ATHENS AND ORAN: HEROISMS IN TWO PLAGUES

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ABSTRACT: In the autumn of 430 BCE, the city of Athens was devastated by a plague, one chronicled by both the Athenian historian Thucydides and the Roman poet Lucretius. Albert Camus' notebooks and novel *The Plague* (*La peste*) clearly show his interest in the plague of Athens and several scholars have detected comparisons between its narrator, Dr. Rieux, and the historian Thucydides. But a careful examination of what Rieux actually says about the plague of Athens complicates matters and suggests that Camus in some sense rejects accounts of the plague of Athens as a model for his novel. Such a rejection seems confirmed by the novel's identification of Joseph Grand as its hero, an example of decidedly non-Periclean virtue. I argue that although one can find comparisons within the *Plague* between Athens and Oran, more pronounced are their contrasts.

Keywords: Albert Camus, Thucydides, Lucretius, *La peste*, plague of Athens

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1. Introduction

Scholars have long recognized that Albert Camus' 1947 novel, *La peste* (translated as *The Plague*) is informed by the plague that struck Athens in 430 BCE. The novel's main character (and covert narrator) Dr. Rieux offers a short world history of the bubonic plague and explicitly refers to the plague of Athens (I.5).[1] Archambault's study of Greek sources in Camus' writings amply shows that Camus incorporated, verbatim, a passage from Lucretius' depiction of the plague in his 1st C. BCE *On the Nature of Things* (Lucr. 6.1138–1284), a work which itself draws heavily on Thucydides' account of the plague in his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* (Thuc. 2.47–54).[2] Paul Demont has also shown that Camus' notebooks document the planned character of Philippe Stephan, a professor of Greek and Latin in the city of Oran—who ultimately did not make the final draft of the novel—but who (according to Camus' notebooks) proclaims that he never really understood Thucydides and Lucretius until he experienced the plague in Oran.[3] Finally, scholars

[1] I cite Camus' *The Plague* either by part/subsection (e.g., I.5=part I.subsection 5) or by page number in Camus 1975, occasional emended. French text is Camus 1947.

[2] See Archambault (1972: 54–62). References to Lucretius and Thucydides derive from Smith (2001) and Woodruff (1993) and are cited parenthetically.

[3] See Demont 1996, 1999, and 2009. The relevant notebook passages are translated in Camus (1998: INSERT).

like Archambault, Robert Zaretsky, and John Percival have noticed numerous similarities between Dr. Rieux and Thucydides' self-described focus upon objective observation.[4]

Although clearly scholars are attuned to source-related relations between Athens and Oran, as it were, Camus' explicit discussion of the plague of Athens requires further examination. Oddly enough, Dr. Rieux misrepresents crucial details of the plague of Athens because his imagination takes hold and projects a sort of heroic narrative onto the plague. But the novel subsequently, and explicitly, undermines such a heroic narrative. What the narrator imagines about the nature of the plague (either in Athens or in Oran) in April, in the early stages of the Oranian plague, is drastically different from what the narrator actually experiences of the plague in August, when the death toll of Oran is at its worse (as chronicled in Part III of the novel). Somewhat paradoxically, Camus fictional novel calls into question and seeks to correct, more objectively, the (fictional) nature of the plague in Athens (and perhaps even its depiction in Lucretius). Camus the novelist invites us to imagine the experience of the Oranian plague more "objectively." But such an "objective" account of plague re-imagines the role of the hero. If Pericles' funeral oration presents the image of the paradigmatic hero of 5th C. Athens as both a warrior and a public democratic citizen, Dr. Rieux presents Joseph Grand, a minor bureaucrat, as the hero of the plague in Oran in the 1940s because of his role as a healer (or, more accurately a statistician who contributes to the battle of healers fighting the plague). I suspect that part of the enduring popularity of Camus' novel, at least during the COVID-19 pandemic, comes from the fact that its heroes are quite similar to our own

[4] See Percival (1971: 206–210) and Zaretsky (2010: 89–94, 105–109). The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a bit of a cottage industry pursuing parallels to the plague of Athens; see, among many others, Kelaidis (2020).

heroes of the pandemic, namely our doctors, nurses, hospital workers, and those who support them in the fight against the pandemic.

In order to show that Camus' novel, *The Plague*, offers a critical contrast between the plague in Athens and that in Oran, in the first part of my chapter I examine carefully what the novel says about the Athenian plague in subsection I.5 of the novel (its sole explicit discussion of Athens). In the second part of my chapter I examine how Camus' depiction of the plague in Athens includes details that are absent from the accounts of Thucydides and Lucretius, details that the character of Dr. Rieux simply makes up in his imagination, which creates an erroneous hybrid image of Athens/Oran, an image that the "objective" Dr. Rieux rejects. That Camus wishes to contrast the accounts of the plagues in Athens and Oran finds confirmation in the third part of my chapter, in which I argue that Camus' discussion of heroism in *The Plague* contrasts starkly with the depiction of heroism found in Pericles' funeral oration. By means of a conclusion, I briefly reflect on how Camus' depiction of heroism in *The Plague* conforms better with our own notions of heroism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Camus' Athens during the plague

Camus' explicit discussion of the plague of Athens is contained in Dr. Rieux's historical reflection after the term plague "had been uttered for the first time" (36). Within the narrative sequence of the novel, which begins in mid-April in a year of the 1940s, by the second week of May Oran had experienced not only the deaths of thousands of rats, but also approximately a dozen

deaths due to an unfamiliar disease (29, 30).[5] The medical community of Oran, represented by Doctors Richard, Rieux, and Castel, debate the identity of the illness, and Dr. Castel, a doctor who had witnessed an outbreak of plague in Canton, China, in 1894, prompts Rieux to acknowledge that "It's hardly credible. But everything points to its being plague" (p. 36). But although Camus inserts into the narrative a short history of the bubonic plague, the section also offers a reflection on the juxtaposition of scientific observation and imagination, which appears to be one of the keys in interpreting Camus' description of the plague of Athens.

After reflecting on the similarities between pestilence and war and reporting that Rieux felt "a vague unease" about the future, Camus writes that

> [Rieux] tried to recall what he had read about the disease. Figures floated across his memory, and he recalled that some thirty or so great plagues known to history had accounted for nearly a hundred million deaths. But what are a hundred million deaths? When one has served in a war, one hardly knows what a dead man is, after a while. And since a dead man has no substance unless one has actually seen him dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke in the imagination (*l'imagination*). (38)

[5] Readers are reminded that the bubonic plague (caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis)* is usually transmitted by a flea that infects the rats as hosts. The massive death of rats in Oran means that the fleas carrying *Y. pestis* are in search of a new host, namely human Oranians.

Rieux recalls the plagues of Constantinople (541 CE) and Canton (1894), wondering how to make comprehensible their death tolls—perhaps by lining-up bodies end-to-end. But he rebukes himself: "He was letting his imagination play pranks—the last thing wanted just now. A few cases, he told himself, don't make an epidemic; they merely call for serious precautions. He must fix his mind, first of all, on the observed facts" (39). Focusing on the "objective of "scientific" nature of plague, Rieux produces from memory of a medical school textbook a list of its symptoms.[6]

Camus then has Rieux recount "a whole series of fantastic possibilities" (*une longue suite d'images extraordinaires*) associated with the word "plague," what he calls "old pictures of the plague," beginning with "Athens, reeking and deserted even by the birds" (39) and followed by the horrifying imagery of six other historical plagues (in addition to Athens, those of China [1855], Marseille and Provence [1720], Constantinople [541], the Black Death [c.1350], Milan [1629], and London [1665]). The reflection concludes with Camus' sole explicit discussion of Athens:

> Dr. Rieux called to mind the funeral pyres of which Lucretius tells, that the Athenians struck by the illness raised in front of the water (*devant la mer*). The dead were brought there after nightfall, but there was not room enough, and the living fought one another with torches for a space where to lay those who had been dear to them; for they had rather engage in bloody conflicts than abandon their dead. One could imagine the red glow of the pyres before the water (*devant l'eau*),

[6] Cf. Thuc. 2.49, Lucr. 6.1145–1204. Demont (2013) shows that the apparent "objectivity" of reporting scientific symptoms belies several decades of scholarship that has been unable to determine decisively what disease (or perhaps diseases) struck Athens in 430 BCE.

> tranquil and dark; battling torches whirling sparks across the darkness; and thick, fetid smoke rising towards the watchful sky. One could fear… But such dizziness (*ce vertige*) can't hold before reason.[7] (40, my translation).

Camus has Rieux step back from such historical imagination, pull himself together, and remind himself that there is solace in one's "everyday work (*le travail*)…The thing was to do your job (*son métier*) well" (41).[8] But what lesson is the reader to take from Rieux's historical reflection? To unpack his reflection one must examine the Lucretius passage that Rieux (imaginatively) quotes.

3. Thucydides and Lucretius' Athens during the plague

Although Percival and Zaretsky posit comparisons between Dr. Rieux and Thucydides, Archambault notes that Camus' explicit discussion of the plague of Athens derives from the account in Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* rather than Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*.[9] Lucretius, a 1st C. BCE Roman poet who sought to transmit the scientific

[7] A major theme of *The Plague* concerns the relationship between reason, abstraction, and empathy (see, for instance, Rambert and the mother of a plague-stricken girl who criticize Rieux as lacking pity or empathy due to his focus on reason [86–87, 89–90]).

[8] That one may find solace in one's everyday toil, perhaps an echo of Camus' interpretation of Sisyphus, is a reoccurring them in the *Plague* (82, 136, 150, 163–164).

[9] Archambault (1972: 55–56) documents Camus' quotation from Lucretius and the verbal echoes of his contemporary French translation of Lucretius in the novel. But although he notes that

and ethical philosophies of Epicurus to a Latin audience, provides an extended account of the plague of Athens as part of his explanation of miasma and the atomistic explanation of the transmission of pestilence (6.1138–1284). Scholars have long recognized that Lucretius' account draws quite heavily—albeit with occasional mistranslation—from Thucydides' account, even if in some places Lucretius adds details absent from Thucydides.[10]

For Dr. Rieux, the plague of Athens had several distinctive features: the city was deserted by birds; the dead were cremated on funeral pyres at night, alongside the seashore; and the families of the dead broke into torch-lit fights in their efforts to cremate their dead. The observations on carrion birds, recollected by Rieux, can be found in both Thucydides and Lucretius (Thuc. 2.50, Lucr. 6.1215-24). But Rieux's account of the funeral pyres more closely follows that of Lucretius. Thucydides, for instance, only reports that

> the laws [Athenians] had followed before concerning funerals were all disrupted now, everyone burying their dead wherever they could. Many were forced, by a shortage of necessary materials after so many deaths, to take disgraceful measures for the funerals of their relatives: when one person had made a funeral pyre, another would get before him, throw on his dead, and give it fire; others would come to a

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Thucydides is never quoted in the *Plague*, "several passages of the novel bear what strikes this reader as the unmistakable Thucydidean imprint" (56).

[10] Commager (1957) and Stoddard (1996) explore the continuities and discontinuities between Thucydides and Lucretius on the plague of Athens.

> pyre that was already burning, throw on the bodies they carried, and go their way again. (Thuc. 2.53)

Listen, instead, to Lucretius' version of the same phenomenon:

> And many dreadful expedients were prompted by poverty and the sudden emergency. With loud clamoring people would place their own relatives on pyres piled high for others and apply torches to them, often engaging in bloody brawls rather than abandon the bodies. (6.1282–84).

Rather clearly, Rieux's imagery of inter-citizen conflict and torch-illuminated brawls derives from Lucretius rather than Thucydides, as Rieux himself notes (41). Thucydides' Athenians appear much more despondent than combative in their failure to abide by customary burial practices (Thuc. 2.51).

But perhaps what is most remarkable in Rieux's account of the plague of Athens is his imagination's conflation of Lucretius' Athens and the seaside city of Oran. Rieux clearly envisions the human brawling and towering plumes of the funeral pyres taking place next to the ocean; indeed, he reports that "one could imagine the red glow of the pyres before the water (*devant l'eau*), tranquil and dark; battling torches whirling sparks across the darkness; and thick, fetid smoke rising towards the watchful sky" (40). Although Thucydides notes that the plague originated in the Athenian port of the Piraeus and Lucretius mentions the inter-familial strife, neither of them

make reference to sea-side night-time funeral pyres.[11] Indeed, their accounts of the temples in Athens appear to refer to the area around the acropolis rather than the Piraeus, which is several miles away from the urban center of Athens. By contrast, from the first page of the *Plague* Camus has emphasized the fact that Oran is a sea-side city, one whose swimming beaches provide a gauge for its health.[12] The narrator's imagination has clearly (but erroneously) combined images of Athens and Oran under plague conditions.

In general, Camus treats "imagination" in *The Plague* with some ambivalence. Although Rieux's imagination transfers the horrors of Athens to Oran in an erroneous way that produces irrational fear, elsewhere in the novel Camus has characters criticize a lack of imagination on behalf of those responding to the threat of the plague. So, for instance, 302 deaths took place in the third week of the plague, but according to the narrator that fact failed to strike "the imagination" of the populace (78). Dr. Castel and Jean Tarrou both criticize the Prefect of Oran for lacking imagination, and what they seem to have in mind is the ability to conceive of something catastrophic. For instance, when Tarrou explores the idea of having the government establish compulsory sanitary committees, he notes about the Prefect—who responded with voluntary

[11] Thuc. 2.48, Lucr. 6.1284–86. Rieux's conflation of the burial practices of Athens and Oran also inaccurately predicts the industrial cremation that takes place at the height of the plague in Athens: everyday Oranians evade city guards to honor the dead by throwing flowers into the rail cars carrying them to the crematorium (178). There is social breakdown in Oran, especially with respect to attempts to break the quarantine and escape the city's gate (protected by armed guards), but it looks very different than what Rieux first feared in the opening days of the plague.

[12] See 93, 113, 172, 256–57.

committees—that "What they're short on is imagination. Officialdom can never cope with something really catastrophic. And the remedial measures they think up are hardly adequate for a common cold" (124). "Imagination" in these passages means something like "seeing the bigger picture" or appreciating more general threats (which is a desirable characteristic for public authorities, especially those tasked with responding to a public health disaster).[13]

A reflection in Part III of Camus' *The Plague* confirms that Rieux's conflation of Athens and Oran was both imaginative and irrational. Within the narrative sequence of the novel, Part III chronicles the disease at its worst—in the month of August, the worst time of the year in Oran (167–68)—by illustrating societal breakdown first in the form of arson, looting, and martial law and secondly in the transformation of burial practices and the implementation of a "strange procession of passengerless streetcars" conveying victims of the plague to a crematorium outside the city (178).[14] The narrator characterizes Oran as victim to "revolutionary violence, though only on a small scale" (171), namely, attempts by the inhabitants of Oran to break out of the now-armed city gates, and the mechanization of the burial process such that it was transformed into a merely administrative transaction (173). Such social transformations echo the societal breakdown that Thucydides (more so than Lucretius) chronicles: Athens, too, suffered a form of lawlessness and a breakdown of societal practices including those of honoring the dead (Thuc. 2.52–53).

[13] Imagination also features prominently in the experience of exiles and separated lovers (71–72, 181, 274, 294).

[14] Like the beaches of Oran, Camus uses the city's streetcars to gauge its health, rather like imagery of empty subways during COVID-19 (see 26–27, 40, 63, 237, 242, 258).

And yet Camus' narrator, amid the highest weekly death toll of the plague[15] and under an "oily, foul-smelling cloud of smoke" emanating from industrial crematorium (178), reevaluates his initial imaginative expectations for chronicling the plague. Speaking to the reader in the 3rd person, he notes that

> the narrator is well aware how regrettable is his inability to record at this point something of a really spectacular order—some heroic feat or memorable deed like those that thrill us in the chronicles of the past (*dans les vieux récits*). The truth is that nothing is less spectacular than pestilence, and by reason of their very duration great misfortunes are monotonous. In the memories of those who lived through them, the grim days of plague do not stand out like vivid flames, ravenous and inextinguishable, beaconing a troubled sky, but rather like the slow, deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path. No, the real plague had nothing in common with the grandiose imaginings (*les grandes images exaltantes*) that had haunted Rieux's mind at its outbreak. The plague was, above all, a shrewd, unflagging adversary; a skilled organizer, doing his work thoroughly

[15] The narrative structure of the *Plague* is a "chronicle" that assigns dates in a year in the decade of the 1940s. Thus, Camus marks the first human death on April 30 (22), a weekly death count of 321 at the end of May (78), a weekly death count of 700 in July (111), and switches to daily death counts of 90–140 over the summer months (113, 119, 148).

> and well.[16] That, it may be said in passing, is why, so as not to play false to the facts (*trahir*), and still more, so as not to play false to himself, the narrator has aimed at objectivity. He has made hardly any changes for the sake of artistic effect… (179–180).

The narrator's allusion to the "grandiose imaginings" that haunted Rieux—and the image of the plague as flames casting a beacon in the sky—rather clearly refers back to Rieux's imagined conflation of the seaside funeral pyres of Athens/Oran, casting the images of flames upon the sea (40). Reminiscent, I suspect, of our experiences with COVID-19 lockdowns, the narrator's point is that defeating—or simply enduring—a public health calamity like the plague is a marathon rather than a sprint.

4. Heroism in Athens and Oran

Perhaps one of the reasons that Rieux dismisses imaginary spectacles inspired by Athens is because Oran offers a different insight about the nature of heroism. It is worth recalling that Thucydides' account of the plague of Athens follows immediately after Pericles' funeral oration (2.35–46), a speech that purports to praise the Athenian dead by means of praising the "customs…the form of government, and the way of life that have made our city great" (2.36). Perhaps the most famous claim in the speech is Pericles' exhortation that his fellow Athenians

[16] *The Plague*, famously, appears to liken the plague of Oran to the German invasion and occupation of France in 1940 both in this passage and several others (e.g., 37; see also 68–69, 123 ff., 138, 149, 190, 270, 285, 307–08).

"become lovers of Athens" (ἐραστὰς γιγνομένους αὐτῆς [2.43.1]) because of the city's power. But Thucydides' account of the plague offers a counter-balance to the funeral oration: It is the same Athenians whom Pericles calls "lovers of nobility with restraint" (φιλοκαλοῦμέν μετ' εὐτελείας) who during the plague conducted a crime spree aimed at obtaining easy pleasures (2.40, 2.53); it is the same Athenians whom Pericles describes as people who "respect the law greatly and fear to violate it, since [they] are obedient to those in office at any time, and also to the laws" who fall into utter lawlessness during the plague (2.37, 2.53). Although Rieux never discusses Pericles' funeral oration (nor does Camus mention it in his notebooks), I suspect that he would attribute such a speech to Pericles' imagination rather than to his close observation.

By contrast, when the narrator of the *Plague* reflects on the "hero" of his story, he identifies Joseph Grand, a minor bureaucratic official, as

> this insignificant and obscure hero who had to his credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal. This will render to the truth its due, to the addition of two and two its sum of four, and to heroism the secondary place that rightly falls to it, just after, never before, the noble claim of happiness. (137–138)

Grand's absurdity consists in the fact that his goal is writing a great novel, and yet he is never able to move beyond writing (and re-writing) the first sentence (63, 101–105, 135, 263); his heroism consists in compiling statistics and data-modeling for the sanitary groups (137). But more importantly is his attentive attitude to the plague's threat. After Rieux offers thanks for Grand's service, he responds "Why, that's not difficult! Plague is here and we've got to make a stand, that's

obvious. Ah, I only wish everything were as simple" (134).[17] Such attentiveness constitutes heroism for Rieux. And the camaraderie and friendship that Grand, Rieux, Jean Tarrou, Father Paneloux, and Raymond Rambert experience in their work together on the sanitary committees is, for Camus, a form of love that is superior to that which Pericles exhorted to his fellow Athenians.

Further confirmation of Grand's heroism can be found in a speech by the founder of the sanitary committees in Oran, Jean Tarrou, a speech which also unpacks the most fundamental symbol of the plague, namely that of human errancy and inattention. Tarrou explains to Rieux that

> each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breath in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. (253)

Tarrou concludes that the world is divided into pestilence, victims, and healers (253–54); even if we cannot aspire to the supererogatory status of the healer, through conscientious attention we are nonetheless obligated not to spread the plague. Put less metaphorically, human wrong-doing—for Tarrou—consists in harming or injuring others, either directly or indirectly, through inattentive neglect.

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[17] Grand's attitude mimics that of the narrator, who likens serving on the sanitary committees to stop the plague as like "knowing whether two and two do make four" (132).

One perhaps can detect echoes of such heroism in the final paragraph of Camus' novel. After the narrator final discloses his identity as Dr. Rieux, he explains his reasons for composing his chronicle:

> Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this story (*le récit*), so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quiet simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise (*il y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser*). Nonetheless, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly what would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints, but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers (*des médicins*). (308)

In such a calls to arms, I suspect we can find a mirror for the heroes of our own age. Whereas Pericles praised the martial virtues of soldiers, Rieux praises the caring virtues of healers (and their record keepers). Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, we valorized the first responders who raced into the Twin Towers in New York City or who enlisted in armed forces to fight terrorism in Afghanistan or Iraq. But during COVID-19, the nurses, health-care providers, super-market

workers, public-transportation drivers, and others who put-themselves at risk became our heroes. I suspect the Albert Camus who wrote *La Peste* would approve.[18]

[18] I owe a debt of thanks to my scholarly heroes, specifically my COVID-19 Camus study group, that read and video-conferenced on a weekly basis from May until August 2020 during lockdown to conduct a close study of *La peste*.

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