

## BOOK REVIEW

*Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*. By HUNTER H. GARDNER. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 303. Hardback, \$98.00. ISBN: 978-0198796428.

This timely book explores two paradoxically unified narratives of plague in Latin literature: dissolution and reconstitution. Gardner analyzes Roman approaches to “zombie-esque” plague narratives not merely as ruinous episodes of death but, more broadly, as apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives, asking what comes *after* destruction. Beginning with the simple notion that disease affecting individual *corpora* offers a convenient metaphor for the political *corpus*, Gardner draws out a range of complex nuances latent in the multivalent nature of Roman contagion. Plague erases individual bodies and familial ties through liquefaction, dissolution and decay; this destruction of the individual creates a *tabula rasa* on which a new socio-political collective can be written.

Gardner moves chronologically through historical and literary accounts of plague to trace Roman responses to social and political upheaval: Livy on the early Republic; Lucretius on its end; Vergil on the emerging principate; and Ovid on post-civil war Rome. Part I of III (“*Tabula Rasa: A New Kind of Plague Narrative*”) explores literary representations of pestilence together with the lived realities of disease in late Republican and early Imperial Rome. Gardner presents ancient medical accounts of contagion alongside modern aesthetic theories from Artaud, Foucault, Girard and Sontag to develop a uniquely medical-critical approach to Roman plague discourse. Gardner’s modern theoretical approach, while welcome, curiously omits foundational ancient literary-critical approaches. Aristotle, for instance, receives no mention despite extensive discussion of Artaud’s idea that theatre is a cathartic experience, like “draining a giant abscess” (30). Applying her approach to Livy’s accounts of disease in early Rome, Gardner develops a generalized model of plague as a formative event which “culls” Rome’s people and government, creating newer, stronger institutions by breaking down weaker ones (74).

In Part II (“Experiments in Apocalyptic Thinking”), Gardner interweaves historical, political and literary developments of plague from Lucretius to Vergil and Ovid. Chapter 3 offers a political explanation of the oft-debated final lines of *De Rerum Natura*, extending Clay’s view of the plague as a “final test.”<sup>1</sup> Gardner highlights *DRN*’s opposition to closure by untangling the simultaneous homogeneity and division of plague victims, which foreshadows the ambiguity of the post-pestilence state. Does plague’s erosion of barriers produce a new, unified society? Or is the chaotic brawling that famously concludes the poem symbolic of the “frailty of any bond” (107)? Gardner’s political reading recovers readers’ material experience of plague, as earlier instruction in Lucretian atomism prepares them for the concluding narrative of disintegration, but does not address the problem of Epicurean pleasure at the end of the poem. How might the paradoxical productivity of plague’s work in building community through erosion support the poem’s commitment to *pleasurable* material experience?<sup>2</sup>

Chapters 4 and 5 explore Vergilian and Ovidian developments of the post-apocalyptic state teased in Lucretius. Gardner’s elucidation of pestilence in Vergil’s Noric and Cretan plagues together with Ovid’s narrative of plague on Aegina offers a fresh perspective on the tired debate of Augustan pessimism and optimism, as she employs the ambiguity of pestilential dissolution and reconstitution to “juxtapose the possibilities and limitations of the new order” (145). The liquefying effects of disease among cows and bees in Vergil’s *bougonia* model an Augustan return to a boundary-less Golden Age whose utopian and dystopian qualities eerily overlap. In turn, the complicated past rivalries among Ovid’s ant-born race signal the impossibility of the “thoughtless homogeneity” of Vergil’s newborn bees as a long-term model for Augustus’ state (149). Gardner’s rich analysis in these chapters prompts valuable questions for future study: Is the productivity of plague limited to optimistic readings of the body politic? Or are there ways in which the plague can have a positive outcome that also subverts the body politic? How can pestilence narratives inversely comment on the health of the state?

A final, wide-ranging Part III (“Transmitting Roman Plague”) considers the reception of late Republican and early Imperial plague discourse from Lucan, Seneca and Silius Italicus (Chapter 6) to early Christian poets, the Italian Renaissance and Margaret Atwood (Chapter 7). Lucan and Seneca’s provocative

<sup>1</sup> Diskin Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 266.

<sup>2</sup> For one potential response to this question, see Rebecca Moorman, “The Aesthetics of Disgust in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*,” *Classical Philology* 117, no. 4 (forthcoming October 2022).

representations of the false homogeneity of the imperial body politic eventually yield to Silius Italicus's treatment of plague as a diagnostic tool which can occasionally "remedy Roman *discordia*" (232). More hopeful directions for plague discourse continue in Gardner's final chapter, as fictional diseases, like their historic counterparts, become less deadly and more restorative. Another curious omission here, especially given Gardner's modern theoretical framework, is Haraway's work on the posthuman, which would have greatly enriched Gardner's consideration of "(post) human identity" (258).<sup>3</sup> The book's epilogue, which considers 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century zombie horror, concludes the study with an exciting application of themes in Roman plague discourse to modern social inequity and racial discord.

This book is commendable for its exploration of the "distinctively Roman features of contagion" (3), which offers a welcome correction to the historical privileging of Greek literary accounts of disease, but Gardner's focus on Latin epic, especially Augustan poetry, still leaves much of Latin literature untouched. I was surprised, for instance, not to find any mention of Roman satire or its well-recognized obsession with the diseased body.<sup>4</sup> Overall, however, Gardner has produced a thought-provoking work on the post-apocalyptic potential of plague in Roman culture and beyond, proving the universality of Roman pestilence narratives as a powerful response to radical changes in the body politic from ancient Rome to modern America.

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<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge 1991), 149-181 and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Kenneth J. Reckford, "Reading the Sick Body: Decomposition and Morality in Persius' Third Satire," in "Vile Bodies: Roman Satire and Corporeal Discourse," ed. Susanna Morton Braund and Barbara K. Gold, special issue, *Arethusa* 31, no. 3 (1998): 337-354.