

THOMAS SPRAT'S *THE PLAGUE OF ATHENS*:
THUCYDIDES, LUCRETIIUS, AND THE
'PINDARIC WAY'

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When Thomas Sprat's *The plague of Athens* was republished in 1665, London was reeling from a disastrous epidemic of bubonic plague that claimed over 50,000 lives, a fifth of the city's inhabitants. The long poetic account of the ancient devastation memorably narrated in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* had originally appeared in 1659, and probably the timing of the reissued text was not coincidental. Its fate in print, however, was by no means that of the numerous ephemeral works occasioned by this last significant outbreak in England of the terrifying disease. Though Samuel Johnson would later dismiss the poem with the remark, 'a subject of which it is not easy to say what could recommend it',¹ Sprat's contemporaries long valued *The plague of Athens*. Further editions in 1667, 1676, 1683, 1688, 1703 and 1709 earned him the name 'Pindaric Sprat' and contributed to the judgement 'celebrated Poet'.² Neither impression suits a writer now more valued as the author of *History of the Royal Society* and as a significant prose stylist; nor is the once widely published poem easily available, much less commonly read. Nonetheless *The plague of Athens* still has much to recommend it not merely for its subject but as an index to the literary and medical sensibilities of a writer and his seventeenth-century milieu.

Sprat's decision to render in poetry the well-known narrative from Book 2 of Thucydides's history was undertaken somewhat self-consciously. From the outset of the poem's introductory epistle, written to his friend and former Oxford proctor Walter Pope, a reluctant and self-effacing author invites the reader to compare his 'rude and unpolisht Copy' with its 'excellent Patterns, the *Greek* and *Latin*'.³ Towards this end Sprat includes Thomas Hobbes's

¹ Samuel Johnson, 'Sprat', in *Lives of the English poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), ii. 33.

² Anthony à Wood, *Athenæ Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss, 4 vols (London, 1813–20), iv. 727; Giles Jacob, *The poetical register; or, The lives and characters of all the English poets*, 2 vols (London, 1723), ii. 194.

³ Thomas Sprat, 'To my worthy and learned friend, Dr. *Walter Pope*, late proctor of the University of Oxford', in *The plague of Athens, which hapned in the second year of the Peloponnesian Warre* (London, 1665), sig. A3r. Hereafter cited in the text.

contemporary translation of the episode from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* that Lucretius later adapted in *De rerum natura*. Unable to decide whether the Greek or Latin account of the plague is 'more a Poem', Sprat concedes that the historian Thucydides had an advantage over the poet Lucretius: 'He having been present on the place, and assaulted by the disease himself, had the horror familiar to his Eyes, and all the shapes of the *misery* still remaining on his mind, which must needs make a great impression on his Pen and Fancie' (sigs A3r–v). The young English poet must also follow in the footsteps of his Greek guide, 'writing by an *Idea* of that which I never yet saw, nor care to feel' (sig. A3v). With reservation and misgiving all too familiar in the prefatory apologies of the seventeenth century, the epistle excuses the 'rash attempt' to capture in English a semblance of the Greek original.

The performance is more than an academic exercise in the university world of Oxford. The decision to imitate Thucydides, whatever its immediate occasion, is in fact part of a long literary tradition. Through Lucretius's subsequent influence on Virgil, Thucydides's narrative indirectly affected the account of the plague that ends Book 3 of the *Georgics*; more directly, Thucydides's history of the Athenian epidemic shaped the description of pestilence in Procopius's history of Justinian's reign. The inclusion of plague episodes in such works as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Lucan's *Bellum civile* suggests that even for those not indebted to the Greek historian, plague narratives became set pieces.⁴ A recent Wadham College M.A. and an aspiring poet would not have been indifferent to the classical tradition, especially during a period of renewed interest in translation. Three years before Sprat published his version of Thucydides's history, John Denham had reminded his fellow poets of the translator's obligation: 'it is not his busines alone to translate Language into Language, but Poesie into Poesie; . . . and if a new spirit be not added into the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a *Caput mortuum*'.⁵ This 'new spirit' also marks the work of a group of poets in the late 1640s and 1650s who published significant translations of classical and continental writers.⁶ In his Oxford world of books and languages Sprat may

⁴ Studies of Virgil that consider Lucretius's influence include, Michael C. J. Putnam, *Virgil's poem of the earth: studies in the Georgics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 215–35; and Joseph Farrell, *Virgil's Georgics and the traditions of ancient epic: the art of allusion in literary history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 84–94. Procopius follows Thucydides's account closely in his sixth-century narrative of the bubonic plague, Book II, xxii–xxiii, *History of the wars*; Ovid describes the plague of Aegina in *Metamorphoses*, 7:523–613. Farrell notes the tradition of 'Silver Latin set pieces', 85 n. 42.

⁵ John Denham, Preface to *The destruction of Troy*, in *The poetical works of Sir John Denham*, ed. Theodore Howard Banks, Jr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), 159.

⁶ T. R. Steiner, *English translation theory, 1650–1800* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1975), 18–20.

have encountered Denham, Richard Fanshawe, Edward Sherburne, and Thomas Stanley; his own writing was certainly influenced by the most important of these literary figures, Abraham Cowley.

The young man, who later became Cowley's literary executor and first important biographer, probably met the eminent poet at Oxford during a formative period in his own literary development. The university had granted Cowley a medical degree in late 1657, and he may have had especially close links with Wadham College and the circle of thinkers who were to help form the Royal Society. Cowley also entered Sprat's Oxford world even more forcefully through his collection of poetry published in 1656 and presented to the Bodleian Library.⁷ The impact is apparent in Sprat's lengthy encomium, 'Upon the poems of the English Ovid, Anacreon, Pindar, and Virgil, Abraham Cowley, in imitation of his own Pindaric Odes'. The wit and majesty Sprat extols in Cowley's soaring Pindarics offered the inexperienced poet an admittedly 'matchless pattern'; but in a tribute to Cromwell published with poems by Edmund Waller and John Dryden in early 1659, Sprat again attempted to emulate Cowley's Pindaric spirit. The same year the epistle to his most ambitious poem acknowledges with apology a further indebtedness to 'that excellent Person, (the present Ornament and Honour of our Nation) whose way of writing I imitate' (sig. A3r). Cowley's translations and adaptations of Pindar are the inspiration, if not the occasion, for a poem on a subject 'First described', its title page proclaims, 'in *Greek* by *Thucydides*; Then in *Latin* by *Lucretius*. Now attempted in *English*, by *Tho. Sprat*'.

The fifteen *Pindarique Odes* Cowley included in the 1656 *Poems* became for Sprat and his contemporaries the inspiration and model for 'the Pindaric way of Writing'.⁸ When Cowley published the series of translations and imitations of Pindar, his prefatory comments and extensive annotations revealed his considerable doubt that readers would understand his intent. Realizing that '*Pindar* is imitable by none', he catalogued at length the hallmarks of 'the noblest and highest kind of writing in Verse'.⁹ A paragraph from the preface to the 1656 edition succinctly isolates the most

⁷ Cowley was among forty men invited to become members of the newly formed Royal Society; he was elected in March 1660/61. Arthur H. Nethercot, who considers the evidence linking Cowley and Sprat together at Oxford, notes the tradition that Sprat wrote his ode to the celebrated poet when he gave a volume of Cowley's 1656 *Poems* to the library at Wadham College (*Abraham Cowley: the muse's Hannibal* [London: Oxford University Press, 1931], 175–7).

⁸ Thomas Sprat, *An account of the life and writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley: written to Mr. M. Clifford*, in *Critical essays of the seventeenth century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), ii. 131. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁹ Abraham Cowley, 'The praise of *Pindar*' and the Preface to *Pindarique Odes*, in *The English writings of Abraham Cowley*, ed. A. R. Waller, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905–06), i. 178, 156. Hereafter cited in the text.

obvious and troublesome characteristics of the Greek poet: 'The digressions are many, and sudden, and sometimes long'; 'The *Figures* are unusual and *bold*, even to *Temeritie*'; and 'The *Numbers* are various and irregular' (i. 11). Among the fifteen Pindaric odes, 'The praise of *Pindar*' confirms the well-established Horatian view of a poet whose '*unnavigable Song*' roars unchecked in a torrent of striking figurative language and seemingly inexhaustible inventiveness. The next ode in the series, 'The Resurrection', attempts to capture an image of Pindar's untamed Pegasus in a manner described in an accompanying note as 'truly *Pindarical*, falling from one thing into another, after his *Enthusiastical manner*' (i. 183). But Cowley is well aware that extravagance, abruptness, and irregularity do not ensure magnificence and sublimity, however challenging the wit and rich the fancy. In defense of what he calls 'my manner of *Translating*, or *Imitating*' (i. 156), a separate preface to the odes praises the 'Spirit' of Pindar's poetry, which can be captured only in a 'libertine way'.¹⁰ Both the Olympian and Nemean odes he translates and copiously annotates are interested, in the words of the preface, not merely in 'what he spoke, as what was his *way* and *manner* of speaking' (i. 156). Throughout the notes Cowley continually calls attention to omissions and additions that make difficult expressions 'a little more perspicuous' (i. 177) or 'take that sense which pleases me best' (i. 164). The remainder of the odes imitate the Pindaric manner in a 'free kind of *Poetry*' (i. 200) that turns from the original communal celebration of victory towards a more personal praise and statement.

The freedom of the Pindaric way especially appealed to Sprat. While others applauded the forcefulness and sublimity of Cowley's odes, Sprat later praises in his biography 'a new sort of Writing' suited 'for all manner of subjects' (ii. 132). The bold figurative language and lengthy digressions concern him less than the metrical and stanzaic irregularity that delights the mind quickly dulled by constant meter constrained within narrow limits. The irregularity of the poetic line is in fact unusually attractive because of its 'near affinity with Prose'. Though Sprat does not develop this assertion, he contends 'this loose and unconfin'd measure has all the Grace and Harmony of the most Confin'd. And withal it is so large and free, that the practice of it will only exalt, not corrupt our Prose' (ii. 132). When the subject is Thucydides's prose narrative of the Peloponnesian War, largeness and freedom might well seem to Sprat

¹⁰ Characteristics of the Cowleyan Pindaric and their relation to the seventeenth-century sensibility are discussed in Harvey D. Goldstein, 'Anglorum Pindarus: model and milieu', *Comparative Literature*, 17 (1965), 299-310; and David Trotter, 'The Pindaric Odes', in *The poetry of Abraham Cowley* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 109-42. See also, more generally, Carol Maddison, *Apollo and the nine: a history of the ode* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1960), 369-401.

all the more desirable. He values in Cowley's translation of Pindar and the other classical writers the rare ability to re-create 'true spirit', and in his imitation of Cowley's Pindaric mode he himself aspires to convey the 'Sense and Genius' of the ancient historian's prose.

Like Lucretius's Latin adaptation of the prose history, Sprat's English version follows closely the structure of the original narrative. The plague that afflicted Athens in the summer of 430 B.C., soon after the Peloponnesian armies had entered Attica, quickly proved more devastating than any military force. Thucydides does not dwell on the causes of the epidemic, which swept out of Africa and carried away about a third of the city's inhabitants;¹¹ he is interested instead in the nature of the disease that he himself had suffered. Although he insists the cruelty of the sickness defies expression, his detailed account of its symptoms has long fascinated medical historians. The sudden and unexpected onslaught of the disease began with severe headache, inflammation of the eyes, bloody tongue and throat, and noisome breath. Painful hoarseness and sneezing were followed first by a wracking cough and then by severe vomiting; violent convulsions seized most of the victims, who were also marked by eruptions on their skin as well as tormented by an unbearable inward heat and insatiable thirst. Those who did not die after seven to nine days from the unparalleled fever often succumbed to a fatally debilitating diarrhea. Gangrenous loss of fingers, toes, and genitalia, blindness, and amnesia also afflicted some survivors. No disease of this nature and magnitude, Thucydides insists, had ever appeared before; nor have modern medical scholars convincingly proved that the symptoms must be those of smallpox, bubonic plague, typhus, measles, influenza, or any of the more esoteric diseases they have proposed.¹² The epidemiology of the sickness that defied the best Athenian medicine further re-enforces a narrative of extraordinary virulence. Thucydides devotes the rest of his description to an account of how the besieged lived and died with the horror. Growing fear and isolation intensified desperation. Physic seemingly beneficial in one

¹¹ Reports of the mortality rates vary from a quarter to a third of the population; see the figures and notes in J. F. D. Shrewsbury, 'The plague of Athens', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 24 (1950), 2; and James Longrigg, 'The great plague of Athens', *History of Science*, 18 (1980), 210.

¹² Among the numerous attempts to define the specific disease – many of which offer extensive reviews of other theories, some favour smallpox and a few bubonic plague; others have suggested scarlet fever, measles, typhus, typhoid fever, dengue, ergotism, syphilis, anthrax, malaria, influenza and toxin-producing strains of staphylococcus. Summaries of many theories and reservations about the possibility of identifying the Greek plague with any modern disease are developed in J. C. F. Poole and A. J. Holladay, 'Thucydides and the plague of Athens', *The Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 29 (1979), 282–300; and Longrigg, 'The great plague of Athens', 209–25. Longrigg rejects, however, the suggestion 'that Thucydides' description of the Plague is a purely literary invention for historiographical purposes' (210).

instance proved harmful in another, and no physician could deflect the mortal blow. Victims of the highly contagious disease sometimes simply gave up hope and died forsakened; compassionate caregivers moved to offer solace were themselves often fatally infected. Country dwellers seeking refuge in the city exacerbated an already grim plight. Thucydides captures scenes of the dying and dead falling over each other in the streets, around the few sources of water, or in the temples. Omnipresent death paradoxically engendered in fearful desperation a fearless indifference that threatened the very bases of society. Sacrosanct rites of funeral were ignored in the hasty disposal of bodies, and an open dissoluteness defied human and divine laws. The desperate living, convinced that any semblance of order was both futile and pointless, abandoned themselves to self-indulgence. This final despair explicitly confirms the force of the assault on both the individual and the body politic; where the Peloponnesian armies had failed, the epidemic appears to have succeeded.

Without the immediacy of the Peloponnesian War and its narrative framework, the plague becomes in Sprat's adaptation a metaphor for the larger struggle of life itself. The theme is unmistakable in the opening exclamation of the two-stanza prelude: 'Unhappy Man! by Nature made to sway, / And yet is every Creatures prey, / Destroy'd by those that should his power obey' (p. 1). Sixty-one lines of irregular Pindaric verse, equivalent in length to nearly a quarter of Thucydides's entire account, stress the fragility and evanescence of human existence; then abruptly the poem turns to the Athenian plague. The apparent disregard for continuity is a common feature of the Pindaric way; Lucretius's poem also provides a precedent for the initial focus and sudden transition. The concluding movement of *De rerum natura* shifts from a general discussion of disease almost arbitrarily to the specific example of the Athens plague. This challenging and perplexing conclusion to the long poem becomes appropriate for some modern readers who see the plague symbolically as an image of life – 'Man's own despair before his incurable state' and a 'ghastly apocalypse'.¹³ Sprat's sense of the figurative struggle tacitly present in Thucydides's history as well is perhaps further governed by Cowley's Pindaric imitation 'The plagues of *Egypt*'. The last and longest of the odes begins on a generalized note similar in tenor to Sprat's opening stanzas:

¹³ H. S. Commager, Jr, 'Lucretius' interpretation of the plague', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 62 (1957), 113; D. F. Bright, 'The plague and the structure of *De rerum natura*', *Latomus*, 30 (1971), 612. In the introduction to his translation, however, Frank O. Copley believes 'the poem simply stops, and in so doing tends to substantiate the argument that the work is unfinished' (Lucretius, *The nature of things* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 1977], xx).

Is this thy *Brav'ery Man*, is this thy *Pride*?
Rebel to God, and *Slave* to all beside!
Captiv'd by everything! and onely *Free*
 To fly from thine *own Libertie*!
 All *Creatures* the *Creator* said *Were Thine*;
 No *Creature* but might since, say, *Man is Mine*!
 In black *Egyptian Slavery* we lie;
 And sweat and toil in the vile *Drudgerie*
 Of *Tyrant Sin*;
 To which we *Trophees* raise, and wear out all our *Breath*,
 In building up the *Monuments of Death*;
 We, the *choice Race*, to *God* and *Angels Kin*!

(i. 219)

Typologically the captive 'we' unable to journey to the 'promis'ed *Canaan* above' are seventeenth-century antitypes of the children of Israel whose bondage becomes the essential concern of Cowley's extended paraphrase of Exodus.

Sprat's poem initially establishes a similar parallel figuratively through a military metaphor that structures his imitation. The 'we' are embattled beings surrounded by maladies that threaten the illusion of human dominance:

Thousand Diseases sent by Fate,
 (Unhappie Servants!) on us wait;
 A thousand Treacheries within
 Are laid weak Life to win;
 Huge Troops of Maladies without,
 (A grim, a meager, and a dreadful rout:)
 Some formal Sieges make,
 And with sure slowness do our Bodies take;
 Some with quick violence storm the Town,
 And all in a moment down:
 Some one peculiar fort assail,
 Some by general attempt prevail.

(pp. 1-2)

From this general image of an unhappy mankind caught in 'A dangerous and destructful War', the Pindaric turn to Thucydides's besieged Athens develops an associational continuity that is somewhat less obvious than Cowley's typological transition. Thucydides's description of the Athenian plague, notably in Hobbes's translation, emphasizes no figurative conflation of war and disease, but the similarities between the destructiveness of the Peloponnesian armies and that of the pestilence are unmistakable.¹⁴ Sprat depicts a relentless enemy driven by a 'barbarous rage'. Carried by the winds out of the African deserts, the invading disease

¹⁴ In 'The language of Thucydides's description of the plague', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 16 (1969), Adam Parry notes Greek verbs that suggest military attack (116).

offers no quarter as it sacks the land in search of booty. Outside the walls of Athens this 'strange unheard-of Conqueror' succeeds where the war failed, destroying the stalwart Athenians who had resisted the Spartan siege. Once the capitol or head is taken, victory and death's sword appear inevitable as this 'bold' and 'mighty' conqueror transforms the body into its own enemy. And even when repulsed, the vanquished invader often ransacks the memory and takes limbs and eyes. Against such 'dreadful troops', a disease never confronted before and resistant to physic, 'Nature, alas! was now surpriz'd, / And all her Forces seiz'd' (p. 21).

This figurative understanding of the plague's destructiveness, though less apparent in Thucydides's narrative, exploits an image common to the seventeenth-century understanding of disease. While most of his contemporaries still believed in the endogenous origins of disease in the body's unbalanced humors, the notion of invasiveness was nevertheless also deeply rooted in tradition. Most would not seriously challenge either the biblical correlation between sin and sickness or the supernatural causes of affliction. In the *bellum dei contra homines* waged for the sins of the world, the wrathful God of Scriptures wields a sword and unleashes his arrows.¹⁵ Severe visitations of the plague prompted publications variously entitled *Gods arrowe of the pestilence* and *Gods three arrowes*, but the shafts of destruction were not limited to the plague. 'God hath his Quiver full of these arrows, full of the Pestilence, of Fevers, and Dropsies, and consumptions, and all manner of diseases; and he shoots these arrows into our families, friends, and children: and none but himself can pull them out'.¹⁶ The metaphor also did not always depend solely upon biblical association and religious significance. When the dangers of smallpox began to displace the fears of bubonic plague, the disease was likened to a barbaric invader and a merciless tyrant. Earlier images of the plague already reflect the Renaissance figure of the body as a fortress or castle. Typically, the author of a poem written in the aftermath of the 1625 plague equates the epidemic with the 'fatall Engine of Destruction' levelled against each individual in an incessant attempt to 'batter downe, / The clayie bulwarkes of our Mud-wall'd towne'.¹⁷ The metaphor of the body under siege is fanciful though hardly original; pushed to extremes by others, the conceit leads to grotesque images of the besieged: 'Their Groines sore pier'st with pestilentiall Shot: / Their Arme-pits digd with Blaines, and vlcerous Sores, / Lurking

¹⁵ Robert Wright, *A receyt to stay the plagve* (London, 1625), 21.

¹⁶ John Stanford, *Gods arrowe of the pestilence* (Oxford, 1604); William Gouge, *Gods three arrowes: plagve, famine, sword* (London, 1631). Edward Lawrence, *Christs power over bodily diseases* (London, 1662), 25.

¹⁷ Abraham Holland, *London, looke-backe*, added to J. D., *Salomons pest-house, or towre-royall* (London, 1630), 59, 56.

like poisoned Bullets in their flesh'.¹⁸ Added to the fearsomeness of the powerfully and fatally disruptive is the implicit threat of the foreign or alien. 'A link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness', Susan Sontag observes, 'lies perhaps in the very concept of wrong, which is archaically identical with the non-us, the alien'.¹⁹ The forces of disease are the enemy, the other, that threatens both individual and collective being.

Sprat intensifies the enmity of disease and the fear of annihilation in his depiction of the plague's devouring nature. The forces of death he imagines embody the dread of dissolution common to both the traditional understanding of disease and the Thucydidean image of beleaguered Athens. As the plague sacks and ransacks all before it, the enemy appears momentarily a mythic monster who swoops down upon Greece and seizes its prey with 'ravenous claws'. 'Glutted with ruine', the new and inexplicable disease continues remorselessly not only to conquer but to consume. The recurrence of the word 'devour' evokes a horror Sprat's readers would have understood well. Seventeenth-century treatises on the plague trace the etymology of the disease's name to the Greek 'smite, or wound' and the Latin 'eat up, or devour'.²⁰ Poetic accounts of the plague liken this 'deuouring Enemy' to a gangrene that eats away the nation's towns and cities; its insatiable appetite is also that of an 'All-deuouring Monster' and a fiery serpent.²¹ Other major seventeenth-century maladies appear in their own ways equally voracious. The common contemporary term for venereal disease, *lues venerea*, suggests in the Latin a dissolution unmistakable in the medical realities of the affliction: 'some have the uvula and the Palat of the Mouth eaten away by *Ulcers*, and many you see who loose their Noses by this violent Disease, some have the tip of the Nose and Nostrils eaten away, some loose their Eyes, and many their hearing, and some their Mouths drawn away'.²² The terrifying loss of the self is still more common in smallpox, the disease that became in the period a greater danger. Poets who decried smallpox as a 'double Death' and 'The very *Goth* and

¹⁸ Thomas Dekker, *A dialogue betweene warre, famine, and the pestilence*, in *The meeting of gallants at an ordinarie* (1604), in *The plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker*, ed. F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 109.

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 48.

²⁰ George Thomson, *Λοιμοτομία; or, The pest anatomized* (London, 1666), 7. Nathaniel Hodges traces the Latin word for plague, *lues*, to the Greek meaning dissolve (*Loimologia* [London, 1721], 35).

²¹ Thomas Brewer, *The weeping lady; or London like Ninivie in sack-cloth* (London, 1625), sigs B3r, B4r, C3r; John Davies of Hereford, *The triumph of death; or, The picture of the plague, according to the life; as it was in anno domini. 1603*, in *Humours heau'n on earth* (London, 1609), 238–9.

²² Charles Peter, *Observations on the venereal disease, with the true way of curing the same* (London, 1686), 15.

Vandal of a Face'²³ voice in their hyperbole the fears of disfigurement vividly expressed in diaries, letters, and memoirs as well as in medical works. Increasingly smallpox appeared an unusually 'Cruel Disease', marring its victims and taking away with their features identity and life itself. The wantonness of the disease compounded the loss:

By other Ills though w'are of Life bereft,
There's yet at least some Humane Likeness left:
But when we do thy barb'rous Work behold,
We know not if the Dead were Young or Old.
From the detestable and loathsome Sight
We turn our Eyes, and stiffen with Affright!²⁴

The realities of the suffering in the seventeenth century make the specific symptoms of the Athenian disease much more immediate. Despite Sprat's statement that the ancient plague was unknown to him, much that Thucydides relates was very familiar in the writings and experiences of the seventeenth-century English. The febrile symptoms of the plague, smallpox, and venereal disease are similarly those of lassitude, heat, headache, hoarseness, and noisomeness. The inward heat and outward coolness Thucydides notes are characteristic of bubonic plague victims; bleeding in the mouth and nose is common in cases of smallpox as well as the plague; and redness of the eyes is a sign of smallpox. Detailed descriptions of the most feared contagions depict in fact patterns of suffering resembling those in Thucydides's narrative. Before the distinctive swelling of the lymphatic glands confirmed with blackish buboes the presence of 'Pestilential Matter', the diagnosis of bubonic plague was often clear. 'It is a most deadly signe of the Pestilence', medical texts agreed,

to haue a continuall and burning Feauer, to haue the Tongue dry, rough, and blacke, to breathe with difficultie, and to draw in a great quantitie of breath, but breathe out little; to talke idely; to haue the Phrensie and madnesse together, with vnquenckable thirst, and great watching; to haue Convulsions, the Hickit, Heart beating, and to swound verie often and vehemently; further, tossing and turning in the Bead, with a loathing of meats, and daily vomits of a greene, blacke, and bloody colour; and the Face pale, blacke, of a horrid and cruell aspect, bedewed with a cold sweat, are verie mortall signes.²⁵

²³ Thomas D'Urfey, 'An elegy on the death of that true perfection of beauty and goodness, the Lady *Essex Spicket*', in *New poems* (London, 1690), 95; Richard Flecknoe, 'On the small pox', in *Epigrams* (London, 1671), 69.

²⁴ Robert Gould, *A poem most humbly offered to the memory of her late sacred majesty, Queen Mary* (London, 1695), 13. Its cruelty is widely decried; see, for example, Thomas Spilman's earlier poem, 'Vpon his ladies sicknesse of the small pockes', in *A poetical rhapsody, 1602-1621*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-32), i. 222.

²⁵ Ambroise Paré, *A treatise of the plague*, trans. Thomas Johnson (London, 1630), 29.

Excruciating headaches, violent fever, and uncontrollable convulsions also preceded another dreaded swelling, the pustules of smallpox. Again the signs were well established:

pain of the back, neck and head, with heaviness of the eyes, itching of the nose, shortnesse of breathing, dry cough, beating in the forehead and temples, sometimes *delirium*, trembling and convulsion, beating of heart, neezing [*sic*] often, hoarsenesse, heat, rednesse, and pricking in the whole body; troublesome sleep, sorrow and restlessness, shining and itching of the eyes, voluntary teares, tumor of the face with a little rednesse.²⁶

While neither the eruption and suppuration of smallpox nor the gangrenous lesions and swelling of bubonic plague followed the same course as the Athenian disease, the many similarities among the contagions led to the same general effect. The cries of indescribable pain, the raving of delirium, the stench of fetid sweat and oozing pus, and the sight of faces and limbs hideously distorted were the seventeenth-century realities of bubonic plague, smallpox and syphilis. A composite of their worst fears is embodied in a disease without precedent in either Thucydides's Greece or Sprat's England.

Sprat's attempts to re-create the suffering poetically rather than clinically envision the conquering, annihilating epidemic for the most part in the literary context of a decidedly figurative and allusive language. A single symptom from Thucydides's history, 'and then inwardly their Throats and Tongues grew presently bloody', expands in the poetic imitation sevenfold:

The tongue did flow all ore
 With clotted Filth and Gore;
 As doth a Lions when some innocent prey
 He hath devoured and brought away:
 Hoarsness and sores the throat did fill,
 And stopt the passages of speech and life;
 No room was left for groans or grief;
 Too cruel and imperious ill!
 Which, not content to kill,
 With tyrannous and dreadful pain,
 Dost take from men the very power to complain.

(p. 9)

Sprat's portrayal of overwhelming and inexpressible agony reflects the influence of Lucretius, but the leonine, tyrannical cruelty he imagines eschews the Latin poet's sensitivity to graphic, physiological detail: 'The throat also, black within, sweated blood, ulcers clogged and closed the path of the voice, and the tongue,

²⁶ James Cooke, *Supplementum chirurgiae* (London, 1655), 261.

mind's interpreter, oozed with blood, weakened by pain, heavy to move, rough to the touch'.²⁷ Lucretius sees in Thucydides's history the suffering of the individual, and he develops a moving portrait of insuperable pain. Sprat's poem never attempts to approximate the Lucretian description of the sunken eyes, hollow temples, drawn skin, and compressed nostrils, 'dank sweat streaming and shining over the neck, fine thin spittle, salt and yellow in colour'.²⁸ Nor does his ode dwell on the suppurating sores and enervating diarrhea that waste away the body. Like so many other seventeenth-century poets who mute the clinical realities of disease, Sprat leaves much to the imagination. Figurative language rather than physical detail sustains the portrait of a disease even more terrifying in its deliberate impreciseness. Sprat chooses, for example, to stress at length an unbearable thirst and heat; he says nothing about the 'ghastly shape' of themselves the hapless sufferers saw reflected in the waters to which they turned for unattainable relief. The unspeakable distortions and the feverish torment add to the nightmare of 'wandring and affrighted minds', their 'distemper'd fancies' possessed in the waking death by indescribable hellish visions of 'Unusual shapes, and images, / Dark pictures, and resemblances / Of things to come' (p. 13).

The horror of the plague is more specific in images of general contagion. At much greater length than either Thucydides or Lucretius, Sprat exploits the ironies of a plague-stricken world. His panoramic scene of death-strewn streets and market place evokes more than pathos:

Here lies a mother and her child,
The infant suck'd as yet, and smil'd,
But strait by its own food was kill'd.
There parents hugg'd their children last,
Here parting lovers last embrac'd,
But yet not parting neither,
They both expir'd and went away together.

(p. 14)

Lucretius's image of parents and children lying together in death becomes in Sprat's re-creation an emblem of a world in which the fundamental bonds of life nurture death. The mourning friend dies before he can close the eyes of the departed, the father bequeaths death with the breath that names his son heir, servants follow their masters to the grave, and husband and wife remain one in death. Sprat considers neither Thucydides's observation that shame

²⁷ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1937), 525.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 529.

But the delight of mortal men
 flowers,
 then flutters to the ground,
 shaken by a mere
 shift of thought.³⁰

Cowley stresses this note in the Pindaric imitations that inspired Sprat's ode. An epigraph from Manilius, 'At birth our death is sealed', accentuates in the Pindaric poem 'Life' the mortality that qualifies all existence. 'Life and fame', 'The Extasie', and 'To the New Year' emphasize an insubstantiality and evanescence never far from the centre of Cowley's celebratory odes. 'To Mr. Hobs' assures this great Columbus of philosophy that time need not be his enemy, but 'Brutus' is much less confident in human joy. 'To Dr. Scarborough' praises the physician's war against time, only to conclude 'Let *Nature*, and let *Art* do what they please, / When all's done, *Life is an Incurable Disease*' (i. 200). All who would journey to a heavenly Canaan, the last of the odes reminds at great length, will not escape the bondage and suffering of this disease.

Sprat's Pindaric version of the episode from Thucydides develops a similar awareness of the disease that is life. Fundamental to his collocation of war and plague is an ironic, even paradoxical inversion that re-enforces the unsettling view of a besieged world. Military metaphors assault traditional expectations of order and certitude, inverting the normal relationship between life and death. Sources of life become causes of death, the sun breeding the dreaded miasma of plague, which grows in deadliness as it encounters greater resistance. The ironies are inescapable. The infected populace that formed the bulwark of Athenian civilization conquers the city only to have the plague paradoxically come to its defence and bar the invading Spartans. The body similarly turns against itself as life-giving lungs and heart spread the infection. Physicians abet the disease with their medicines, caregivers become the sources of disease, and 'even after death' contagious remains further attest that 'all are murderers here' (p. 15). The living who desperately turn against the institutions of society themselves become destructive instruments of plague, and in the ensuing chaos life is more grievous than death.

Nothing can avert the self-destruction. Sprat's Pindaric attempt to understand the historic plague in relation to the mythic world of the gods underscores the futility.³¹ The goddess Minerva pleads

³⁰ Pindar, 'Pythian 8', in *Pindar's victory songs*, 205. See also Shankman, 'The Pindaric tradition', 221.

³¹ D. S. Carne-Ross observes in *Pindar* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) that Pindar uses myth 'to set the particular, nonrecurrent event' 'in relation to an event in the permanent, paradigmatic world of the gods and heroes which makes it understandable' (18).

vainly with Jove and the heavenly forces to save the city, but they remain mute and implacable, abandoning Athens without explanation. The speaker is no more successful than Minerva when he beseeches the heavens, fate, and the plague itself. The apostrophes succeed only in re-enforcing the impassioned Pindaric stance of the poet who exhorts, 'Hold, Heavens! hold' and implores 'Draw back, draw back thy sword, O Fate!' The heavens do not respond, nor does fate heed the plea to lower its sword. The poet bound increasingly to the city he mourns as 'Unhappy *Athens*' can ultimately only beg fate to sate the ravenous appetite of plague elsewhere. The poem's final plea strikingly reveals the inability to comprehend much less affect the course of epidemic:

But then kind Plague, thy conquests stop;
 Let Arts, and let the learned there escape,
 Upon *Minerva's* self commit no rape;
 Touch not the sacred throng,
 And let *Apollo's* Priests be like him young,
 Let him be healthful too, and strong.
 But ah! too ravenous Plague, whilst I
 Strive to keep off the misery,
 The learned too as fast as others round me die;
 They from corruption are not free,
 Are mortal though they give an immortality.

(pp. 20–21)

Temporal distinctions collapse and the plague gains new power as the speaker seems part of the world of the dead and dying. The affinity between the poet and the learned exists implicitly in their common failures. Neither the books of the learned nor the ode of the poet can 'keep off the misery'.

The absence of both physical cure and poetical healing reflects indeed Sprat's understanding of Thucydides's narrative. The Greek historian never proposed to set down either the physical causes or cures of the disease, which by its very nature remain in any case unknowable; he is interested primarily in providing future generations with some idea of its impact. Metaphysical questions of cause and effect are also no part of this concern. While Sprat, on the other hand, considers the forces of fate and the mythic world of gods, other than a single reference to the angel sent by God to protect the Hebrew's holy land, he too offers no divine or celestial perspective. Quite unlike Lucretius's adaptation, Sprat's imitation further resists any suggestion that a vengeful plague singled out for punishment selfish Athenians unwilling to aid the sick. No where in the ode is any seventeenth-century recognition of the biblical relationship between sin and sickness, divine wrath and human suffering. In the spirit of Thucydides, he demonstrates that the

forces of disease, like the forces of history, often defy rational comprehension.³²

The plague of Athens is an imitation in the spirit that John Denham and Abraham Cowley advocated and John Dryden later valued. In the 1680 preface to *Ovid's Epistles*, Dryden distinguishes their liberal view of translation from metaphrase, 'turning an Authour word by word, and Line by Line', and paraphrase, where 'his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense'. Their way of imitation, which Dryden believes Cowley achieved in his translation of Pindar, 'assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sence, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion'.³³ Though Dryden prefers a moderate course between the extremes, his understanding of their aims and his appreciation of Cowley's accomplishment significantly reflect the growing contemporary interest in translation, an interest that led to 'unusual diversity and experimentation'.³⁴ Among the various translations and imitations, which include Nahum Tate's adaptation of Girolamo Fracastoro's important Neolatin poem on syphilis, Sprat's poem on the plague undoubtedly also appealed to contemporaries because the imitation of Thucydides was an imitation as well of an increasingly fashionable Pindaric mode.

When William Congreve complained in 1706 that 'There is nothing more frequent among us, than a sort of Poems intituled Pindarique Odes', his essay on the Pindaric poem acknowledged the impact Cowley had on seventeenth-century poetry.³⁵ Many Restoration writers, including Congreve, were drawn to the freedom of the irregular stanza. 'Lax and lawless versification', Samuel Johnson later objected, 'so much concealed the deficiencies of the barren and flattered the laziness of the idle, that it immediately overspread our books of poetry'.³⁶ Elsewhere Johnson dismisses Sprat's contributions to the prevailing fashion, 'Nothing therefore but Pindarick liberty was to be expected'.³⁷ This terse dismissal of Sprat, however, does not consider his earlier prominence as a poet. Though *The plague of Athens* may not develop the 'great comprehension of knowledge' and 'fertility of fancy' Johnson begrudgingly admires in Cowley's Pindarics, its wit is hardly

³² In his essay 'The language of Thucydides's description of the plague', Parry concludes that 'the Plague offers the most violent challenge to the Periclean attempt to exert some kind of rational control over the historical process' (116).

³³ John Dryden, *Ovid's Epistles*, in *The works of John Dryden*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker et al., 20 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956-89), i. 114.

³⁴ Judith Sloman, *Dryden: the poetics of translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 8.

³⁵ William Congreve, 'A discourse on the Pindarique Ode', in *Letters & documents*, ed. John C. Hodges (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1964), 213.

³⁶ Johnson, 'Cowley', i. 48.

³⁷ Johnson, 'Sprat', ii. 38.

negligible. Unable to soar, as he himself admits, on Pindaric wings, Sprat appreciates the affective force of an allusive, though sometimes strained fancy that luxuriates in the paradoxes and ironies of unsettling inversions. Given the freedom of the long, irregular stanzas, he also faithfully developed the spirit of Pindar as well as the other conventions basic to the seventeenth-century Pindarique.

The subject of the poem complements the Pindaric manner and contributed to the sustained contemporary interest in *The plague of Athens*. Despite Sprat's insistence that he was writing about 'an *Idea*' of something he had never experienced, the fears, isolation, and desolation he describes recall the suffering common in seventeenth-century narratives of the bubonic plague. The patterns of misery do not vary markedly in the often undistinguished and predictable occasional pieces written or sometimes reissued in response to the major visitations of 1603, 1625 and 1636, but the poems remained an important part of the century's growing plague literature. The most ambitious, George Wither's 20,000-line poem on the 1625 plague, sold thousands of copies;³⁸ other poetic narratives and meditations were more limited in design. Among these the reissuance of Sprat's poem in 1665 and 1667 offered through the imitation of the past an idea of the present suffering. As the memories and fears of the bubonic plague grew less intense and smallpox became more prominent in the Bills of Mortality, the further editions of 1676, 1683, 1688 and 1703 recalled in the unknown malady not unlike smallpox the acute understanding of disease as an invasive force. At the same time the three editions of Tate's translation *Syphilis; or, A poetical history of the French disease* and the seven editions of Gabriel Harvey's medical tract *Little Venus unmask'd* suggest the relevance of Sprat's poem to the growing concern with venereal disease. A Restoration world increasingly sensitive to medical needs and remedies was moreover still deeply rooted in traditional seventeenth-century uncertainty and mutability. For them the disease inseparable in Thucydides's history from war appeared above all a metaphor for life.

Before Sprat's death in 1713, the poem was reissued in a 1709 edition and in the author's collected poems of 1712; no other separate publication of *The plague of Athens* was ever printed. The 1723 *Poetical register* still recognized Sprat as a 'celebrated Poet',³⁹ and Samuel Johnson later included a brief entry on the author in

³⁸ Wither, who later responded to the 1665 plague with the 1000-line poem, *A memorandum to London*, claimed to have sold 24,000 copies of the earlier work *Britain's remembrancer* (Allan Pritchard, 'George Wither: the poet as prophet', *Studies in Philology*, 59 [1962], 228 n. 31).

³⁹ See above note 2.

Lives of the poets, but his major poem became in the eighteenth century a less notable part of the verse gathered together in the various collections of works by English poets. The declining interest in *The plague of Athens* coincided with the waning enthusiasm for 'Pindarism' Johnson notes in his life of Cowley. A century that increasingly preferred Cowley's prose to his poetry also preferred the 'elegance' of Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*.⁴⁰ Though Sprat valued the 'near affinity' between Pindaric poetry and prose, the now unfashionable verse of *The plague of Athens* could not compete with the vivid prose account of epidemic disease Daniel Defoe created in his 1722 publication, *A journal of the plague year*, an imaginative re-creation of the 1665 catastrophe that also presents an idea of another by then remote and increasingly distant plague.

⁴⁰ Jean Loiseau documents Cowley's changing fortunes in *Abraham Cowley's reputation in England* (Paris: Henri Didier, 1931); Samuel Johnson, who praises the history's 'selection of sentiment and elegance of diction', notes in his life of Sprat, '*The History of the Royal Society* is now read, not with the wish to know what they were then doing, but how their transactions are exhibited by Sprat' (ii. 33).