

# The Politics of Epidemics, from Thucydides to Mary Shelley to COVID-19

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Mary Shelley immersed herself in ancient and medieval literature, especially plague writing of Greece, Rome, and Florence, during her teens and early twenties. In her journal, she recorded that in 1820 she read “Book I” of Homer, likely the *Iliad*, alongside Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Boccaccio’s medieval Italian classic of interlinked tales to serve as a diversion during a time of plague, the *Decameron*. In 1815, she had jotted down that she had bought a translation of Lucretius’s first-century BCE poem, *De rerum natura*, which alludes to Thucydides’ historical account of the fifth-century BCE plague of Athens. (She also noted that her partner, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, read Thucydides that year.) Around the same time, she wrote that she had read the Latin original of Ovid’s first-century mythological spin on Thucydides’ firsthand impressions of that plague, found in Book VII of the *Metamorphoses*.

Literary scholar Nora Crook has shown in her systematic study of Mary’s journals that it was often the domestic practice of the Shelleys for Percy to read aloud to her while she worked on her needlepoint, making clothes for herself or their children. Among his favorite authors to read aloud were Lucretius and Homer. Percy returned to the *Iliad* so often that Mary would have known, perhaps by heart, the verses from Book I in which Apollo, the sun god, emerges in a very different guise as the god of both plague and war. He vengefully shoots down men with burning arrows of pestilence, after the Achaean leaders Achilles and Agamemnon fight over the child war brides they stole from their enemies. Homer recounts that “the corpse fires burned everywhere and did not stop burning.”

Although Thucydides was a pioneering historian, not an epic poet, there is an equally stark image of the overlay of war and plague in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In his narrative of the plague that hit Athens during its war with Sparta around 430–429 BCE, Thucydides recalls the horror of seeing his fellow citizens throw corpses onto funeral pyres intended for others, in a mad rush to rid themselves of the infected bodies that even predatory birds and animals would not touch or eat.

From Homer to Thucydides, war and plague are woven together in the Greek imagination. From this ancient association of plague and war, Mary Shelley drew the inference that politics—rooted in interpersonal conflict over love and other loyalties—is the driving force behind epidemics.

She also knew war from her own experience. The sixteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin bore witness to the scourge of the Napoleonic wars when she eloped with Percy Shelley to France in July 1814. In her first extant journal entry, from the 12th of August, she described the north-central French village, Le Pavillon-Sainte-Julie, as “a beautiful place but also desolated by the Cossac . . . they took the cows, sheep & poultry & tore down the houses for wood for fires.” The village had been plundered and burned to the ground by what she and the French called “the Cossacs,” the Russian soldiers in the multinational coalition that had invaded France that winter to fight Napoleon.

In the aftermath of the invasion, Mary observed, French peasants were left impoverished, serving inedible food in their filthy abodes, which were filled with rats and other signs of pestilence. One refugee whom they met on the road said that his child had been “murdered by the Cossacs.” War did not stop on the battlefield; like a plague, it seeped into every level of society, even homes and families.

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The editors of Mary Shelley's journals—Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert—traced how she later reworked her journal entries for her first book, a travel memoir she produced with Percy. In *A History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, published in 1817, Mary declared her “detestation of war, which none can feel who have not travelled through a country pillaged and wasted by this plague, which, in his pride, man inflicts upon his fellow.”

## PESTILENTIAL BATTLEFIELDS

In her post-apocalyptic pandemic novel set in the year 2100, *The Last Man* (1826), Shelley dramatized war as a plague upon humanity by having one of the main characters, Lord Raymond, die midway through the story on a pestilential battlefield in Constantinople, under the crumbled ruins of the dome of Hagia Sophia, during a centuries-long war between Greece and Turkey. Soon after Lord Raymond's death, the epidemic that erupts during the war turns into a lethal global pandemic that appears to wipe out all but one human, Lionel Verney, who stands for Mary Shelley in this roman à clef.

Lord Raymond is the analogue for the poet Lord Byron, who fought for Greek independence and died of fever and sepsis near the battlefield of Missolonghi in 1824. The devastating news of the loss of Byron reached Mary just as she was beginning to write *The Last Man*. The untimely death of one of her closest friends only compounded her sorrow over losing her husband Percy to drowning; three children she bore and one they fostered to malaria, fever, or other illnesses; her sister Fanny and Percy's first wife, Harriet, to suicide; and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, to sepsis after giving birth to her.

In fathomless grief, Shelley confided to her journal, “The Last Man! Yes, I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me.” With the death of Byron, the plague of war had come to touch her personally, just as it had touched the life of the bereaved refugee she met on the road, a decade before, near Le Pavillon-Saint-Julie.

Shelley's story of the pathology of the plague in *The Last Man* follows many of the details of Sophocles' fictional representation of the plague of Thebes in *Oedipus Rex* and Thucydides' eyewitness report of the plague of Athens. Blood is a common

theme among them. Verney's wife, Idris, spews blood from her mouth as she dies of the plague. Sophocles' priest speaks of the “red waves of death” caused by the plague of Thebes. Thucydides describes sores, red skin, blisters, and internal burning that drove people to run, naked, to plunge themselves in water.

Indications that Thucydides' chronicle of the plague (which he caught and survived) likely served as a source for Shelley include their common emphasis on its initial infection of the upper respiratory system, then its swift descent to cause organ damage and internal bleeding in the rest of the body. Both Shelley and Thucydides depict people dropping dead from the plague within days of exposure, apparently through a combination of airborne and person-to-person transmission. The classicist Christopher Mackie argues that the plague of Athens was probably either smallpox or epidemic typhus, based on Thucydides' graphic depiction of its welts and wasting effects.

Shelley was familiar with typhus. It killed Allegra Byron, the young daughter of her sister Claire Clairmont and Lord Byron, while the girl was confined in an Italian convent by her father in 1822. Shelley also would have known of smallpox—if only through some of her favorite literary works, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1761 novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*—before she herself fell ill from it on a visit to France in 1828. As the biographer Miranda Seymour relates, when Shelley woke up in Paris and looked into the mirror to see her pretty face disfigured by pockmarks, she physically identified with Frankenstein's so-called monster for the first time.

The epidemiology of the plagues of Shelley and Thucydides is also similar. Both are said to have originated in North Africa, whence they spread by trade routes and war. During the second Peloponnesian War, the Athenian military leader Pericles told his people to hide behind the city walls to secure themselves against the Spartan invaders. His strategic confinement of the masses in a closed space turned Athens into a petri dish for plague. Ironically, even Pericles—best remembered for his funeral oration—fell to the disease.

Finally, like Thucydides, Shelley does not explain the plague in terms of orthodox or traditional religious belief. Neither of their plagues are god-sent, as they are in Homer and the Bible. Just like Thucydides, Shelley depicts plague as

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escalating within wider and deeper patterns of human social and political conflict.

## THE NEW MONSTER

The historian Mike Davis has set forth a similar political thesis about the origins of pandemics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In his 2005 book, *The Monster at Our Door*, he speculated that the avian flu—after lethal outbreaks in 1997 and 2003—would be the next mammoth pandemic to overwhelm human and other life forms on Earth. He updated the book in 2020 to address COVID-19, retitling it *The Monster Enters*.

In the riveting new introduction—written while in lockdown in his garage last April—Davis argues that globalized capitalism is the political disease that drives pandemics to grow and spread, whether they are coronaviruses (such as SARS of 2003, MERS of 2012, or SARS-CoV-2 of 2020) or influenza A viruses (such as the Spanish Flu of 1918, the Asian Flu of 1957–58, or the Hong Kong Flu of 1968). Davis contends that “multinational capital has been the driver of disease evolution through the burning or logging out of tropical forests, the proliferation of factory farming, the explosive growth of slums and concomitantly of ‘informal employment,’ and the failure of the pharmaceutical industry to find profit in mass producing lifeline antivirals, new-generation antibiotics, and universal vaccines.”

Davis pinpoints some of the blame for our current pandemic on the elite class of international travelers—whether flying or cruising for business or pleasure—who unwittingly transported the novel coronavirus from the Wuhan wet market around the world in late 2019 and early 2020, and

seeded outbreaks in major cities such as Seattle, Paris, Milan, London, and New York. The virus may have jumped from bats to humans near Wuhan, but it was human social, economic, and political behavior that turned SARS-CoV-2 into a global disaster. This political analysis of the origins and pathways of plague is one that Davis shares with the father of history and political science, Thucydides, and the mother of modern political science fiction, Mary Shelley.

As a political scientist and a scholar of political science fiction, I follow in the footsteps of Davis, Shelley, and Thucydides in advancing a political theory of the origins and spread of pandemics like COVID-19. Whether we treat plagues in literary terms as metaphors for the problems that beset humanity, or we conceive them in political terms as products of our social choices and behaviors, people are ultimately responsible for them. Given the difficulty of disentangling the various social and political causes behind COVID-19, we ought to pause and consider the responses of past thinkers to the contagions that beset them.

In the canon of plague literature, from Thucydides to Davis, Shelley stands out as a philosophical model for surviving and transcending pestilence, both real and metaphorical, with an uncommon mix of political awareness and existential grace. As she shows in her journals, each of us must grapple with plagues on a personal level, often in isolation or despair. But we also must reckon with our social and political responsibility for contagions on a global scale, as she had the vision to imagine in her post-apocalyptic pandemic novel, *The Last Man*. ■