

Episode Ninety-Two - The Plague of Athens, and the End of the Poem

Post by “Cassius” of October 4, 2021 at 8:40 PM

Welcome to Episode Ninety-Two of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please visit EpicureanFriends.com where you will find our goals and our ground rules. If you have any questions about those, please be sure to contact us at the forum for more information.

This Episode 92 will be the last of our regular episodes, as we complete Book Six and read Latin lines 1125 to the end of the poem. We will discuss our impressions of the Plague of Athens, and then next week we will have a recap of our impressions of the entire poem.

In honor of our completion of the poem we will split today's reading, with Joshua, Don, and Martin each taking a part.

Now let's join our panel reading today's text.

Munro Notes-

1138-1251: a plague thus engendered once devastated Athens: a large portion of the people were attacked by it; many of them after every form of bodily and mental suffering died in a few days; others later from the subsequent effects; others escaped, often with the loss of some member; medicine was of no avail; even friends and relatives frightened by the infection often deserted the sick.—The poet wishing to illustrate what he has laid down as the cause of disease, concludes his poem with this description which is an imitation, in many parts a close translation, of Thucydides is 47-54. One would infer from the words of Lucr. that he had no practical or scientific knowledge of any such like form of disease: he is content to take on trust whatever the historian says and, as we shall see, more than once misapprehends or misinterprets his words. I have looked into many professional accounts of this famous plague: the writers almost without exception praise Thucydides' accuracy and precision, and yet differ most strangely in the conclusions they draw from his words: physicians, English French or German, after examining the symptoms have decided that it was each of the following maladies, typhus scarlet putrid yellow camp hospital jail fever, scarlatina maligna, the black

death, erysipelas, smallpox, the oriental plague, some wholly extinct form of disease: each succeeding writer at least throws doubts on his predecessors' diagnosis. Lucretius' copy must manifestly be even more vague and inconclusive. The truth is that having laid down his general principles of disease and vindicated his philosophy, he seeks now to satisfy his poetical feeling by a powerful and pathetic description which he has plainly left in an unfinished state. He has been imitated in turn by Virgil *geor.* III 478-566, closely by Ovid *met.* v11 523-613, by Seneca *Oed.* 110-201, by Livy more than once, and by others.

1252-1286: the country-people flocked into the town and increased the misery ; all public places, even the temples, were crowded with the dead and dying; religion and all the decencies of burial were neglected.

Browne 1743

JOSHUA

[1138] Once such a plague as this, such deadly blasts, poisoned the coasts of Athens, founded by Cecrops. It raged through every street, unpeopled all the city, for coming from far (from Egypt, where it first began) and having passed through a long tract of air, and over the wide sea, it fixed at last upon the subjects of King Pandion. Men soon, by heaps, fell victim to the rage of death and the disease.

[1145] The head was first attacked with furious heats, and then the eyes turned bloodshot and inflamed; the jaws within sweated with black bloods; the throat (the passage of the voice) was stopped by ulcers; the tongue (the interpreter of the mind) overflowed with gore, and, faltered with the disease, felt rough, and scarce could move. And when the poison, through the jaws, had filled the breast, and flowed into the miserable stomach, then all the springs of life began to fail; the breath sent out a filthy smell abroad, like the rank stench of rotten carcasses, the powers of all the soul and all the body flag and grow faint, as in the gates of death. To these innumerable evils followed close a sad distress and sinking of the mind, loud sighs with bitter moans, and frequent sobbings, all the day and night, twitched and convulsed the nerves and every limb, and loosened every joint, and sorely racked the wretches, tired out with pains before.

[1163] Yet you could not perceive, by the touch, that the surface of the body was inflamed with any extraordinary heat; it felt only warm to the hand, and looked red all over with burning pustules, as when the sacred fire spreads over the limbs. But all within was in a flame that pierced the very bones; the heat raged in the stomach as in a furnace; no garment, ever so light or thin, could be endured upon their limbs; they rushed into the wind and cold, some plunging their bodies, scorched with the disease, in rivers, and naked threw themselves in chilling streams; some ran with open mouths and headlong leaped into deep wells; the parching thirst, insatiable, so burnt their bodies it made whole showers of water seem no more than a few drops.

[1178] The pain was without intermission, without end; the body lay quite spent, stretched out, the burning eyes wide open and, without sleep for many a restless night, rolled dreadfully about. The physician muttered to himself in silent fear, and leaves the patient in despair,

[1182] for many signs of coming death appeared. The mind distracted with death and horror; a stern brow; a countenance fierce and furious; the ears tormented with a buzzing noise; the breath thick, or deep and seldom drawn; a frothy sweat, flowing in abundance over the neck; the spittle thin and dry, and yellow as saffron, and the salt matter could scarce be brought up through the jaws by coughing; a contraction of the nerves in the hands, and a trembling over all the limbs, and a coldness creeping up gradually from the feet; the nostrils pinched in, as at the point of death; the nose sharp, the eyes sunk, the temples hollow, the skin cold and hard, a frightful distortion of the mouth, and the skin of the forehead stretched and shining. Nor did the wretches lie long under the cold hands of death, for they expired commonly upon the eighth, or at the farthest upon the ninth day.

DON

[1199] But if any of the infected, as some did, escaped with life, either the filthy ulcers breaking, or by a most offensive looseness, they fell at last into a consumption, and then died; or streams of corrupted blood, with grievous headache, flowed from his stuffed nostrils, and thus his strength and life ran out, and the wretch bled to death. Such as escaped a sharp flux of filthy blood at the nose, the poison pierced into their nerves and limbs, and seized upon their very genitals; and some were so terrified at the approach of death that they suffered the virile member to be cut off to preserve life. Some remained alive without hands and feet, and some lost their eyes, so terrible was the fear of death to these miserable wretches. Some were seized with an entire forgetfulness of every thing; they did not so much as know themselves.

[1215] When heaps of bodies lay one upon another, unburied, upon the ground, yet the birds of prey, and the wild beasts, either kept at a distance to avoid the noisome stench, or if they tasted they soon died. At that time no birds appeared abroad in the day, nor did the wild beasts leave the woods by night; many of them were infected with the disease, and fell down dead; the faithful dogs especially lay gaping out their infected breath in every street, for the poison drove out life from every limb.

[1225] The many funerals of the dead were hurried away without order, and unattended. Nor was their any certain remedy to be applied; for what was of service to some, and relieved the patient, and preserved life, was fatal and brought death to others.

[1230] But the most wretched and deplorable thing of all, at this time, was that when once a person found himself infected with the disease, as if a sentence of death had passed upon him, his spirits failed him, he fell into melancholy and despair, thought of nothing but death, and so gave up the ghost. And funerals were heaped one upon another, because the fierce contagion of the disease incessantly raged, and carried on the infection. And if any one, too fond of life, and fearing to die, avoided to visit the miserable sick, the same want of help was soon his own punishment; he died in a filthy and deplorable manner, abandoned, and without assistance, and

perished by neglect, like the wretched beasts of the field. And those who were compelled by shame, and by the moving cries and piteous moans of their friends, to attend them in their distress, were seized by the infection, and died by the disease and the fatigue. Indeed the most pious among them lost their lives in this manner:

[1247] And when they had endeavored to bury the bodies of whole families of their friends, among those of the friends of others, they returned, wearied with grief and weeping, and most of them took to their beds for sorrow. And there was not one to be found who, in this calamitous time, had not grievously suffered, either by the disease, or by death, or by the most bitter pain and anguish of mind.

MARTIN

[1252] Besides, the shepherds and the herdsmen, and the lusty ploughman pined away with the infection; their bodies lay miserably stretched out in their close narrow huts, and died of poverty and the disease. You might frequently see the dead parents lying over their dead children, and again, the children expiring upon the bodies of their wretched mothers and fathers.

[1259] Nor was it a small addition to this plague that was brought from the country to the city; for the infected peasants flocked higher in multitudes from all parts, and carried the sickness along with them. They filled all the houses, and all places; and as they were pent up close together, death had the greater power to slay them in heaps. Many bodies lay along in the streets, gasping for thirst; and, rolling to the public conduits, they drank insatiably and were suffocated with water. Others you might see in the highways and common places, languishing, with their bodies half dead, horrible with filth, covered with rags, and rotting with the corruption of the limbs; there was nothing but skin upon the bones, and that putrefied with eating ulcers, and buried in nastiness.

[1272] And lastly, death had filled all the temples of the gods with dead bodies, all the shrines of the celestial deities were loaded everywhere with carcasses. The priests furnished these places with such wretched guests. Nor was there any reverence paid to the gods; their divinities were no more regarded; for the present calamity overcame everything. Nor did the people any longer observe that custom of sepulture they had ever followed, which was to bury their dead in the city. They were all distracted and amazed, and every one buried his wretched friend as the exigency of things would permit. And sudden rage, and dreadful poverty, drove men into many outrageous actions: They would place their relations, with violent outcries, upon the funeral piles that were raised for others, and light the fire; and often quarrel, with much loss of blood, rather than forsake the bodies of their friends.

Munro 1886

[1138] Such a form of disease and a death-fraught miasm erst within the borders of Cecrops defiled the whole land with dead, and dispeopled the streets, drained the town of burghers. Rising first and starting from the inmost corners of Egypt, after traversing much air and many

floating fields, the plague brooded at last over the whole people of Pandion; and then they were handed over in troops to disease and death.

[1145] First of all they would have the head seized with burning heat and both eyes blood-shot with aglare diffused over; the livid throat within would exude blood and the passage of the voice be clogged and choked with ulcers, and the mind's interpreter the tongue drip with gore, quite enfeebled with sufferings, heavy in movement, rough to touch. Next when the force of disease passing down the throat had filled the breast and had streamed together even into the sad heart of the sufferers, then would all the barriers of life give way. The breath would pour out at the mouth a noisome stench, even as the stench of rotting carcasses thrown out unburied. And then the powers of the entire mind, the whole body would sink utterly, now on the very threshold of death. And a bitter despondency was the constant attendant on insufferable ills and complaining mingled with moaning. An ever-recurring hiccup often the night and day through, forcing on continual spasms in sinews and limbs, would break men quite, for wearying those forspent before.

[1163] And yet in none could you perceive the skin on the surface of the body burn with any great heat, but the body would rather offer to the hand a lukewarm sensation and at the same time be red all over with ulcers burnt into it so to speak, like unto the holy fire as it spreads over the frame. The inward parts of the men however would burn to the very bones, a flame would bum within the stomach as within furnaces. Nothing was light and thin enough to apply to the relief of the body of any one; ever wind and cold alone. Many would plunge their limbs burning with disease into the cool rivers, throwing their body naked into the water. Many tumbled headforemost deep down into the wells, meeting the water straight with mouth wide agape. Parching thirst with a craving not to be appeased, drenching their bodies, would make an abundant draught no better than the smallest drop.

[1178] No respite was there of ill: their bodies would lie quite spent. The healing art would mutter low in voiceless fear, as again and again they rolled about their eye-balls wide open, burning with disease, never visited by sleep.

[1182] And many symptoms of death besides would then be given, the mind disordered in sorrow and fear, the clouded brow, the fierce delirious expression, the ears too troubled and filled with ringings, the breathing quick or else strangely loud and slow-recurring, and the sweat glistening wet over the neck, the spittle in thin small flakes, tinged with a saffron-color, salt, scarce forced up the rough throat by coughing. The tendons of the hands ceased not to contract, the limbs to shiver, a coldness to mount with slow sure pace from the feet upward. Then at their very last moments they had nostrils pinched, the tip of the nose sharp, eyes deep-sunk, temples hollow, the skin cold and hard, on the grim mouth a grin, the brow tense and swollen; and not long after their limbs would be stretched stiff in death: about the eighth day of bright sunlight or else on the ninth return of his lamp they would yield up life.

[1199] And if any of them at that time had shunned the doom of death, yet in after time consumption and death would await him from noisome ulcers and the black discharge of the

bowels, or else a quantity of purulent blood accompanied by headache would often pass out by the gorged nostrils: into these the whole strength and substance of the man would stream. Then too if any one had escaped the acrid discharge of noisome blood, the disease would yet pass into his sinews and joints and onward even into the sexual organs of the body; and some from excessive dread of the gates of death would live bereaved of these parts by the knife; and some though without hands and feet would continue in life, and some would lose their eyes: with such force had the fear of death come upon them. And some were seized with such utter loss of memory that they did not know themselves.

[1215] And though bodies lay in heaps above bodies unburied on the ground, yet would the race of birds and beasts either scour faraway, to escape the acrid stench, or where anyone had tasted, it drooped in near-following death. Though hardly at all in those days would any bird appear, or the sullen breeds of wild beasts quit the forests. Many would droop with disease and die: above all faithful dogs would lie stretched in all the streets and yield up breath with a struggle, for the power of disease would wrench life from their frame.

[1225] Funerals lonely, unattended, would be hurried on with emulous haste. And no sure and general method of cure was found; for that which had given to one man the power to inhale the vital air and to gaze on the quarters of heaven, would be destruction to others and would bring on death.

[1230] But in such times this was what was deplorable and above all eminently heart-rending: when a man saw himself enmeshed by the disease, as though he were doomed to death, losing all spirit he would lie with sorrow-stricken heart, and with his thoughts turned on death would surrender his life then and there. Ay for at no time did they cease to catch from one another the infection of the devouring plague, like to woolly flocks and horned herds. And this all heaped death on death: whenever any refused to attend their own sick, killing neglect soon after would punish them for their too great love of life and fear of death by a foul and evil death, abandoned in turn, forlorn of help. But they who had stayed which shame would then compel them to undergo and the sick man's accents of affection mingled with those of complaining: this kind of death the most virtuous would meet.

[1247] and different bodies on by them, would perish by infection and the labor different piles, struggling as they did to bury the multitude of their dead: then spent with tears and grief they would go home; and in great part they would take to their bed from sorrow. And none could be found whom at so fearful a time neither disease nor death nor mourning assailed.

[1252] Then too every shepherd and herdsman, ay and sturdy guider of the bent plow sickened; and their bodies would lie huddled together in the corners of a hut, delivered over to death by poverty and disease. Sometimes you might see lifeless bodies of parents above their lifeless children, and then the reverse of this, children giving up life above their mothers and fathers.

[1259] And in no small measure that affliction streamed from the land into the town, brought thither by the sickening crowd of peasants meeting plague-stricken from every side. They

would fill all places and buildings: wherefore all the more the heat would destroy them and thus close-packed death would pile them up in heaps. Many bodies drawn forth by thirst and tumbled out along the street would lie extended by the fountains of water, the breath of life cut off from their too great delight in water; and over all the open places of the people and the streets you might see many limbs drooping with their half-lifeless body, foul with stench and covered with rags, perish away from filth of body, with nothing but skin on their bones, now nearly buried in noisome sores and dirt.

[1272] All the holy sanctuaries of the gods too death had filled with lifeless bodies, and all the temples of the heavenly powers in all parts stood burdened with carcasses: all which places the wardens had thronged with guests. For now no longer the worship of the gods or their divinities were greatly regarded: so overmastering was the present affliction. Nor did those rites of sepulture continue in force in the city, with which that pious folk had always been wont to be buried; for the whole of it was in dismay and confusion, and each man would sorrowfully bury as the present moment allowed. And the sudden pressure and poverty prompted to many frightful acts; thus with a loud uproar they would place their own kinsfolk upon the funeral piles of others, and apply torches, quarreling often with much bloodshed sooner than abandon the bodies.

Bailey 1921

[1138] Such a cause of plague, such a deadly influence, once in the country of Cecrops filled the fields with dead and emptied the streets, draining the city of its citizens. For it arose deep within the country of Egypt, and came, traversing much sky and floating fields, and brooded at last over all the people of Pandion. Then troop by troop they were given over to disease and death.

[1145] First of all they felt the head burning with heat, and both eyes red with a glare shot over them. The throat, too, blackened inside, would sweat with blood, and the path of the voice was blocked and choked with ulcers, and the tongue, the mind's spokesman, would ooze with gore, weakened with pain, heavy in movement, rough to touch. Then, when through the throat the force of disease had filled the breast and had streamed on right into the pained heart of the sick, then indeed all the fastnesses of life were loosened. Their breath rolled out a noisome smell from the mouth, like the stench of rotting carcasses thrown out of doors. And straightway all the strength of the mind and the whole body grew faint, as though now on the very threshold of death. And aching anguish went ever in the train of their unbearable suffering, and lamentation, mingled with sobbing. And a constant retching, ever and again, by night and day, would constrain them continually to spasms in sinews and limbs, and would utterly break them down, wearing them out, full weary before.

[1163] And yet in none could you see the topmost skin on the surface of the body burning with exceeding heat, but rather the body offered a lukewarm touch to the hands and at the same time all was red as though with the scar of ulcers, as it is when the holy fire spreads through the limbs. But the inward parts of the men were burning to the bones, a flame was burning

within the stomach as in a furnace. There was nothing light or thin that you could apply to the limbs of any to do him good, but ever only wind and cold. Some would cast their limbs, burning with disease, into the icy streams, hurling their naked body into the waters. Many leapt headlong deep into the waters of wells, reaching the water with their very mouth agape: a parching thirst, that knew no slaking, soaking their bodies, made a great draught no better than a few drops.

[1178] Nor was there any respite from suffering; their bodies lay there foredone. The healers' art muttered low in silent fear, when indeed again and again they would turn on them their eyes burning with disease and reft of sleep.

[1182] And many more signs of death were afforded then: the understanding of the mind distraught with pain and panic, the gloomy brow, the fierce frenzied face, and the ears too plagued and beset with noises, the breath quickened or drawn rarely and very deep, and the wet sweat glistening dank over the neck, the spittle thin and tiny, tainted with a tinge of yellow and salt, scarcely brought up through the throat with a hoarse cough. Then in the hands the sinews ceased not to contract and the limbs to tremble, and cold to come up little by little from the feet. Likewise, even till the last moment, the nostrils were pinched, and the tip of the nose sharp and thin, the eyes hollowed, the temples sunk, the skin cold and hard, a grin on the set face, the forehead tense and swollen. And not long afterwards the limbs would lie stretched stiff in death. And usually on the eighth day of the shining sunlight, or else beneath his ninth torch, they would yield up their life.

[1199] And if any of them even so had avoided the doom of death, yet afterwards wasting and death would await him with noisome ulcers, and a black flux from the bowels, or else often with aching head a flow of tainted blood would pour from his choked nostrils: into this would stream all the strength and the body of the man. Or again, when a man had escaped this fierce outpouring of corrupt blood, yet the disease would make its way into his sinews and limbs, and even into the very organs of his body. And some in heavy fear of the threshold of death would live on, bereft of these parts by the knife, and not a few lingered in life without hands or feet and some lost their eyes. So firmly had the sharp fear of death got hold on them. On some, too, forgetfulness of all things seized, so that they could not even know themselves.

[1215] And though bodies piled on bodies lay in numbers unburied on the ground, yet the race of birds and wild beasts either would range far away, to escape the bitter stench, or, when they had tasted, would fall drooping in quick-coming death. And indeed in those days hardly would any bird appear at all, nor would the gloomy race of wild beasts issue from the woods. Full many would droop in disease and die. More than all the faithful strength of dogs, fighting hard, would lay down their lives, strewn about every street; for the power of disease would wrest the life from their limbs.

[1225] Funerals deserted, unattended, were hurried on almost in rivalry. Nor was any sure kind of remedy afforded for all alike; for that which had granted to one strength to breathe in his mouth the life-giving breezes of air, and to gaze upon the quarters of the sky, was destruction

to others, and made death ready for them.

[1230] And herein was one thing pitiful and exceeding full of anguish, that as each man saw himself caught in the toils of the plague, so that he was condemned to death, losing courage he would lie with grieving heart; looking for death to come he would breathe out his spirit straightway. For indeed, at no time would the contagion of the greedy plague cease to lay hold on one after the other, as though they were woolly flocks or horned herds. And this above all heaped death on death. For all who shunned to visit their own sick, over-greedy of life and fearful of death, were punished a while afterwards by slaughtering neglect with a death hard and shameful, abandoned and reft of help. But those who had stayed near at hand would die by contagion and the toil, which shame would then constrain them to undergo, and the appealing voice of the weary, mingled with the voice of complaining. And so all the nobler among them suffered this manner of death.

[1247] and one upon others, as they vied in burying the crowd of their dead: worn out with weeping and wailing they would return; and the greater part would take to their bed from grief. Nor could one man be found, whom at this awful season neither disease touched nor death nor mourning.

[1252] Moreover, by now the shepherd and every herdsman, and likewise the sturdy steersman of the curving plough, would fall drooping, and their bodies would lie thrust together into the recess of a hut, given over to death by poverty and disease. On lifeless children you might often have seen the lifeless bodies of parents, and again, children breathing out their life upon mothers and fathers.

[1259] And in no small degree that affliction streamed from the fields into the city, brought by the drooping crowd of countrymen coming together diseased from every quarter. They would fill all places, all houses; and so all the more, packed in stifling heat, death piled them up in heaps. Many bodies, laid low by thirst and rolled forward through the streets, lay strewn at the fountains of water, the breath of life shut off from them by the exceeding delight of the water, and many in full view throughout the public places and the streets you might have seen, their limbs drooping on their half-dead body, filthy with stench and covered with rags, dying through the foulness of their body, only skin on bones, wellnigh buried already in noisome ulcers and dirt.

[1272] Again, death had filled all the sacred shrines of the gods with lifeless bodies, and all the temples of the heavenly ones remained everywhere cumbered with carcasses; for these places the guardians had filled with guests. For indeed by now the religion of the gods and their godhead was not counted for much: the grief of the moment overwhelmed it all. Nor did the old rites of burial continue in the city, with which aforesaid this people had ever been wont to be buried; for the whole people was disordered and in panic, and every man sorrowing buried his dead, laid out as best he could. And to many things the sudden calamity and filthy poverty prompted men. For with great clamouring they would place their own kin on the high-piled pyres of others, and set the torches to them, often wrangling with much bloodshed, rather than abandon the bodies.