonders whether the

promise is in fact fulfilled by ll. 18-22 of book 3, which was written after book 5. To this Bright (623) adds that it would not be in keeping with Epicurean method to write of such imperceptible matters, and that the promised description might have been intended as a separate work. Nevertheless, book 6 was clearly intended to be the last one (6.92-5) and is already of a length comparable to the others; the addition of further (and irrelevant) material would be undesirable (Bailey 35).

²⁵ See also Fowler and Fowler.

²⁶ Less convincingly, Bright also points out 'suggestive sound-pattern parallels' between the opening of book Six and the beginning of the plague passage.

²⁷ *Brankhos*, (Thuc. 49.3), which may in fact be represented by *ulceribus vocis via saepta coibat* (1148) (Bright 610).

²⁸ All translations of Lucretius in this paper are by Latham except where noted.

²⁹ The translation is misleading: *steriskomenoi toutōn* means that they actually lost said body-parts. Rusten (186) says that the participle is causal: "many survived because they lost these parts."

³⁰ See, for example, 6.25: '[Epicurus] purged men's breasts with words of truth. He set bounds to desire and fear.'

³¹ My translation, deliberately literal.

³² My translation.

³³ Vallillee (40-42) rejects the theory of a Hippocratic source, except at 1192-6, where the symptoms 'are reminiscent of a corpse, rather than of a sick person' (41).

³⁴ Interpreting *kardia* in this way goes back to Galen (Vallillee 20); Page (100) argues against it.

³⁵ *Cor maestum* (1152), *anxius angor* (1158) and *ferro privati* (1209)

³⁶ My translation

³⁷ Perhaps also the 'streams' (1172), though Bright (619) acknowledges that these existed in Athens.

³⁸ Lines 477-566. The *Georgics* were written between 37 and 29 BC (Williams X).

³⁹ The translations in this sentence are mine. Translations of Vergil elsewhere in this paper are from Fairclough unless otherwise indicated.

⁴⁰ Or of the death of both bulls (see below, n. 9).

⁴¹ Noricum: a Celtic federal state south of the Danube, between Raetia and Pannonia, incorporated into the Roman Empire 16 BC (OCD). It equates roughly to modern-day Austria, though its description in Vergil seems also to include parts of modern Croatia and Slovenia.

⁴² Now the Timavo; it is at the head of the Adriatic, near Trieste.

⁴³ E.g. that Vergil may have relied on the account of a 'talkative old shepherd' (P.

Hanozin, *Les études classiques* 2 (1933): 946, cited at Harrison 6).

⁴⁴ See also West 71-2.

⁴⁵ Liebeschütz adduces Aristotle, *History of Animals* 588a ff. for the general principle (71, n. 5), and 571b and 572b as a source for *Georgics* 3.245-68, on the influence of Love on all creatures (67, n. 3).

⁴⁶ Harrison (17-18) understands the first part of this excerpt to apply to the death of one bull and the last to describe the death of the second. Though none of the commentaries or translations I consulted interprets the lines this way, it is certainly possible. For one thing, it is clear from the introduction (480) that no animals survive this plague; for another, *illis*

(527) seems to refer back to both bulls and makes more sense if they are both dead. The *animus* (521) should be that of the second bull, the most recently mentioned of the three beings involved. The lines in Lucretius (2.361-5) corresponding to 520-2 describe the feelings of a bereft mother, corresponding to those of the bereft second bull; these lines lead directly into the 'unstrung flanks' and 'drooping neck,' which ought therefore to belong to this second bull. There is also a structural parallelism which supports the idea: 515-7 show a 'tricolon decrescendo' in two and a half lines (two full lines followed by a half) pertaining to the first death, while 522-4 comprise a 'tricolon crescendo' in two and (not quite) a half lines (the partial line first followed by two full), pertaining to the second death. Gale (422) also interprets the passage this way.

⁴⁷ I have used West's translation here instead of Fairclough's; it is more literal and therefore better suited to the argument at this point.

⁴⁸ Tr. West (see previous note).

⁴⁹ I.e. the distribution of the disease, as opposed to its general nature as covered in the symptomatology. Symptoms are described, of course, in the case of each individual animal.

⁵⁰ On Vergil's 'deep-rooted conviction... of wine's capacity for destruction' see Harrison 14-15.

⁵¹ My translation.

⁵² For this *oppositio in imitando*, see also Farrell 86.

⁵³ Harrison (59, n. 67) adduces Livy 3.6.5, 4.9.3, 4.25.3, 4.30.11, 5.14.4, 7.2.2, 27.23.7, 40.37.2.

⁵⁴ The following five paragraphs represent a summary of the main points of Harrison's article. Several important elements must be left out here, and I would encourage the reader to consult the original, especially as Harrison confronts many traditional assumptions about this passage.

⁵⁵ Harrison (58, n. 63) cites Livy 21.63.13f., 27.26.13 and Julius Obsequens 17, 35, 52, 67.

⁵⁶ Gale (424, n. 51) dissents.

⁵⁷ I have adapted Harrison's translation.

⁵⁸ For examples of this ritual procession, see Harrison 61, n. 106.

⁵⁹ 2.380, 1.483, 1.491, 2.380, 3.565, 4.453.

⁶⁰ My translation.

⁶¹ See *e.g.* *Georgics* 1.5-42, 1.100, 1.338, 2.473, 2.527ff.

⁶² The proper method begins with seeking divine guidance in identifying the offence and expiating it (Harrison 28). Freudenburg also relies heavily on the Aristaeus episode to explain his somewhat different interpretation of the plague.

⁶³ Freudenburg (74) ends his article with this quotation and this thought; his conclusions, however, regarding Vergil's plague and its relationship to that of Lucretius are quite different from those of Harrison, whom I have mostly followed.

⁶⁴ I will be arguing later that Ovid, to whom the subtleties of the Latin language presented no obstacle, understood Vergil's plague in the manner I have been suggesting.

⁶⁵ For the problems involved in defining the genre of the *Metamorphoses*, see Kenney 432-4.

⁶⁶ A play on the Greek word for 'ants,' *myrmēkes*.

⁶⁷ 'Unter der Hand,' 67.

⁶⁸ My translations.

⁶⁹ Hesiod frg. 205 (Merkelbach-West p. 181): '[Aegina] became pregnant and bore the horseman Aeacus... but when he reached the prime of much-loved youth, he was distressed at being alone. The father of men and gods turned all the ants on the lovely island into men and deep-girdled women' (my translation; the ellipsis is in the original).

⁷⁰ Strabo 8.6.16: 'It is said that the Aeginetans were called Myrmidons - not as the myth has it, because, when a great [plague] occurred, the ants became human beings in answer to a prayer of Aeacus, but because they excavated the earth after the manner of ants and spread the soil over the rocks, so as to have ground to till, and because they lived in the dugouts, refraining from the use of soil for bricks' (Trans. Jones - I have replaced Jones' 'famine' with the more accurate 'plague' for *loimôû*).

⁷¹ Bömer also points out (332) that Ovid's image of Aegina is a traditional one, dating to the beginning of Hellenistic times. Aegina was renowned for its large population (especially that of slaves) and for its wealth. Though exaggerated, this image of Aegina is useful as a parallel to Athens in the plague account.

⁷² The *Metamorphoses* was published 'in the years immediately preceding [Ovid's] exile in AD 8' (Hinds 1085). Vergil died in 19 BC: when the *Aeneid* was published, he 'became the Roman Homer, the *Aeneid* in particular serving as the great Roman classic against which later epic poets and in a sense all Latin poets had to situate themselves' (Fowler and Fowler 1063).

⁷³ That is, in the first four feet (see next note) of the eight most frequent metrical patterns, which represent 81.62% of all the lines in the *Metamorphoses*. The distribution ranges from 12S/20D to 15S/17D (Duckworth 5).

⁷⁴ Latin poetic metre is quantitative (measured in the length of syllables according to certain rules), unlike English, which is qualitative (based on the stress-accent of syllables). The hexameter line comprises six feet, of which the first five are either dactyls or spondees and the sixth is a spondee (or, more exactly, a trochee, since the last syllable is not measured). A dactyl is a long syllable followed by two short, and a spondee is two long syllables. Since the last two feet generally end the same way (dactyl / spondee), standard notation indicating the metre of a hexameter verse is limited to the first four feet, which of which is denoted by either a 'D' (dactyl) or an 'S' (spondee). For example, a verse made up of three dactyls followed by a spondee, with the last two feet understood to follow the usual dactyl / spondee pattern at line's end, would be labelled 'DDDS.'

⁷⁵ With a range between 18S/14D and 21S/11D (Duckworth 6).

⁷⁶ The higher proportion of dactyls in Vergil's plague narrative, corresponding very closely to the dactylic average in Lucretius, probably reflects a tendency on Vergil's part to imitate Lucretius.

⁷⁷ Again, in the first four feet of the eight most common patterns, which represent 79.81% of the poem's verses (Duckworth 5). The range of distribution is from 16S/16D to 19S/13D.

⁷⁸ After 548, the percentage of dactyls ranges between 50% and 53.7% (by 576), ending up at 51.6%.

⁷⁹ My translation.

⁸⁰ My translations. On Nestor's influence, see also *Iliad* 2.21, 370, 441, etc.

⁸¹ My translation.

⁸² My translation.

⁸³ Nestorian examples: *Iliad* 1.260ff., 11.670ff., 11.749ff., 23.626ff.

⁸⁴ *E.g. Iliad* 1.260ff.: 'I have mixed in the past with even better men than you [*i.e.* Agamemnon and Achilles] and never failed to carry weight with them, the finest men I have ever seen or shall see[. . .]. And they were men whom not a soul on earth today could face in battle.'

⁸⁵ This and the following translations of Ovid are mine, except where noted.

⁸⁶ 'Terme technique, conservé par la poésie' (E-M).

⁸⁷ Anderson suggests *quattuor (heu) menses*, 'for four months, alas.'

⁸⁸ My translation.

⁸⁹ 'Ovid's favourite verb of marvel' (Anderson 301).

⁹⁰ Forms of the related verb *tabescere* occur at *Metamorphoses* 15.363 and *Tristia* 5.1.77.

Forms based on the perfect stem *tabu-* shared by *tabere* and *tabescere* occur at *Metamorphoses* 3.445, 4.259, 8.227, 14.432 and *Ars Amatoria* 2.89, but these have the meaning 'pine away' or 'melt away,' showing them to be from *tabescere*.

⁹¹ My translation.

⁹² *Torrentur, rubor, tumet, tepidis, ventis, patent*. Compare Lucretius' *torrens* (6.1176), *rubentis* (1146), *tumebat* (1195), *tepidum* (1165), *patente* (1175), *ventum* (1171) (Vallillee 116).

⁹³ *Dura*: literally, 'hard.' 'Why Ovid should choose this adjective remains a mystery' (Anderson 303), but I have chosen, without much reservation, to translate it as 'bony.'

⁹⁴ 'Ähnliche bildliche Verwendung.'

⁹⁵ My translation.

⁹⁶ My translation.

⁹⁷ A fifth-foot spondee occurs in the *Metamorphoses* on average only once in 323.5 verses (Duckworth Table I).

⁹⁸ Though Thucydides' term actually means 'half-dead.'

⁹⁹ For example, *Iliad* 6.146, 21.463ff.

¹⁰⁰ Though anachronistic: 'Die homerische Zeit kennt die Verwendung von Weihrauch nicht' (Bömer 349).

¹⁰¹ Translations mine.

¹⁰² An earlier interpretation, according to Bömer (355), is that 'the combatants fall dead on the pyres and burn there.' This clearly demands too much of the text.

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