

# The Athenian Plague: New Evidence Inviting Medical Comment

*Fordyce W. Mitchel*

SOME OF THE RECENT NOTES on the plague in Periclean Athens indicate that it would be important, both for population-studies and for the identification of the disease itself, to know whether the plague attacked all its victims without regard for age or fell upon some age-groups more severely than upon others.<sup>1</sup> The present paper suggests, first, that there is evidence, only incidentally given by Thucydides, that children suffered less with the plague than did adults; second, that one disease which tends to spare children while killing adults is typhus, already the leading contender in the plague-controversy; third, that the combined plague and blight which Sophocles describes in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* has, in addition to the several known characteristics it shares with plague-related conditions at Athens in the summer of 426 (see below, n.14), other specific symptoms which are apparently characteristics of typhus. While the purpose of this paper is admittedly to present evidence not previously exploited in support of the case for typhus, the author has tried, and the reader is cautioned, to keep in mind that the final decision concerning the relevance of this evidence to the plague-controversy and its ultimate importance in reaching a solution must be left to the medical men, who alone are competent to judge such matters.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The basic recent study, both for the relevant bibliography and for the definition of Thucydides' medical terms, is D. L. Page, *CQ* 3 (1953) 97–119. Page's identification of the disease as measles, however, is contested by Sir William MacArthur, *CQ* 4 (1954) 171–74, who favours typhus fever. Page has a short rejoinder, *CQ* 4 (1954) 174. A good summary of the controversy as it now stands is found in A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, II (Oxford 1956) 150–53 *ad* Thuc. 2.48.3. For the problems connected with the plague in population-studies, such as the disproportionately high mortality among the strong young men in the cavalry and the supposedly high mortality among the naturally weaker small children, see Gomme, *Commentary* II pp. 388–89 *ad* Thuc. 3.87, and A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford 1957) 161–180, especially 165–66 and 179–80.

<sup>2</sup> For recent arguments in favor of bubonic pest, see W. Williams, *G&R* 4 (1957) 98–103, followed by E. M. Hooker, *JHS* 78 (1958) 78–83. That Thucydides believed the disease to

## I

Thucydides tells us (6.26) that the Athenians, in the spring of 415, voted to give the generals full power to determine the size of the expeditionary force against Sicily; that later on preparations got under way and they (*sc.* the generals)<sup>3</sup> summoned the allies and began drawing up muster-rolls (*κατάλογοι*) of the Athenians themselves; that their task was made all the easier because the city had just recovered from the effects of the plague and of the uninterrupted war with regard to the size of the age-group which had grown up,<sup>4</sup> *i.e.*, since the last occurrence of the plague in 426<sup>5</sup> and since the end of the Archidamian war in 421.

The account of the actual preparations, surely a humdrum affair, is broken off, and Thucydides substitutes the more exciting and historically important description of the mutilation of the Hermae. The preparations must have continued, however, from the beginning of spring (6.8.1) to midsummer (6.30.1) of 415, and they reappear in the story at chapter 30 with the description of the actual departure for Sicily and receive further comment in chapter 31 with the recapitulation of the size, cost and general magnificence of the outlay. It seems possible, then, to pass over the mutilation and to treat chapters 26 and 30–31 as a single passage dealing with the matters of the preparation, and to suggest that the *katalogoi* which the generals began to draw up

be contagious is argued by Ch. Lichtenthaeler in *Gesnerus* 19 (1962) 83–86, a reference furnished by W. M. Calder III.

<sup>3</sup> Although *Ἀθηναῖοι* is the subject of *ἐπεμπον* and *ἐποιούντο*, it was in fact the *στρατηγὸς* who drew up the muster-rolls (*κατάλογοι*) for a particular expedition; *cf.* Lysias 9.4–5, 15; 14.6; 15.5, 7; Diodor. 11.81.4, 84.2–5. These lists are distinct from the general hoplite-register which is usually mentioned obliquely in such expressions as [*δπλῆται*] *ἐκ καταλόγου* and *ὑπὲρ τὸν κατάλογον* and is described, not too clearly, by Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 53. *Cf.* Thuc. 6.43; 7.16.1, 20.2; 8.24.2, and Jones (n.2 above) p. 163. Jones has drawn a sharp and proper distinction between the general hoplite-register and the muster-rolls, but both Jones and the handbooks (G. Busolte/H. Swoboda, *Griechische Staatskunde* [München 1920–26] 579 n.1 and p. 1193; J. Kromayer/G. Veith, *Heerwesen und Kriegführung der Griechen und Römer* [München 1928] 47; J. Oehler, *RE* 6 [1909] 244 *s.v.* *ἐπώνυμος*; Ernst Meyer, *RE*, zweite Reihe 4 [1931] 253, *s.v.* *strateia* 2) err in their interpretation of the terms *στρατεία ἐν τοῖς ἐπώνυμοις* and *στρατεία ἐν τοῖς μέρεσιν*. The correct interpretation can be found in LSJ, *s.v.* *στρατεία* 2 and 3. The present author hopes soon to finish a special study of these two terms.

<sup>4</sup> *ἄρτι δ' ἀνειλήφει ἡ πόλις ἑαυτὴν ἀπὸ τῆς νόσου καὶ τοῦ ξυνεχοῦς πολέμου ἔς τε ἡλικίας πλῆθος ἐπιγεγεννημένης καὶ ἔς χρημάτων ἄθροισιν διὰ τὴν ἐκεχειρίαν, ὥστε βῆον πάντα ἐπορίζετο.*

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides says (3.87) that the plague came on again in the winter of what we call 427/6 and lasted not less than a year, *i.e.*, into the winter of what we call 426/5. Once this is understood it is simpler to use the single date 426 to designate the full year of the second onset.

in chapter 26 are the same as the *χρηστοὶ κατάλογοι*<sup>6</sup> of chapter 31 which were used in the final selection of the infantry.<sup>7</sup>

A muster-roll that is called *χρηστός* will contain the names of an age-group which has not been decimated by disease and war-casualties, and it must be made up of strong young men, neither too young nor too old, of the kind that can withstand the rigors of an extended campaign far from home.<sup>8</sup> What Thucydides tells us, then, is that it was comparatively easy for the generals of 415 to select their complement of men because there were plenty of stout young fellows in the age-group which had grown up since the plague and that, because of the peace of Nicias, there had been few losses in their ranks due to war.

Since no one would suppose that the picked troops of 415 consisted in boys who had been born since 426, the meaning of *ἡλικία ἐπιγεγεννημένη*<sup>9</sup> must be taken in the strictly military sense, the age-group which

<sup>6</sup> There seems to be no really good translation of *χρηστός* as a modifier of *κατάλογος*, possibly because the word tends to describe the men on the roll rather than the roll itself. The men are strong, able, useful to their city and effective in battle; the roll itself, to be good for the purpose for which it was drawn up, namely, the selection of such men, must be big.

<sup>7</sup> This identification suggests that the phrase: *τὸ δὲ πεζὸν καταλόγοις χρηστοῖς ἐκκριθέν* should be translated: "and the infantry was selected by using muster-rolls (*sc.* the ones the generals had drawn up) that were remarkably good for the purpose." It does not seem likely that the phrase refers back to the general hoplite-register (see above, n.3), although this, too, was in good shape at the time, as Thucydides himself (6.26) has already indicated in more specific terms. The expression seems clear enough: the generals drew up muster-rolls and these rolls were remarkably good; from these lists the final choice of 1500 picked men was made, for, considering the great rivalry and fair hopes, there seems to have been more Athenians wanting to go than there were places, and so the generals could pick and choose. The stories about Tolmides (told by Diodor. 11.84 and by Plutarch, *Per.* 18.2) are perhaps the best parallels for this kind of "selective" muster, except that Tolmides wanted also quantity while the generals of 415 were able to concentrate on quality.

<sup>8</sup> Picked troops usually mean young troops. Cf. Thuc. 4.67.2 plus Gomme's *Commentary* III p.529; Xen., *Anab.* 4.1.27, 2.16; 6.4.25; 7.3.46, 4.6; Diodor. 11.84.2–5. Younger men were useful for sprints and for advancing against occupied heights or over difficult ground—in fact for any situation that demanded dash and physical stamina. The age-standards for any picked force were probably about the same as those for mercenary troops in general, except that mercenaries might by continuous exercise and practice stay in shape a few years longer; and it may be safely assumed that the average age in either of these groups would be considerably below the average age of the run-of-the-mill citizen-levy. Cf. H. W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers* (Oxford 1933) 29: "Probably most of the soldiers (*sc.* in the Ten Thousand) were fairly young. Those up to 30 appear to form a fair proportion of the army (2.3.12), while those over 45 are few enough to be the minimum guard for the camp in an emergency (6.5.4)." See also 5.3.1, where Xenophon implies that men over 40 were all but useless when he says that they were put on board ship along with the sick, the women and children, and any unnecessary equipment.

<sup>9</sup> The term *ἡλικία* sometimes means a single year-class (*οἱ ἐπὶ τοῦ δεῖνα ἄρχοντος ἐγγραφέντες*) and sometimes, as here, a group of year-classes (*οἱ ἐν ἡλικίᾳ*, Dem. 13.4) that was called

had reached manhood since 426. In 415 this group would have included all those boys who had been approximately eight to eighteen in 425 and in each successive year had been admitted to their respective *heli-kiai*, thereby becoming liable to military service.<sup>10</sup> Since the *katalogoi* drawn up in 415 naturally drew heavily on these *heli-kiai*, and since Thucydides says that the generals' task was easy and the results were good, the logical implication is that neither the plague of 426 nor the earlier attack had made serious inroads into the ranks of the boys and teenagers; that the disease either had not attacked them at all, or, if it had, at least not so as to kill or maim them.

## II

Bearing all this in mind, we may note what two medical authorities, both of them advocates of typhus in the plague-controversy, have had to say about age as a critical factor in a typhus epidemic. Presumably neither one was relying on the other for his knowledge of the disease itself, nor is it likely that either one had seen or recognized the significance of the evidence in Book VI. Professor T. Ferguson of Glasgow, in a letter quoted in Gomme's *Commentary*,<sup>11</sup> says that "typhus fevers attacked chiefly young adults between the ages of 20 and 30." Sir William MacArthur, in citing from the Hippocratic Corpus what he believes to be another ancient description of typhus, comments: "The description evidences remarkable clinical acumen and includes the observation that although the comatose fever very commonly attacked children, of all patients these had the lowest mortality. The usual rarity of death in children, in contrast to adults, is a unique character of typhus."<sup>12</sup>

If these two statements, taken together, are in general correct: that typhus fever is unique in that it attacks and kills chiefly the 20 to 30-year-olds but tends to spare children, and if it is agreed that Thu-

up as a unit for a particular campaign; cf. Aristotle, *Ath.Pol.* 53.7. The difference between *year-class* and *age-group* must be borne in mind.

<sup>10</sup> In 425 the age at which a young man began his military training, if he had any, and was registered as liable to service in the field, was perhaps less formalized than it was a hundred years later; cf. O. W. Reinmuth, *TAPA* 83 (1952) 34-50, especially 34-41. Nevertheless, age eighteen seems to be entirely reasonable as the approximate or normal time to begin this part of his civic responsibilities. Cf. Aristotle, *Ath.Pol.* 42 for what definite information we have about the *ephebeia* after the law of Epicrates was passed ca. 335.

<sup>11</sup> See vol. II, p.152 *ad* Thuc. 2.48.3.

<sup>12</sup> See CQ 4 (1954) 171, n.1.

cydides implies that the youngsters between the ages of approximately 8 and 18 survived the plague of 426 in such significant numbers that ten years later the quantity (*πλήθος*) of available hoplites had so far recovered its former level that the muster-rolls could again be called *χρηστοί*, then there would appear to be another strong argument for identifying the Athenian plague with some one of what Professor Ferguson has called (*loc. cit.*) "an ill-defined group of fevers" generally known as typhus.<sup>13</sup>

### III

How does this interpretation of Thucydides agree with what is by some accounts (see below, n.14) the only other contemporary eye-witness account of the plague, that of Sophocles in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*? The answer is that Sophocles is even more explicit in showing the importance of age as a differentiating factor between those who died of the disease and those who survived. His account is by no means a clinical description, and he has, with complete poetic freedom, combined the traditional threefold blight on crops, cattle and pregnant women with the symptoms of the plague proper. It is all the more startling therefore to find him making a special point of a clinical characteristic which was apparently overlooked by Thucydides.

<sup>13</sup> This theory, if accepted, would first of all eliminate "the presumably heavy mortality among children" as the primary cause of the lasting decrease in the Athenian population in the final quarter of the fifth century. This older theory in any case has a flaw in that it presupposes a *steady* decline from 429 onwards and does not account for the significant recovery around 415 which Thucydides attests for at least the adult male population. On the basis of the present theory, however, it may be suggested that the lasting decrease at the end of the century was actually brought on by the premature deaths, between 429 and 426, of a high percentage of the young adults who would have produced most of the children during the next ten or fifteen years. Thus many of the children who would have been maturing and filling up the ranks during the decade which begins about 411 were in fact never born. On the other hand, the survival of children during the plague-years would explain how the heavy losses to the disease and to war (at Delium and Amphipolis) could be made up by 415, while the heavy mortality among young adults between 429 and 426 would explain why the losses in Sicily were not made up. The *helikiai* maturing in the years following the Sicilian disaster were pitifully small, as is shown by the startling drop in the zeugite class from 21,000 in 431 to only 9,000 or less in 411; cf. Jones, (n.2) pp. 165 and 178. Second, it would also be possible to suggest a solution to the apparent discrepancy, noted by Jones on p. 165, between the 20 per cent loss in the *taxeis* and the 30 per cent loss in the cavalry. Typhus is the one disease which could presumably account for the higher proportion of losses in the cavalry, which, being made up of the youngest, strongest and healthiest, would otherwise have been expected to suffer less.

B. M. W. Knox, in his important article on the date of the play,<sup>14</sup> has already adequately demonstrated that Sophocles did indeed have the Athenian plague in mind when he described the combination of plague and blight in Thebes; and that there are many allusions to strictly Athenian experiences of the war and plague that make no sense at all in the dramatic setting—the Thebes of Oedipus.<sup>15</sup> Knox has even defended Sophocles' combination of the plague proper with the traditional threefold blight on the grounds that the conditions of the blight did actually obtain in Athens during the plague, even if they were only indirectly related to it.<sup>16</sup>

There is no need to recapitulate here all the similarities that Knox has noted between the Sophoclean account and what is otherwise known of plague-stricken Athens. It is enough to present what follows as additional evidence that Sophocles' poetic description of the Theban plague was in fact close to the actual circumstances of the Athenians in 426; and that, if the identification of the disease as typhus is allowed, he actually added details of symptoms that are missing from Thucydides' medical description.

First, I believe that τέκνα and παῖδες, wherever they occur in the prologue, are to be taken literally as "children." Without denying that the use of τέκνα (line 1) shows paternal concern and is an example of princely diction, or that such an antithesis as πάλαι νέα is the kind of thing the tragedians liked, it is still possible to suggest that, "O children, young nurslings of Kadmos who was of old" (ὦ τέκνα, Κάδμου τοῦ πάλαι νέα τροφή, 1) is a straightforward address to a group of suppliants who were predominantly children.<sup>17</sup> The τέκνα is repeated in line 6,

<sup>14</sup> *AJP* 67 (1956) 133–47. See p.133, n.4, for those who believe that there is no connexion between the dramatic and the historical plagues, and n.5, for those who believe that a connexion exists.

<sup>15</sup> Knox, *op.cit.* (n.14) 138–39 and 140–41.

<sup>16</sup> Knox, *op.cit.* (n.14) 137–38.

<sup>17</sup> For an opposite view, see William M. Calder III, "The Staging of the Prologue of *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *Phoenix* 13 (1959) 121–29. Calder argues against the use of a crowd of suppliants (extras) on the grounds that it "is highly irregular in extant Greek tragedy" and that there would be a difficult problem to get them off the stage at the same time that the chorus was coming on. On the other hand, the unique and exceptional is so common in extant Greek tragedy, and there is so little agreement as to what is regular, that it seems hazardous to do away with the suppliants, who are so necessary dramatically, simply because there is no recognizable parallel. Furthermore, what is a difficulty in staging is by no means an impossibility.

There must be on-stage at the beginning of the play a suppliant group of such size and nature that it would arouse in Oedipus and in the audience an immediate and strong feel-

and *παῖδες* (32, 58, 142, 147) is used four times thereafter. In fact every time the suppliants are addressed as a group, whether by Oedipus or by the priest, they are called “children.” The priest, on the other hand, is addressed but once and, by contrast, is called “O aged one” (*ὦ γεραιέ*, 9) and is told that it is fitting that he should speak “for these (children).”

The very sight of the suppliant group aroused pity in Oedipus, and also presumably in the audience. “For I should be unfeeling indeed if I did not pity such a supplication as this” (*δυσάλγητος γὰρ ἂν | εἶην, τοι-ἀνδε μὴ οὐ κατοικτίρων ἔδραν*, 12–13). What it was that made the sight pitiable must have been obvious enough on-stage, but now is lost. Whatever it was, however, had to do with the ages of the suppliants, for the priest in his reply does not say they are sick or dying, but refers to their apparent ages: “You see us, of what ages are we who sit here” (*ὄραῖς μὲν ἡμᾶς ἡλίκοι προσήμεθα*, 15).

He then proceeds to name the two groups that are represented. The first and presumably the more numerous group is composed of the very young, and the second, of the very old: “These not yet with strength for a long flight, these weighted down with age” (*οἱ μὲν οὐδέ-πω μακρὰν | πτέσθαι σθένοντες, οἱ δὲ σὺν γήρα βαρεῖς*, 16–17). Since neither youth nor old age need be of itself pitiable, the sight must have aroused pity from another point of view, perhaps that of the *polis*—that there were only boys (*παῖδες*) and old men (*γέροντες*) left, and no men (*ἄνδρες*) to defend the city.<sup>18</sup>

ing of pity. Such a spectacle could not be supplied by one aged priest and two youthful attendants. If that was all Oedipus saw on-stage, how could he have been moved to say that he would be hardhearted indeed if he did not pity such a supplication as he saw? And why would the priest call special attention to their ages if there were nothing more unusual than an old priest accompanied by two boys? Calder himself (page 125) recognizes the need for extras when he makes what seems to me a desperate suggestion, *viz.*, that the poet used the “some 16,000 spectators” as such and had Oedipus ignore the suppliants on-stage and address the Athenian audience, who were currently at war with the Thebans, as the descendants of Cadmus, as “the people of Thebes.” Later on in the play, Calder (p.125, n.18) would have the audience abandon their role as suppliants and become “assembly-men” who answer Oedipus’ summons along with the chorus of old men. In offering such a solution to “the apparent difficulty of making fifteen men represent the assembly of the Thebans . . .,” Calder overlooks the possibility that this small group of old men does represent all the citizens who are *able* to attend—the rest being already dead, sick and dying, or too young to attend an assembly.

I agree with Calder that the Athenian audience identified itself with the sufferers on-stage, but it was because they had experienced the same things themselves and recognized the symptoms.

<sup>18</sup> That the Athenians a century later still considered a country bereft of its young men as a *θέαμα δεινὸν καὶ ἐλεινόν* is evident from Dem. 19.65, where it is said that the ambassa-

These two groups were probably not evenly divided. There are always more boys than old men, and in this case the old men were so few that the suppliants as a whole could be appropriately addressed as children. The next two lines further define the two groups as “priests, and I the priest of Zeus, while these are the chosen ones of the unmarried youths” (ἱερῆς, ἐγὼ μὲν Ζηγνός, οἶδε τ’ ἡθέων | λεκτοί, 18–19). Thus it would appear that *all* the old men were priests, necessarily a limited number, and in this case probably acting mainly as leaders (see especially 147), and for that reason, too, less numerous than the boys, who are not *little* boys, to be sure, but still technically παῖδες and not of an age to join the τάξεις.<sup>19</sup>

If the piteous aspect of the suppliants consists in this, that they are all either very young or very old and no real men are present, we may infer that there are no men of military age left anywhere in the city—they are all either sick and dying or already dead. It would seem inadequate therefore to translate τὸ δ’ ἄλλο φύλον (19) simply as “the rest of the folk off-stage.” Since the male population, what is left of it, is represented on-stage, τὸ δ’ ἄλλο φύλον, which is off-stage thronging the agoras and temples with suppliant branches, must refer specifically to the other sex, the women.<sup>20</sup>

That there were indeed no ἄνδρες and that it was in fact the women who were the suppliants, wailing at the altar-steps in other parts of the city, is amply borne out in the rest of the prologue and in the first stasimon:

1) The old priest emphasizes the lack of men when he tells Oedipus,

dors to Delphi were forced to look upon a χάραν ἔρημον τῶν ἐν ἡλικία, γυναῖα δὲ καὶ παιδάρι’ ὀλίγα καὶ πρεσβύτας ἀνθρώπους οἰκτρούς.

<sup>19</sup> There is no sure identification of the ἡθέων λεκτοί. We know that they are παῖδες and they have been described as οὐδέπω μακρὰν πτέσθαι σθένοντες. Many will agree with Mortimer L. Earle’s (*Oedipus Tyrannus* [New York 1901] p. 142) conservative comment that these words (even with the possible connotation of “nestlings”) do not in the mouth of an old man imply infancy; perhaps fewer will accept immediately the further suggestion that the words apply to all unmarried παῖδες who had reached the age of puberty up through the class of ἔφηβοι (cf. O. W. Reinmuth, *TAPA* 83 [1952] 39–40), i.e., those who were not yet deemed strong or experienced enough to join the *taxeis* in the field or, particularly, on expeditions beyond the borders. Jebb’s translation “chosen youths,” as though it were from ἡθεοὶ λεκτοί, and the comparison with Eur., *Hec.* 525: λεκτοί τ’ Ἀχαιῶν ἔκκριτοι νεανίαι, give much too festive an air to the whole scene. The wretched youngsters on-stage are merely the chosen representatives of their class. Since they are the predominant group in the suppliants on-stage, it may be assumed that their class in general had survived in considerable numbers.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. LSJ, s.v. φύλον I.2.



“If you will be ruler in this land in the future even as you now hold it, it is better to have it with men in it than bereft thereof; for there is no use in a tower or a ship if it is bare of men and there is no one living within” (ὡς εἶπερ ἄρξεις τῆσδε γῆς, ὡσπερ κρατεῖς | ξὺν ἀνδράσιν κάλιον ἢ κενῆς κρατεῖν· | ὡς οὐδέν ἐστιν οὔτε πύργος οὔτε ναῦς | ἔρημος ἀνδρῶν μὴ ξυνοικούντων ἔσω, 54–57).

2) And when Oedipus, after dismissing the παῖδες (142), issues the command, “But let someone else summon the people of Kadmos hither” (ἄλλος δὲ Κάδμου λαὸν ᾧδ’ ἀθροίζετω, 144), only a chorus of old men answers the call, again emphasizing the gap between themselves and the παῖδες who had filled the stage only a moment before. Once on-stage the chorus tells us the whole army is down with the plague (νοσεῖ δέ μοι πρόπας στόλος, 169–70)<sup>21</sup> and that you might see one man after another setting out for the shore of the western god (ἄλλον δ’ ἂν ἄλλω προσίδοις . . . ὄρμενον ἀκτὰν πρὸς ἐσπέρου θεοῦ, 175–77): and that the city, past numbering these deaths, is perishing (ὦν πόλις ἀνάριθμος ὄλυται, 179).

3) The final bit of evidence which serves to identify both those who are dead and dying and those of the ἄλλο φῦλον comes in lines 181–85: “Meanwhile young wives<sup>22</sup> and grey-haired mothers, too, around the altar’s edge lift up their wails, some here, some there, suppliants against their grievous woes” (ἐν δ’ ἄλοχοι πολιαί τ’ ἐπὶ ματέρες | ἀκτὰν παρὰ βώμιον ἄλλοθεν ἄλλαι | λυγρῶν πόνων ἰκτῆρες ἐπιστενάχουσι). Although they are never on stage, the women are twice mentioned, here and in lines 19–21, as mourning and praying for deliverance. Here they are significantly divided into two groups, the young wives and the grey-haired mothers. The young women mourn *qua* wives, therefore for their young husbands and not for their small children. The older women have no young children and therefore, when they mourn *qua* mothers, it is for their grown sons. It is noteworthy that they are not

<sup>21</sup> The word *στόλος* is an expression which is perhaps more appropriate to Athens than to Thebes. T. G. Rosenmeyer has suggested that there is no *dramatic* reason in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* for keeping the military off-stage as there is, for instance, in the *Septem*, when Thebes is at war and the men are defending the walls. Therefore, the plague alone must account for the lack of men of military age on-stage.

<sup>22</sup> The word *ἄλοχος* does not by itself support Jebb’s translation “young wife,” nor does he tell us his reason for adding the epithet. Nevertheless he is right. All the mourning women are married and they are divided into two groups: one is composed of grey-haired mothers and the other, of bed-partners. The latter group, both by contrast with the former and by the connotation of the word, must be made up of younger women who mourn, *qua* ἄλοχοι, for their missing mates.

said to mourn for their husbands, who were presumably older than the more susceptible age-group and had not suffered severe losses on the whole; indeed, as we have seen, the old men were amply represented on-stage both in the prologue and by the chorus. The age-group that does *not* appear and is being mourned and is missed in the *πύργος* and in the *ναῦς* is the one made up of those who could effectively bear arms, *viz.*, the young male adults.

## IV

But Sophocles seems to emphasize that the chief victims were the young *male* adults, for it is they who are absent while at least some of their young wives have survived to mourn them, while, on the other hand, our modern medical authority, Professor Ferguson, says only that the chief victims of typhus were young adults. This is a problem. A tentative solution<sup>23</sup> may be reached by calling upon that same ancient authority who was so highly praised for his clinical acumen by Sir William MacArthur (see above, n.12). This point especially needs checking by modern medical authorities, but since Sir William has identified the plague in Thasos, described in *Epidemics* 1.13–22, as typhus and quotes from §17 concerning the effects on children, it is permissible to use also §16, which concerns the effect on women: “Many women caught the disease, but fewer than the men and they died less frequently. But most of them (*sc.* who became sick near their terms) had a difficult time in childbed, and after childbirth the disease continued—and these especially died. . . . But if it happened that they took the sickness during (early?) pregnancy, they aborted, in every case I know.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> R. B. Lloyd has suggested a simpler solution, *viz.*, that the young husbands, being above the critical age of twenty, were attacked more frequently and fatally than were their younger wives, many of whom would have been below twenty. Thus there may have been an age factor, as well as a sexual one (see below), which operated in favor of the survival of young wives whose slightly older husbands had died.

<sup>24</sup> The Loeb text: *γυναῖκες δὲ ἐνόσησαν μὲν πολλαί, ἐλάσσους δὲ ἢ ἄνδρες καὶ ἔθνησκον ἦσσαν. ἔδυστόκεον δὲ αἱ πλείστα καὶ μετὰ τοὺς τόκους ἐπενόσεον, καὶ ἔθνησκον αὐταὶ μάλιστα . . . ἦσι δὲ συνεκέρησεν ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃσι νοσῆσαι, πᾶσαι ἀπέφθειραν, ἃς καὶ ἐγὼ οἶδα.* W. H. S. Jones translates: “Though many women fell ill, they were fewer than the men and less frequently died. But the great majority had difficult childbirth and after giving birth they would fall ill, and these especially died . . . but all to my knowledge had abortions if they chanced to fall ill when with child.” Since the *δυστοκία* must have been caused by their having the disease already, it is meaningless to translate *μετὰ τοὺς τόκους ἐπενόσεον* as “they would fall ill after

If typhus was indeed the disease affecting the Athenians and if it is true that fewer women than men contract typhus and that fewer die of it, there is a ready explanation of what Sophocles says about the young wives mourning their husbands. Furthermore it would be clear why and how it was that the traditional threefold blight could be added to an account of the plague without falsifying any particulars of the actual conditions in Athens—for Knox has already explained the blight on the crops and the cattle as describing the actual conditions in the early years of the war, and now typhus seems to supply a reason for the phrases: “the abortive labors of women in childbed” (*φθίνουσα . . . τόκοισί τ’ ἀγόνοις γυναικῶν*, 26–7) and “nor do women surmount their labor-pangs with births (of live children)” (*οὔτε τόκοισιν ἰήλων καμάτων ἀνέχουσι γυναῖκες*, 173–74).<sup>25</sup>

V

In conclusion it may be noted that Thucydides, the student of medicine, the keen observer and accurate writer, who was so concerned about leaving to posterity a recognizable description of the plague, has failed to mention as a clinical character of his disease the important fact that children were less seriously affected than adults, but has given us this information only incidentally in another connexion. Sophocles, on the other hand, in describing a plague that would have real meaning for his Athenian audience, has actually emphasized this characteristic and, in doing so, has also shown the other side of the coin, namely, has shown that old people, too, survived. That Thucydides, *qua* professional historian, did not mention the survival of the young and old is quite understandable, for he was chiefly interested in the number of fighters gone from the *taxeis* and from the cavalry; but that Thucydides, *qua* amateur physician, seems, at least in this case, to have “omitted to mention what he cannot have failed to observe”<sup>26</sup> is a more serious matter for his apologists

childbirth.” Apparently the epidemic sometimes caused *δυστοκία* and sometimes *ἀποφθορά*. It would seem that the difference lay mainly in the stage of pregnancy at which the woman contracted the disease.

<sup>25</sup> Lines 173–4 may also mean “nor do women in childbed surmount their laborpangs,” *i.e.*, they die. The meaning hinges upon the interpretation of *τόκοισι*, either “with live births” or “in childbed”. Thus either interpretation would fit the description in the *Epidemics*—referring either to the miscarriages and difficult deliveries of the majority or to the subsequent deaths of many.

<sup>26</sup> D. L. Page, *CQ* 4 (1954) 174.

to explain. Sophocles, on the other hand, was interested in the overall picture of suffering in the city; he could not show on-stage the great number of the dead, but he could make their numbers poignantly felt by showing the pitiful survivors, the young and the old. That the poet gives on the whole an accurate account of the disease, interwoven as it is with the old formula of curse and blight, is an unexpected bit of realism.

RANDOLPH-MACON WOMAN'S COLLEGE

*June, 1964*