

Demons and Diseases in Vergil's *Aeneid*

As we are constantly beset by diseases both real and metaphorical, we strive both to come to an understanding of a world in which diseases can kill mercilessly and seemingly without cause or justification as well as to find a way to communicate with others our experiences of sickness. How should one describe a disease? It is a silent killer: something that creeps unseen into our most intimate quarters, our own bodies. Some ancient authors have taken this approach: Hesiod describes personified diseases moving silently about in the night of their own will (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 100-104). Others have attempted to place moral value on sickness: if you are sick, then you have done something wrong and deserve such sickness. Homer describes the plague in Book I of the *Iliad* in such a manner: Apollo shoots plague on the Greek soldiers for the offenses of their leader, Agamemnon (Homer *Iliad*: 43-67). This paper will evaluate how another author describes and uses disease within his work: Vergil.

Aeneas, outside his trusty comrades, would seem to have two other common companions throughout his journeys in Vergil's *Aeneid*: disease, both that which afflicts a single person and that which would be more properly termed pestilence, and the demonic, by which I mean monsters and lesser gods of superhuman capability. This paper will have two primary parts: first, it will focus on these two topics individually in Vergil's *Aeneid*, examining how the poet uses them for similar purposes; second, it will evaluate the imagery associated with select demons (the Harpies, Fama, and Allecto) from the poem to argue that Vergil uses pestilential imagery to describe them and their actions, blurring the lines between the two categories of disease and the demonic.

I will first outline where in the text pestilences and lesser diseases arise in the *Aeneid* and how the author uses them as a tool of the divine, i.e. not appearing naturally but orchestrated by

divine will. Next, I will perform the same task for that of the monsters appearing in the text, again arguing that they are placed within the text primarily as agents of divine will, most often as a preventative measure taken against Aeneas settling before he reaches Italy but also both as inhibitors to his progress towards Italy.

In the final and most substantial portion of this presentation, I will argue that given how close the functions of these two categories are, Vergil begins to use the imagery of the pestilential to describe the demonic. My discussion will center around three particular appearances of the demonic in the *Aeneid*: the Harpies, Fama, and Allecto. The discussion of the harpies in Book III will focus on how the poet describes the harpies as polluting demons, defiling everything they touch and recalling miasma theory, a medical theory for contagion that had substantial popularity in Antiquity. For the discussion of Fama, I will show how Vergil's description of the demon actively engages in the notion of miasmatic pestilence: Fama is seen as a spreading presence that enters the orifices of men and infects them with foreign thoughts, just as miasma will spread from the air into the same orifices to infect them with disease. Lastly, my discussion of Allecto will revolve around her actions as an agent of Juno: she transgresses the border of the body, sinking into Amata her own contagion, a snake plucked from her own head. This transgression shows a key distinction being applied to the demon: she does not rend and tear her way through the body's perimeter but sinks in through hidden means, as diseases creep into the body.

In conclusion, I will bring in evidence from other authors showing the conscious interplay and connections between the demonic and disease, showing that this intimate relation between the two categories extends beyond the borders of Vergil's poetry and time.

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