

# A Deadly Fever

**Post by “Joshua” of January 15, 2023 at 2:00 AM**

Emily Austin's new book has invited many of us to reconsider how we think about the way in which Lucretius ends the sixth and final book of *De Rerum Natura*--with a horrific account of the Plague of Athens in 430 BCE. The ending has long been a source of conflicting opinions. George Santayana in his collection of essays called *Three Philosophical Poets* speculated, like many before and after him, the poem was unfinished--that the conclusion does not seem to satisfy the potential symmetry that Lucretius sets up in the Hymn to Venus, and that, properly finished, Lucretius would have ended with Mars on the warpath. It ends rather morbidly, but Mars never does get his marching cadence.

When I first read Santayana I went looking for clues--clues of the [A STILO MV](#) variety. I never found anything; that is, until tonight.

Before I get to that, lets review some of the hymn to Venus.

- Venus is portrayed as a nurturing mother who gave birth to the founding line of Rome.
- She fills the sea with ships and the land with grain
- Her coming dispels the clouds, placates the sea,
- Her generative power passes on the "teeming breeze of the west wind" (aura Favoni)
- She strikes the heart of man and beast and bird, urging them to procreate after their kind
- Lucretius asks her to placate her lover Mars, who lies on her lap and hangs from her lips by his mouth.

Now for the plague in Athens, starting with line 1138

- While Venus brought life to Rome, the plague brought death to Athens
- Under Venus, clear sky and calm ocean "shine with diffused light". The plague traverses "reaches of air and floating fields of foam"
- Venus' breeze carries life and warmth across the land. The plagued air carries foulness and death.
- It settles on the Athens, and human and beast alike lie rotting in the streets.
- Venus "alone governs the way things are". The plague makes Athens ungovernable, with temples and shrines heaped up with the bodies of the dead
- The hymn to Venus sets the stage for Epicurus. The plague ends rather abruptly.

OK! Now for my meaningless Kabbalistic word games! I mentioned that the section on the plague in Athens starts at line 1138 on the Perseus website. Here's the first sentence:

Quote from Perseus website

Haec ratio quondam morborum et mortifer aestus  
finibus in Cecropis funestos reddidit agros  
vastavitque vias, exhausit civibus urbem.

Quote from William Ellery Leonard

'Twas such a manner of disease, 'twas such  
Mortal miasma in Cecropian lands  
Whilom reduced the plains to dead men's bones,  
Unpeopled the highways, drained of citizens  
The Athenian town.

Quote from anonymous Daniel Brown Edition

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.

Quote from Cyril Bailey

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.

Quote from H. A. J. Munro

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.

"Mortal Miasma", "Deadly Blast", "Deadly Influence", "Death-fraught miasm"--these are translations of the *mortifer aestus*, the killing fever of the plague. I'll stick with deadly influence. These are the last two words of the first line of the plague. *Aeneadum genetrix* are the first two

words of the first line of the hymn to Venus. So we have the life-giving mother of Rome contrasted with the deadly influence of the plague.

I found a strange little anagram.

M O R T I F E R - A E S T U S -  
F E T U S - O R E - M A R T I S

### **FETUS ORE MARTIS**

**Fetus, n.,** nominative singular, "Offspring"

**Ore, n.,** ablative singular, "[from] the Mouth"

**Martis, n.,** genitive singular, "[of] Mars"

A deadly disease-the 'offspring from the mouth of Mars.' In the beginning of the poem Venus restrains him, and Mars hangs pacified from her mouth.

In the end, they are irreconcilable. Venus breaths life, and Mars death. Love and Strife, generation and destruction, the two Empedoclean forces vying with one another in a struggle without end, and each made possible by the other.

So what do you think? 😊