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Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius

Robin Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiv, 209. ISBN 9780521873451 $99.00.

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In 1956, Bernard Knox published a seminal article on "The Date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles" (*AJP* 77:133-147) in which he urged 425 BC as the year of that play's production by explicating various puzzling features of *OT* within a context of Athenian response to the waves of plague after 430. Mitchell-Boyask's most recent book, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination*, expands Knox's observations to a wider array of tragedies (Euripides' *Hippolytus, Heracles, Phoenissae*; Sophocles' *OT, Trachiniae, Philoctetes*), to a greater variety of "political" events, and to a series of general investigations into the valence of words for sickness (*nosos, loimos*) in Athenian tragedy. Observing spikes in the frequency of words for disease in extant tragedy around particular dates (the plague in 430, the construction of the Athenian Asclepieion in 420, the oligarchic coup of 411) M-B attempts to read Athenian drama against the backdrop of these events. Though much of the work inevitably involves issues of dating, M-B's primary goal is not strictly speaking historical but rather literary, insofar as he attempts to revivify various phrases, scenes, characters, and aspects of tragedy that prior to being subjected to his nose for nosological allusions had gone unnoticed. Most pages of this book

contain myriad original interpretative suggestions; my summary focuses only on what I have taken to be the most central and/or exemplary interpretive attempts.

M-B begins his book with a short chapter on references to death, illness, and healing within Greek poetry, mostly with an eye towards the healing powers of song. We need not accept M-B's conjecture that tragedians really envisioned themselves and the masks of tragedy as actually making the dead "suddenly alive again," that Aeschylus saw himself as the "only one who has the power to resurrect Agamemnon and allow him to walk the earth" (12) in order to appreciate M-B's list of points in Greek literature where singing and healing are closely tied (14), or to fall in with this notion. The chapter's most important discussion, following scholars such as Ruth Padel (regarding the general connection between medical terminology and tragedy) and Adam Parry (vis-à-vis the medical terminology of the Thucydidean plague narrative), shows how we must do better than "sporadic forays" (16) into the shared diction of tragedy and the Hippocratic corpus in order to appreciate the actual resonance of medical references in literature. This is, of course, what this book will attempt to do.

Chapter 3, the first of the two "Materials" chapters, explores specifically the uses (and resonances) of the words *nosos* and *loimos* in Greek writings. M-B argues that *nosos* and *loimos*, as words that described painful realities, evoked powerful emotions, especially in times of plague. I was impressed by M-B's history of the deployment of *loimos* and his discussion of the paired words *loimos* and *polemos* (together with the pairing of *nosos* and *polemos*), but was less taken by his assumption that *loimos*'s relative infrequency can be used as an indication of its taboo quality, and therefore as an active avoidance of an especially uncomfortable word. For μ the infrequency of the word means that Plato must "bring himself" to write the word four times (24), that Demosthenes' use of the word "might have been remarkable" in its emotional impact (*Against Aristogeiton* 25.80), and that we should be impressed that Plutarch "summons up the courage to write it [*loimos*] six times." (24) Though the word certainly is rare, M-B has shown not that there was a "tendency to avoid the

word *loimos*," (24) only that it didn't get used very often. M-B is on much safer ground in his analysis of *nosos* in tragedy. M-B provides two incredibly useful tables of extant Greek tragedies, the year (often, obviously, conjectured) of their production, and the frequency of *nosos* in each play (29-30). These tables are at the core of his thesis that *nosos* was on people's minds at particular historical moments (post-430, -420, -411). This chapter also offers, in passing, a large number of insights into *nosos* in Aeschylus (at some crucial moments in the *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound*) and Aristophanes (hardly at all; maybe, M-B suggests, because it wasn't a funny word).

M-B's fourth chapter, on the *Hippolytus*), shows that, even at his most conjectural, M-B manages to creatively elucidate points often ignored in scholarship. His purpose is to show that Euripides' *Hippolytus*) (428 BC) hints in unnoticed ways at Athenian preoccupation with sickness. His argument focuses on the play's setting in Troezen, its mention of the Rock of Asclepius, a reading of Hippolytus as an Asclepius doublet, and the play's reference to the *eiresiônê*) which, building on recent work on Greek religious festivals such as the Thargelia, M-B sees as an apoptropaic of *loimos*) and *limos*). M-B's challenge here is to see connections between poetry and healing in a play that has very little language of healing or disease. The chapter's strongest argument is the postulated connection between Hippolytus and Asclepius, resting largely on some parallels in their stories, Hippolytus' death near Asclepius' rock, and later legends that connect the two. We should also be grateful to M-B for drawing our attention to the Rock of Asclepius, which has elicited precious few comments. By contrast, although M-B rightly goes beyond Barrett's cynical dismissal of the play's location as a weak Euripidean attempt at innovation, his own solution seems inadequate. M-B explains the setting in Troezen through a tenuous line of thought that bounces from Pausanias to Herodotus to conjectures about Troezen-Athenian relations without, however, discussing the history of these relations, for example vis-à-vis Thucydides' descriptions of Athenian ravaging

in the Troezen (2.56.5). No matter; the sheer number of interesting solutions and interpretations that M-B offers will inspire repeated readings.

In the book's fifth chapter, M-B builds directly on the work of Knox to explore the representation of plague in the *OT*). Future commentaries on the play would do well to take note of M-B's analysis of the verb *phthiein/phtinein*) throughout the play. They would also do well to take an especially careful look at M-B's discussion of the play's use of *nosos*) to refer not only in a physical way to the populace of Thebes, but also, by way of the plague under which Oedipus himself suffers, to a metaphorical (but oh so real) sickness of the body politic, a "live" metaphor which will play a central role in M-B's later chapters. M-B concludes by speculating on a puzzle in tragic history: why did the play Aristotle took to be the finest of tragedies not take the first place (according to the play's second hypothesis)? M-B soberly acknowledges that we do not have enough evidence to know precisely why Sophocles was beaten by Philocles, but suggests that, if we accept Knox's dating of the play to 425, this play's "direct, unmediated depiction…of a plague when one was ravaging Athens, or had recently done so…scraped violently at emotional wounds that had barely had the time to form scabs." (65-66) Though we cannot know for certain if this is the case, it seems as good a reason as any for the gap between the play's fifth century loss and its fourth century apotheosis into tragic stardom.

The sixth chapter fleshes out the resonance of various features of the *Trachiniae* by giving that play a production date in between 430 and 425, basing this dating on how powerfully parts of the play read when assigned this date. Skeptical readers might cringe at this approach's apparent circularity (which M-B unashamedly acknowledges), but this would be an arid criticism, and those who take a leap of faith will be rewarded by deepened insights into the play's complexities. After a useful review of the problems of dating the play, M-B explores the possibility that Strepsiades' sufferings on his philosophic couch in Aristophanes' *Clouds* may parody the sufferings of Heracles on his death-bed in the *Trachiniae* (71-74). Though Dover had indicated that Strepsiades'

pains might be loosely based on tragic language, M-B seems to be the first to explore seriously and thoroughly the connection with reference to the *Trachiniae*. M-B carefully compares the descriptions of plague in Thucydides and the descriptions of Heracles' pains in this play and finds them too similar to be accidental. Focus is laid on comparing Thucydides' descriptions of plague-struck genitals and the emasculation of Heracles (through "chemical castration") and other figures in tragedy. Further, M-B attempts to show the transfer of *nosos* and death from Nessus to Heracles to Deianeira as "an intuition of contagious disease." (87) In what seems a diversion from the thesis of the book (and of the chapter), M-B tangentially (but usefully) explores the question of whether the play assumes Hercules' eventual apotheosis. The chapter concludes by positing that Heracles, in being "unique among tragic heroes in moving from displaying a metaphorical *nosos*, in the form of *eros*, to a real one" (97), represents a criticism of imperial Athens, first sick with a *nosos-eros* for conquest, then by the real *nosos* of the plague, in particular connecting this criticism of Periclean policy with what he (together with Ehrenberg) sees as Sophocles' discomfort with the execution of the Samian War. I will leave it to readers to decide how far they are willing to ascribe such direct political criticism to Sophoclean drama.

In this seventh chapter, M-B attempts to show a relationship between the cult of Asclepius (especially the construction of the Asclepieion) and Attic drama, despite the fact, as he acknowledges, that Asclepius himself only directly appears as a character in Aristophanes' *Wealth*. (105) For μ the location of the Asclepieion directly next to the Theater of Dionysus springs from "deeper associations among drama, healing and the Athenian *polis*." (107) He attempts to illuminate these associations by discussing similarities between the myths of Dionysus and Asclepius (with a helpful chart on p. 108), tying the two gods through their potential connections with the Mysteries (109), assorted *testimonia* that connect Asclepius with song and performance (110), the purported (but, as M-B acknowledges with a nod to Mary Lefkowitz, likely entirely fallacious) connection

between Sophocles and the priesthood of Asclepius (112), the (highly conjectural) seating of the priests of Asclepius and of the Muses in the layout of the Prohedria (114), and the close proximity of Asclepieion complexes and theaters in other Greek cities such as Messenia, Pergamon, Corinth, and, most importantly, Epidaurus (117-119). The book's two subsequent chapters will seek to show how the conceptual, architectural, administrative, and mythical proximity of the Theater and the Asclepieion plays out in drama produced after 420.

The eighth chapter is largely a matter of finding or bringing out allusions to Asclepius and to his temple in two Euripidean plays, the *Phoenissae* and the *Heracles*, that do not mention him or his temple. In the *Phoenissae*, there is no plague at Thebes but there is a "bounty of medical vocabulary," (130) and M-B subjects the play's paeans (songs of victory/healing) and paeans more generally to a close analysis in order to unearth such references. This section also contains an interesting analysis of the word *mêchanê* as used in the sense of "cure". In the *Heracles*, M-B analyzes the relationship between Heracles, sick with madness, and the body politic, sick with *stasis*. (123) Specifically, the purging of the royal household in Euripides is necessary for the purging of the city, an idea that will be more fully developed vis-à-vis its connection to ostracism in the ninth chapter. And though this chapter is quite clearly an exercise in "following the image trail" as a route for a broader interpretation of the text, M-B does not advocate any ingenious code (à la Verrall) by which the work's puzzles might reductively be solved, but rather seeks to give voice to a series of nosological resonances that build throughout the play.

The book's ninth chapter, an expanded version of an article in *TAPA* 137 (2007), details how Sophocles' *Philoctetes* uses the language of disease and health, and what M-B sees as allusions towards the Asclepieion itself, to explore Athens' responses to the aristocratic *stasis* of 411. After briefly discussing Sophocles' decision to empty Lemnos of its inhabitants, M-B presents his thesis that this play, like the *OT*, is as much about Athens as about Lemnos. He then goes on to show how references to Asclepius and

healing may be read into the play's text in several ways: (a) a connection between Athena Polias/Hygieia and the Asclepius cult; (b) a suggestion (after Oliver Taplin and David Wiles) that Heracles' evocations of Asclepius might have included a stage motion towards the Asclepieion, and (c) a sense that the language of ostracism is not unconnected to the language of medical purge. The chapter ends by recommending that the *Philoctetes*, produced in 409, be read in the context of the law that required every Athenian to take an oath not to overthrow the democracy, and to do so by the 409 Dionysia Festival (Andocides 1.97-98). In particular, M-B calls attention to the use of verbs of swearing, and explains how this context colors issues of disease and expulsion in the play.

Regarding the atrocities potentially committed by Athenians at Samos, M-B says that "There is no evidence, but there is certainly much room for reasonably informed speculation." (99) This could as easily be said about much of this work's wide-ranging, impressive, and often convincing and fruitful speculations regarding a number of tragedies. In writing this book, M-B had to put aside two fundamental evidential difficulties. The first, dating: we don't know the dates of many of the plays discussed, but M-B takes the plays to be responding to sickness, assigns them dates where this will work, then uses material from the play to show how this works. The second, paucity of sources: M-B's historical reading of the history of *nosos* rests on the study of the word's frequency and its spikes at certain historic points, but we don't have nearly enough plays for this to be statistically significant. These are two leaps that M-B (and just about every person who writes about tragedy) takes, but most readers will be convinced that these are leaps worth taking. M-B has certainly succeeded here in his project to elucidate the "resonance of the drama in the experience of the original Athenian audience" (182). This is clearly a book that could only be written by a seasoned scholar who has spent a great deal of time with Greek tragedy. Its observations are so wide-ranging and comprehensive, the connections it draws so ingenious and unexpected, that they could only be the product of long engagement with these texts.

Even if they ultimately decide not to side with M-B on many of his particular readings, students of tragedy, ancient medicine, and Athenian social and religious history will undoubtedly benefit from this creative and original book.