Epidemiology Through Poetry: Fracastoro's Pestilential Avianocide

In *Syphilidis, sive Morbi Gallici,* Girolamo Fracastoro – a 16th century Veronese intellectual and author of the first ontological theory of disease – presents his poetic investigation into the origins of the French disease. The work concludes with an epic version of the origins and transmission of the disease, with allusions to Columbus' expedition and several classical models. In a scene built around the slaughter of local birds, Fracastoro makes direct allusions to the island of the harpies from *Aeneid* 3 as Columbus' men embark on their bird-hunt (*MG*.3.136-199) and reimagines the harpies as the vectors of a violent airborne epidemic.

Scholarly discussions of the third book have mostly revolved around Columbus' first Spanish expedition and connections to Aeneas and his arrival in Italy (Hofmann, 1994.) David Quint (Quint, 1993) and Phillip Hardie (Hardie, 2004) ground their interpretation of Fracastoro's use of Vergilian allusions in *MG*.3 in terms of the explorers rather than the disease. From this foundation, Quint and Hardie analyze Celaeno's curse as the model for the parrot's prophecy (*Aen.*3.245-246, *MG*.3.170-173), focusing their interpretation on the comments on imperialism that Fracastoro might be making.

There is certainly compelling evidence for this connection, but I believe the very presence of an allusion to the harpies also points to how much this material offered a medical philosopher like Fracastoro because of their strong association with airborne disease and contamination. Vergil portrays the harpies as creatures that corrupt whatever they come into contact with; they are compared to and act like a disease (*Aen.*3.214-215, 225-228.) In another passage their very mouths are the source of contamination (*Aen.*3.232-234.) Fracastoro uses the harpies' presence through the birds to infuse disease into the episode from the beginning via the underlying model's firm association with things that are a *pestis* and *foedus*. The birds serve a

dual role – victim and disease-bringer. They fall victim to the 'disease' that is spread by the explorers' gunfire, and in turn the explorers are infected by disease from the parrots that they shoot down. In this way they are also like the harpies – who are described both as befouled and the bringers of befoulment.

The communalities between the two scenes are further emphasized through the many notable resonances between the landing parties of the Trojans and the Spaniards. Like Aeneas and his men, the Spaniards are voyagers who make landfall on an island that has a pastoral landscape, recklessly attack animals they believe to be unprotected (*Aen.*3.219-223; *MG.*3.155-160), and are violently punished for killing the Sun god's creatures (*MG.*3.137 ff..) The fulfillment of the parrot's curse (as the members of the expedition fall ill) has much in common with the harpies' violent attack.

The way that Fracastoro crafts the disease imagery in this scene comes into sharper focus after Fracastoro's engagement with Lucretius is taken into account; the second layer of Lucretian allusions actually reemphasize the significance of the Vergilian allusions. By this point in the poem, Fracastoro has already established Lucretian atomic language as one of the ways he describes how diseases move. During the hunt, Fracastoro gives a detailed description of the process that leads up to the bullet whizzing through the air towards its target (*MG.*3.160-169.) The progression from bringing together the necessary material, lighting the tinder, and firing the deadly bullet directly echo his description of the formation of disease in *MG.*1, where Lucretius is a clear presence.

Vergil's description of the harpies emphasizes their pestilential qualities. Fracastoro's allusion to this element is key to understanding his depiction of the Spaniards' interactions with the birds. All the components in the hunt become vivid images for the movement of a virulent

quick spreading disease – from its origins in the gunpowder to its transmission by the birds, and the pestilential quality of the harpies and their aerial attacks is brought into focus by the reappearance of recurring Lucretian allusions to atomic motion. Fracastoro is presenting us with an intense and brilliant word-picture for one of his major contributions to the study of disease in his time – a theory of how invisible disease-forming particles travel through the air.

Bibliography

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