



Michael Goyette // *This is Part 1 of a two-part essay. The next installment will appear on Thursday, April 23.*

Like Pandora’s proverbial box, the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly unleashed a deluge of suffering, hardship, and abuse. One of the earliest and best-known Greek myths, the story of Pandora relates the abrupt appearance of misfortunes and ills into the world. This includes the origin of actual diseases (νοῦσοι, Hesiod’s *Works and Days* v. 102), which the Greek poet Hesiod connects with the creation of Pandora—the world’s first woman—and Pandora’s ill-fated impulse to open her infamous box (or, as Hesiod tells it, her jar). Hesiod also portrays Pandora as the matriarch of all future women, whom he describes as a “destructive race and tribe” (ὀλώϊόν... γένος καὶ φύλα γυναικῶν, *Theogony* v. 591) and as a “great bane” (πῆμα μέγ’, *Theogony* 592) to mortal men, thus conflating femininity with disease. The Pandora story, then, not only explains the origin of diseases, but also provides an etiology for misogynistic scapegoating.

Hesiod’s narratives are an early example of the still-persistent fervor to assign blame and cast aspersions when new diseases arise—a history we would do well to remember during our present crisis. The term “scapegoating” itself hearkens back to the ancient world, deriving from an Old Testament practice in which a community would send a goat out into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, as a symbolic bearer of their collective sins (Leviticus 16.1-34). While the act of exiling a goat does not reflect the repellant connotations that “scapegoating” carries today, inherent in this expiatory ritual is the all-too-common tendency in times of crisis to project guilt outward, often upon social pariahs or persons regarded as “Other.” Far from being an obscure relic of distant past, this ugly practice has been flagrantly apparent in Donald Trump’s rhetoric of a “foreign illness” and a “Chinese virus.”

In order to understand this phenomenon, it is useful to turn to the work of classics scholar Walter Burkert. According to Burkert’s influential *Creation of the Sacred* (1998), there has been a pattern of responses to plagues and other catastrophic events across vast periods of history, as well as in

mythological writings from various world cultures. When disaster strikes, people typically begin by asking, “why? why now? why to us?”. Next, they consult a “special mediator” or leader who claims to have divine insight or unique knowledge of the situation. The mediator then renders a “diagnosis” of the problem, identifying a hidden “cause of evil” or wrongdoing responsible for the present crisis. Finally, acts to rectify the wrongdoing or remove the “evil” (à la scapegoating) are performed in order to restore health or obtain salvation.[1] This response pattern reveals not only the enduring human need to make sense of our world and find meaning in turbulent and inexplicable circumstances—especially mass illness—but also the pitfalls that can attend the search. This desire to determine a cause and to remedy suffering can manifest itself in malicious and abhorrent ways, as is repeatedly evident in narratives about new diseases from Greco-Roman antiquity to the present day.

Just as modern epidemiologists and laypersons alike search for answers when new infectious diseases arise and spread through human populations, several Greek and Roman medical writers and tragic poets sought to understand the origins and transmission of new forms of illness. While some ancient sources maintained that it was impossible for new diseases to appear (perhaps in keeping with Hesiod’s implication that all diseases originated with Pandora), others insisted the phenomenon was real and even described it happening during their own times. Resembling present-day anxieties and perceptions of COVID-19, the ancient sources regularly characterize novel conditions as perplexing, capable of spreading swiftly, difficult to manage (if not intractable), potentially dire in outcome, and issuing from distant places and “foreign” cultures.

In his *Natural History* (1st century CE), the Roman encyclopedist Pliny the Elder describes a severe type of skin infection that attacks the entire face before spreading down the neck, chest, and hands (*Natural History* 26.1-3). According to Pliny, while the condition is not fatal, it is so disfiguring that “any kind of death would be preferable” (*quaecumque mors praeferenda esset*). He states that this previously unknown disease became rampant during his time, especially among the Roman upper classes, “as though a plague could choose its targets” (*tamquam malo eligente*). He also asserts that the epidemic began in Asia Minor and Egypt, jingoistically denigrating Egypt as “the parent of such ills” (*genetrice talium vitiorum*). Sounding like a modern conspiracy theorist, he adds that Egyptian doctors subsequently came to treat afflicted Romans, thereby “reaping great profits” (*adferentes magna sua praeda*).

Pliny’s snide speculation recalls the ancient Greek historian Thucydides’ (5th century BCE) conjectures about the origins of the plague that devastated Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Citing only hearsay, Thucydides insinuates that either the Athenian plague originated in Ethiopia (near Egypt), or the Spartans poisoned the Athenians’ reservoirs in order to target their water source and gain an advantage during the war. At this point in time, it is difficult not to connect Pliny’s and Thucydides’ respective claims about Egypt and (as Marco Riccuci has observed) Ethiopia with the way that some modern commentators have small-mindedly fixated on COVID-19’s purported inception in China. Although Thucydides does not elaborate any further on the Athenians’ beliefs about causes of the plague, it seems telling that metics (resident aliens at

Athens) permanently lost their citizen rights and experienced increased xenophobia following the plague and the war.[2]

The biographer and essayist Plutarch (1st-2nd century CE) also associates novel diseases with deleterious outside influences. In a work called *Table Talk*, Plutarch presents a fictional dinner debate between speakers on the question of whether new diseases can really come into existence (Book 8, 731B-734D). The debate reveals the various theories of the time and concludes with Plutarch himself accepting the possibility of new diseases, which he presents as a sign of both physiological and moral decline. He attributes this phenomenon to contemporary Romans' growing penchant for certain "luxuries," particularly their growing fondness for "exotic" dietary habits and foods imported from across the Empire and beyond. In Plutarch's view, these "foreign" influences enervate the Romans' bodies and minds, imperiling their health in ways never before seen. He thus connects these supposedly new health hazards with the increased contact between Romans and other cultures that was brought about by the expansion of the Roman Empire. To be sure, it is very possible that processes of geographical growth and social migrations may have contributed to an influx of certain diseases that were not previously experienced within parts of the Roman Empire.[3] Pliny and Plutarch, however, do not delve into these possible trends with any kind of epidemiological rigor, but rather resort to pathologizing "foreign" influences without any empirical support.

An uninformed search for the causes of a confounding and devastating plague also drives the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. As this unprecedented pestilence batters his city of Thebes, the king Oedipus looks for answers in distant places and external sources, suspecting that the individual responsible may be "from some other land" (ἐξ ἄλλης χθονός, v. 230). His lack of true self-knowledge and his failures of introspection (which can be interpreted as a metaphor for "bad leadership") keep him from realizing, until late in the play, that his own unwitting acts of patricide and incest are in fact the cause of the plague. When Oedipus finally realizes the truth of his identity, he immediately prepares to go into exile in order to spare Thebes from further contamination, but the damage has already been done.

By concluding with Oedipus' imminent departure from Thebes, Sophocles' play mimics a ritual of Greek religion in which a slave, disabled person, or criminal would be expelled from a community (or possibly even sacrificed) during times of plague, famine, invasion, or other kind of crisis in order to bring about purification or resolution. The exiling of such a figure, or φαρμακός (*pharmakos*—a term that shares a root with the Greek words for "medicine" and "remedy," as well as "poison") parallels the more innocuous Old Testament ritual of banishing a goat to absolve the sins of a community. In both contexts, and in *Oedipus*, the objective is to establish distance between the community and the figure assigned blame. Oedipus the king instantly becomes Oedipus the Other, demonstrating the swiftness with which a valued community member can be denounced and shunned during times of crisis. At the same time, this turn of events reminds us that Oedipus was, in a sense, always Other, in that he was raised in Corinth and thus an outsider and a predictable

pariah during a novel plague. Paradoxically, Oedipus becomes a sympathetic scapegoat after showcasing the perils of myopic leadership in a time of pandemic.

These recurring perceptions of novel diseases epitomize the semantics of the “new” in Greek and Latin. In both languages, adjectives meaning “new” (e.g. Greek: νέος, -α, -ον and καινός, -ή, -όν; Latin *novus*, -a, -um) can also imply “unusual,” “strange,” “untoward,” or even “evil” depending upon context.[4] This range of meaning imbues the ‘new’ with connotations of foreignness, malevolence, and moral degradation, as is evident in Euripides’ *Bacchae* (5th century BCE), a play that contemplates the relationship between old and new, native and alien. In this tragedy, the reactionary king Pentheus perceives a charismatic stranger (the god Dionysus in disguise) as a threatening outsider and labels him a bringer of ‘new disease’ (νόσον καινήν, *Bacchae* vv. 353-354). In reality, there is no disease except the delusion within Pentheus’s mind and provincial attitude, and his rhetoric betrays his xenophobic tendencies and eagerness to vilify an imagined Other. As is often the case in these ancient texts, the combination of newness and disease has a virulent capacity to provoke fear and stoke the flames of bigotry.

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Notes:

[1] Burkert, Walter. *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*. Cambridge (MA) 1998: 131.

[2] Martínez, Javier. “Political Consequences of the Plague at Athens.” *Graeco-Latina Brunensia* 22.1 (2017): 143-145.

[3] Morley, Neville. “The Salubriousness of the Roman City.” In *Health in Antiquity* (ed. Helen King). London and New York 2005: 196.

[4] Glare, P.G.W. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford 2012.