

Plague, Individualism, and Exemplary Behavior in Silius Italicus' *Punica*

Plague in ancient epic frequently connotes internal strife: from the Homeric *nosos* that sparks discord between Achilles and Agamemnon in the *Iliad* (1.9-10) to the pestilence that afflicts Pompey's soldiers prior to engaging in battle with Caesar in Lucan's *Pharsalia* (6.80-105), physical contagion mirrors the dysfunction of a community at odds with itself. As a metaphor for civil war, plague can articulate how individual members of a community are threatened by proximity or exposure to ideals that weaken the civic body, and the potency of plague as a metaphor is heightened by the frequent elision in ancient thought between the individual human body and the body politic (cf. Woodman 2009). Silius Italicus, however, parts company with his epic predecessors in his treatment of the pestilence that afflicts both the Carthaginian and Roman camps during the siege of Syracuse (14.580-640), a critical operation in the larger context of the second Punic War. This paper argues that, in contrast to treatments of plague that tend to erase distinctions within masses of unburied, anonymous dead (Girard 1974; Sontag 1978), Silius' treatment of the Syracusan plague functions to articulate the heroic identity of a single general, Marcellus, under whose leadership the threat of inglorious death is staunchly countered.

In order to demonstrate Silius' innovative treatment of contagion, I turn first to his primary source for the episode, Livy's third decade of *Ab Urbe Condita*, 25.26. While both authors stress the ubiquity of death and decay during the outbreak, Silius transforms Livy's *commune malum* (25.26.7), a *pestilentia* whose origins lie in atmospheric conditions, into a "hostile plague" (*inimica pestis*, 14.582), a calamity caused in part by divine wrath, though it is initially felt with alarming equality among both Carthaginians and Romans (*communis ira deum*, Pun.14.616-617; Spaltenstein 1990). Where Livy's treatment does not credit any

single Roman with saving the *castra* (Marcellus merely transfers surviving soldiers into the city, 25.26.15), the dehumanizing prevalence of death in the *Punica*, where afflicted soldiers die like sheep (*in morem pecudum*, 14.631), acts as a foil for the emergence of Marcellus' exemplary behavior (cf. Tipping 2010). Through his portrait of Marcellus' leadership, Silius draws a distinction between the kind of contagion that leads to annihilation and a transmission of ideals, especially that of self-sacrifice, more productive for stabilizing of Roman *imperium* (14.627-634). In so doing, he offers a lesson in managing the pressures of acting as an exemplary individual in the context of a communal drama that privileges homogeneity.

Having established the poet's refashioning of Livy's narrative in order to augment Marcellus' heroism within acceptable limits, I then situate the *Punica's* Syracusan plague within the plague topos in earlier Latin epic. Language reminiscent of Vergil's Noric cattle plague in the third *Georgic* (3.478-566) and Ovid's plague of Aegina (*Met.* 7.517-660; Vallillee 1960) suggests that Silius is harnessing a literary tradition that points bleakly to the apocalyptic extent of plague as civil war, and attempts to represent his *pestis* as a crucible in which Roman *virtus* is forged. In particular, I examine how Silius' brief portrait of an *insignis bellator* (14.606-607) alludes to a dying champion race horse in the *Georgics* (3.498-502; cf. Ovid *Met.* 7.542-544), but attempts to counter the erasure of distinctions that accompany disease as civil war in the earlier epic (Putnam 1979; Thomas 1988; Perkell 1989; cf. Gale 1992) with the renewal of distinction in the figure of Marcellus.

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