

The Diseased Body and Male Civic Identity: A Kristevan Reading  
of Thucydides' Plague Narrative

This paper argues that the diseased body in Thucydides' plague narrative may best be understood in light of both Greek notions about the male body in Hippocratic literature and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, which "disturbs identity, system and order...[and] does not respect boundaries, positions, rules" (4). I propose reading Thucydides' diseased bodies as "abjected"—violated and feminized in a way that threatened Athenian masculine identity.

Previous scholarship has sought to identify the disease (e.g., Papagrigrorakis et al.), or to distinguish the "scientific" elements of his account derived from Hippocratic sources from his "poetic" language (e.g., de Romilly). Scholars have also examined the diseased body's larger role within the work (e.g., Swain, Kallett, Foster). In a similar vein, I argue that the wider narrative context highlights a link between body, civic identity, and *polis* that foregrounds the problems of the diseased, abjected body. Although Thucydides does not give a clinically accurate account of a specific disease, he vividly depicts the bodily and psychological experience of the plague from the perspective of a traumatized survivor.

According to the Hippocratic corpus (e.g., King), Athenian men considered their bodies intact, impenetrable, and under their control, in contrast with the soft, penetrable, unstable female body. Disease symptoms therefore reveal the male body's troubling instability (Holmes). Thucydides' list of symptoms (2.49) takes on meaning in light of the Kristevan abject. His text dwells on the contrast between the inside and outside of the body, only to muddle these boundaries: internal effluvia are ejected (2.49.2–3); the ultimate barrier of the body, the skin, breaks down in boils (2.49.5); and extremities fall off (2.49.7–8). Thucydides' account casts the

disease's symptoms as forces that reduce the body to a penetrable entity without clear distinctions between inside and outside, subject and object.

Immediately before the plague narrative, the physical body is connected with civic identity in Perikles' funeral oration, which defines the Athenian citizen as possessing τὸ σῶμα αὐτάρκες (2.41.1). This civic body is destroyed in the plague narrative (Holmes): σῶμα τε αὐτάρκες ὃν οὐδὲν διεφάνη πρὸς αὐτὸ ἰσχύος περὶ ἢ ἀσθενείας (2.51.3). Men began to consider their bodies ephemeral, like material goods: ἐφήμερα τὰ τε σώματα καὶ τὰ χρήματα ὁμοίως ἡγούμενοι (2.53.2). No longer connected with identity, the Athenian male body has become wholly material. The diseased body, abjected and lacking boundaries, also functions as a microcosm of the *polis* (Brock): the divisions and *nomoi* carefully laid out to introduce Perikles' funeral oration (2.34) are destroyed. Sacred and profane, elite and poor, even human and animal (2.50.1), are no longer separate, and burial customs are abandoned: ...ἐξ ὀλιγορίαν ἐτράποντο καὶ ἱερῶν καὶ ὁσίων ὁμοίως. νόμοι τε πάντες ξυνεταράχθησαν οἷς ἐχρῶντο πρότερον περὶ τὰς ταφάς... (2.52.3–4). The male body in Thucydides' text is, then, intimately bound up with notions of civic and masculine identity: when the body falls ill, the *polis* also suffers.

This reading of Thucydides' diseased body allows a glimpse of Athenian male psychology during this crisis. No longer in control of his body, the male plague victim grappled with not only the destruction of his body, but also the loss of his sense of self and his masculinity. In fact, Thucydides states that the plague's most lethal facet was the despair it brought upon its victims: δεινότατον δὲ παντὸς ἦν τοῦ κακοῦ ἢ τε ἀθυμία ὅποτε τις αἰσθοίτο κάμνων (2.51.4). In sum, Thucydides' plague narrative is a personal encounter with the abject that shows the debilitating psychological effects of the destruction of male, Athenian bodily identity and the concomitant loss of civic identity, devastating to the entire *polis*.

## Bibliography

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