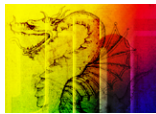


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– Section 4: Reviews –

Book Reviews

F. Ammannati, L. Coccoli, S. Sermini



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## Book Reviews

F. Ammannati, L. Coccoli, S. Sermini

*Reviews of Outka, Viral Modernism. The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature, Columbia UP 2020; Ascheri, Rimedi contro le epidemie. I consigli di diritto europeo dei giuristi (secoli XIV-XVI), Aracne 2020; Henderson, Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City, Yale UP 2019.*



**1** ELIZABETH OUTKA, *Viral Modernism. The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, 326 pp. ISBN 9780231185752, \$ 35.00.

The question behind Elizabeth Outka's essay, *Viral Modernism*, is extremely topical: what are the effects of pandemic diseases on literature? The author examines in particular the effects of the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic on Modernism, reversing the critical gaze that tends to consider the consequences of the war to be more relevant and impactful in the shaping of modernist literature. "We are trained in modernism to see the trauma of war but not the trauma of the pandemic" (4), writes the author, at the same time highlighting the impressive data of influenza deaths. Despite the tragic numbers, the influenza pandemic seems to be absent from the British, Irish and American Literature. Is it really so? The author unexpectedly but convincingly detects viral traces everywhere in the literature considered, pointing out that they are evanescent traces: the way the disease is written is in fact reticence and pandemic imagery can be found "in gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, and hidden bodies" (2). The

pandemic is therefore a hidden theme that pervades the texts that Outka examines by considering specifically the repetition of two peculiar tropes: the 'miasma', namely the pervading absent presence of an uncontrollable, invisible contagion; and the so-called 'viral resurrection', that is the spreading of images related to dead returning, to resurrections caused by the same death-giving fecundity of the virus, to the emergence of zombies and spectral entities.

In the first part entitled *Pandemic Realism: Making an atmosphere visible* the author analyses in particular four works which explicitly recount the experience of pandemic flu in wartime: on the one hand Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) and Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), which permit to clarify both differences and overlapping between the narratives of war and that of pestilence; on the other hand, Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and William Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), which focus on the domestic and daily experience of the pandemic.

After studying the realistic representations of the pandemic, which provide a set of diagnostic tools for interpreting the peculiar pandemic atmosphere, in the second part Outka directs her gaze towards three very famous works representing the modernist movement, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (1925), *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot (1922), and *The Second Coming* by W.B. Yeats (1919), reconsidering them through the lens of pandemic imagery. Although the central theme of these texts is not the pandemic and, in some cases, no mention is even made of the viral tragedy, all these works are pervaded by an atmosphere of death similar to that outlined in the first part of the essay. But the point is not just the narration of an atmosphere: the virus in fact is able to influence the language and the style. In the case of Virginia Woolf, the experience of pandemic crafts "a sentence structure capacious enough to travel from the body to the outer world, a narrative perspective that could move as nimbly among bodies as virus, a plot defined less by linear timelines and more by temporal and experiential fluidity and a structure that could express the delirious, hallucinatory reality that infused the culture" (141). In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the effects of the pandemic result in fragmented writing, "as the aftermath of a proliferating viral catastrophe", in which the plurality of voices alternates with the silence of the disease, or embodies the chaos as in the case of Yeats' poem. Through Woolf, Eliot and Yeats' works, Outka reframes the notion of Modernism as a movement deeply influenced by pandemic: illness is studied as a mechanism

capable of shaping a pervasive aesthetic of absence, loss, silence, emptiness and ineffability.

In the third part, the author investigates the spread in popular culture of two traditions closely linked to the idea of the resurrection of bodies: spiritualism and zombies. She claims that, although the critics overlooked it, they were both responses to the trauma of the pandemic. In this part, not only literary works (such as those by Arthur Conan Doyle or H.P. Lovecraft) but also cinematographic (cf. in particular the film *J'accuse* by Abel Gance) and photographic works are considered to demonstrate how spiritualism and zombies constitute two very different versions of the death resurrection which permitted to tackle and rework the traumatic consequences of a collective tragedy.

By mapping the presence of the pandemic in interwar literature and culture, Outka asks a fundamental question: how can the critics' silence be justified? The search for the reasons why a greater importance is attached to the trauma caused by the war than to that caused by the disease is an essential component of this important essay: "A death in battle could be seen as courageous (though plenty of soldiers and writers pushed against this idea), but a death from influenza?" (22). To die of flu in wartime is "humiliating". Starting from Judith Butler's study *Frames of War*, the author underlines that dying from an illness is not considered as a heroic death in agreement with "a long tradition that aligns illness with seemingly less valiant, more feminine forms of death" (2). If this is the first cause of the little or no consideration given to the disease by both literature and literary criticism, there is another, previous cause. It concerns a matter that literature mostly lays aside, because it is a cultural taboo: taking up the challenge of representing disease and vulnerability. The question underlying the essay is again borrowed from Butler's thought on vulnerability: "what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?". In current times, while we are experiencing a new pandemic, Outka's essay invites us to reflect on how the literature will metabolize the disease and whether it will be able this time to shamelessly and openly accept the challenge of narrating vulnerability, instead of removing it from the collective memory.

Sara Sermini



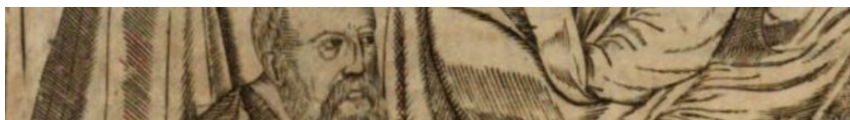
**2** MARIO ASCHERI, *Rimedi contro le epidemie. I consigli di diritto europeo dei giuristi (secoli XIV-XVI)*. Canterano: Aracne, 2020. ISBN 9788825531961, € 10,00 (PDF € 6,00).

Three allegoric images stood out from the frontispiece of Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia's tract on the 1575-6 plague of Palermo: two bags full of money, some pyres, and a landscape grimly dominated by the well recognizable figures of two or three gallows. A couplet by one Maurizio Martelli helped make the message clearer: *Lana, aura, et Linum captant contagia pestis / Ignis, furca, aurum sunt medicina mali*.<sup>1</sup> According to Ingrassia, fire, the gallows and money were in fact the main means to be used against contagion: the first symbolized the need to burn and destroy all infected or infectible objects, the second stood for the penal threat necessary to keep potential transgressors in line, while the third represented the large amount of resources required to pay for the huge expenses undergone by the city in order to enforce its costly sanitary policies.

In the large and ever-growing body of scholarship on the social history of medieval and early modern epidemics, a tendency exists to favor the second of these three aspects, looking at social life in time of disease outbreaks mostly through the lens of criminal justice and the repressive power deployed by authorities in order to enforce their emergency regulations. There are several good reasons justifying that choice. During plague times, scaffolds were often erected in the most visible places (squares, bridges, city gates) and executions came to dominate narratives in chronicles, novels and iconographic representations. Also, emergency legislation deeply affected and meddled with the normalcy of everyday life. As Giulia Calvi put it, "during the virtual dictatorship of the Public Health officials, habitual routines became infractions of numerous regulations, motivated by the fear of contagion and designed to interrupt and block

<sup>1</sup>Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia, *Informatione del pestifero, et contagioso morbo: il quale affligge et have afflitto questa città di Palermo, & molte altre città, e terre di questo Regno di Sicilia, nell'anno 1575 et 1576* (Palermo: appresso Giovan Mattheo Mayda, 1576).

the common channels of communication”.<sup>1</sup> These infractions could thus result in a trial or leave any number of written traces (however fragmentary and incomplete) in the archives, making criminal sources so valuable in registering the different movements and alterations of social interactions. But there may also be a more prosaic explanation for the extensive use of criminal records in historical researches on epidemics. In fact, while the criminal justice system was kept up and running even during plague outbreaks (with health boards sometimes setting up their own special courts), other tribunals were normally closed down to reduce gatherings and avoid contagion. The tendency to rely primarily on criminal sources could thus depend, in part at least, on their greater availability.



Nevertheless, one might still legitimately wonder whether a different set of judicial sources could provide a somehow different picture of the challenges the plague posed at various levels of society. The sudden disappearance of people and properties confronted survivors with a whole series of legal problems that were not reducible to the grammar of crime and punishment. How to establish, for example, the correct line of inheritance when potential heirs die one right after the other, and when, because of the general confusion caused by disorganization and fear, no medical records exist to prove who died first and who died later? Should rent still be paid even though tenants had fled the rented premises to find shelter in a safer place? More generally: should contracts still be honored even though the plague had prevented their full execution? Questions of this sort may lead to a richer historical understanding of social dynamics in times of health crises, by adding to the ‘vertical’ observation of the relationship between authorities and their subjects the ‘horizontal’ auscultation of the

<sup>1</sup>Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year. The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, trans. Dario Biocca and Bryant T. Ragan Jr. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1989), 5.

connections and exchanges between the subjects themselves. For one thing is sufficiently clear: although narrators, from Boccaccio to Manzoni through Defoe, have conventionally depicted plague-ridden communities as unruly places where people move and act ‘beyond the usual laws’,<sup>1</sup> law itself kept in fact operating throughout the epidemic storm as the fundamental infrastructure of associated life.

Mario Ascheri’s *Rimedi contro le epidemie* can provide us with a useful compass to explore this partially uncharted territory. The book is in fact a well-timed reprint of a volume published in 1997 under a different title (*I giuristi e le epidemie di peste*), which was in turn a collection of three papers previously appeared in various publications. This is not precisely an instant book, then, written in the wake of the current COVID situation, and this very untimeliness helps place it above the suspicion of unwarranted anachronisms and hasty analogies. And yet, that only makes the occasional but undeniable similarities with the present all the more striking. The first chapter and the attached appendix present a concise summary of the main issues raised by three sixteenth-century legal tracts on the plague, along with some background information about their authors and the context of their publication: Gianfrancesco Sanzazari della Ripa’s *Juridicus de peste tractatus* (1522), Silvestro Aldobrandini’s *Tractatus iuridicus de peste* (which was composed around 1523 but remained unpublished) and Gerolamo Previdelli’s *Tractatus legalis de peste* (1524). They are the earliest known specimens of their genre, written more than a century and a half after the devastating appearance of the Black Death. The timing, Ascheri argues, is not casual. On the one hand, the relative delay with which jurists—as opposed, say, to physicians or theologians—came to devote ad hoc treatises to the topic can be explained by the incandescence of the matter itself—“since [the plague] could affect the most diverse social relationships, its legal phenomenology was hardly circumscribable” (12)—and by its absence from the sources of Roman law, which seemed to have kept virtually no record of ancient epidemic episodes such as the Justinian’s Plague. On the other hand, when legal *tractati* on the plague finally appeared in the third decade of the sixteenth century, that had to do less with the plague itself than with the crisis of credibility experienced by the *ius commune* as a consequence of humanist fierce attacks and the

<sup>1</sup>See Mario Lavagetto, *Oltre le usate leggi. Una lettura del Decameron* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019).



rise of the different *iura propria*. Faced with the risk of a decline in their professional authoritativeness, jurists responded by reaffirming the undiminished relevance of their expertise and their role of *sacerdotes iuris* even in circumstances of extreme uncertainty and normative chaos.

The second and third chapters go into more details. They deal with the solutions envisaged and proposed (with greater or lesser confidence) by late medieval law doctors to the problems raised by epidemic outbreaks for, respectively, the public management of cities and the regulation of private business. Sannazzari, Aldobrandini and Previdelli's tracts in fact capitalized on a large pool of earlier *consilia*, *quaestiones* and *commentaria* on Roman and Canon law, gathering and organizing sparse hints on the matter that could be gleaned from them. Sixteenth-century jurists seem to agree with their predecessors on the supernatural causes of the plague, which represented the distinctive way in which God chose to wage war against humans because of their sins. The war-like metaphor—which seems to still have some currency in today's parlance about the present predicament—was not, however, a simple rhetorical device. In the works of *ius commune* jurists, the notion of *bellum Dei* was taken literally so as to draw some effective legal consequences from it and solve, by virtue of analogical interpretation, the occasional legal conundrums. Thus, for example, the difficulty over the possibility of imposing an emergency property tax on people who were normally exempted from all sorts of contribution could be dodged by noting that, in times of war, even those who were covered by fiscal immunity were compelled to pay for the sake of the common good.

The reference to the authorities' need for exceptional sources of funding takes us back to the third ingredient of Ingrassia's receipt: *aurum*. The government of plagued communities usually required a huge amount of money and, for that reason, cities often risked to fall deeply into debt. Indeed, one of the major innovations to be found in early modern legal treatises is their authors' attention to the economic aspects of epidemic flows. In order to prevent or alleviate the direct effects of disease outbreaks, public officials had to intervene in matters of production and trade, control prices, ban exports of essential goods, fight hoarders and speculators. According to Sannazzari and the other jurists, the main aim (and justification) of this series of measures was to provide a minimum living standard for 'the poor'—a collective denomination that, we may add, could encompass at the time all those propertyless people who were wholly

or largely dependent on their labor for their daily survival. The book touches here on a point that is worth stressing. When dealing with the lot of the poorer sorts under plague legislations, most of the recent and less recent scholarship has tended to frame the issue in the terms of the repression and banishment of marginalized groups (beggars, vagrants, prostitutes etc.). Ascheri recalls how, for example, the *doctores* consistently urged rulers to keep the streets clean, both from actual filth and from “socially dangerous individuals” who could spread the contagion all over the city (48). However, by highlighting the special care devoted by jurists and public authorities to the relief of the (deserving) poor, he also helps reveal a wholly different facet of this relationship. In fact, once the focus is shifted away from the more repressive elements of plague regulations, something as a ‘moral economy’ of epidemics begins to appear, i.e. a set of moral, legal and political values that presided over the distribution of resources to the lower classes in times of health crises. Its founding principle was that the poor formed an integral part of the community, so that “the ‘civitas’ could not be complete (‘perfecta’) without them” (47). Hence the regular allowances (‘alms’) that, according to Ingrassia himself and other chroniclers, those at the top of society granted to those at the bottom for the entire duration of the emergency. They were intended as a partial compensation for the damages inflicted either by the pestilence or by the measures designed to contain it, with partial and general quarantines causing lots of people to lose their job. In this respect, Ascheri also reports how some jurists believed that the rich could be legitimately compelled, *officio iudicis*, to give alms to the poor, following the well-known legal maxim whereby *tempore necessitatis omnia debent esse communia*. However, organicist reasons were probably not the only ones behind these and other forms of (more or less obliged) largesse. Describing the vast social distress into which the Great Plague of 1665-6 had plunged the town of London, Defoe noted that “had not the Sums of Money, contributed in Charity (...) been prodigiously great, it had not been in the Power of the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs, to have kept the Publick Peace; nor were they without Apprehensions as it was, that Desperation should push the People upon Tumults”.<sup>1</sup> It is not unlikely, then, that concerns with the stability of the community might play a role at least as relevant as those with its completeness and perfection.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, ed. Cynthia Wall (London: Penguin, 2003), 94.

The chapter goes on listing other ‘remedies’ suggested by jurists to manage the situation and restore public health. Sometimes they just seem to take note of the standard procedures followed by public authorities after the outbreak had been officially declared—establishing lazarettos and special plague cemeteries outside the city walls, closing schools and universities, prohibiting spectacles and other unnecessary occasions for gathering, implementing a system of health passes etc.—and simply discuss and elucidate their legal implications. Other times, however, the strict adherence to the sources of the *ius commune* posed more problems than it solved, standing in the way of what cities usually considered as the safest course of action. This is the case, for example, with the policies of access control implemented during pandemics: while rulers were prone to immediately setting up *cordons sanitaires* and barring entry to all people coming from infected places, jurists recalled the duties of hospitality and charity enshrined in legal texts, which imposed to open the doors to those fleeing for their life, provided, of course, they were themselves healthy and showed no symptoms of the disease.

The notion of *iusta fuga* can also be found at the beginning of the third chapter, which deals with “subjective legal situations” and the ways in which disruptions brought about by the plague might affect them. This is probably the most technical, and most original, part of the book. It is also the most dramatic one: it shows the *doctores* faced with the highly difficult task of relaxing provisions that the *ius commune* would normally require but without disfiguring them, so as to ensure the overall survival of the system. The point was, in Ascheri’s words, “to use the zones of elasticity provided by the law in order to safeguard its essential goals” (63). That was a challenge that did not admit a single, general solution. Jurists were therefore to proceed on a case by case basis, assessing for each and every circumstance what was the right amount of *relaxatio* to be applied. Ascheri guides the reader through the subtleties of this rich and intricate casuistry, showing how jurists often struggled to come to an agreement and sometimes failed to reach it.

One almost universally shared principle was that escaping from an unsafe area was not only a legitimate individual remedy against the risk of infection, but also a highly advisable one. This had a number of relevant consequences on personal statuses: it authorized the interruption of activities which people—from peasants to judges—were otherwise contractually obliged to perform; it

excused someone who was judicially bound to reside in a given place for moving away from there; it dictated a series of legal protections for the fugitive, from the postponement of debt repayment to the suspension of prescription periods; and so on. But the same principle also had effects on the form and contents of obligations. It was generally admitted, for instance, that tenants who had left their rented dwellings for fear of contagion were not required to pay any rent to their landlords for the time of their absence, by analogy with what Roman law prescribed in war situations (once again, the warlike metaphor is at work here). Incidentally, this could probably shed light on the decision made by some public authorities to impose a rent reduction or at least a temporary ban on evictions in favor of those who had not been able to leave, as in the case of a decree issued in 1577 by the Senate of Milan and included in Ascanio Centorio's collection of Milanese anti-plague provisions<sup>1</sup>. Escaping was in fact a privilege that only a few could afford. For those who were not so lucky, the 'moral economy' of epidemics required that some sort of protection should be provided.

However, the *doctores* were not necessarily interested in the defense of the weaker party of the legal relation. When discussing the contract of *locatio operarum*, they seemed to have not even tried to find a way to ensure that workers (who figured here as *locatores* of their labor power) were to be paid even when their employers (the *conductores* of that labor power) had escaped from the plagued city and shut down their businesses, leaving them jobless. The only exception jurists could think of concerned, not surprisingly, the salary of university professors. Following Bartolus' opinion, they all agreed that lecturers had to be paid in full, even if the plague had caused universities to close and courses to be canceled. Their fee was in fact not due as a remuneration for a mechanical and manual activity (*propter laborem*), but as a reward for a priceless intellectual performance (*propter probitatem intellectus principaliter*) that exceeded what normally applied to baser kinds of work.

These are just a few samples of a much wider range of legal, social and political issues that Ascheri navigates with clarity and dexterity. His study results in

<sup>1</sup> Ascanio Centorio, *I cinque libri degl'avvertimenti, ordini, gride et editti: fatti, et osseruati in Milano, ne' tempi sospettosi della peste; ne gli anni MDLXXVI et LXXVII. con molti avvedimenti utili, e necessarij a tutte le città d'Europa, che cadessero in simili infortunij, e calamità* (Venice: appresso Giovanni, e Gio. Paolo Giolitti de' Ferrari, 1579), 345.

a comprehensive exploration both of the problems posed by epidemic outbreaks to individuals and communities in late medieval and early modern societies, and of the *ius commune* resources that were available to jurists to solve them. There were some successes, but also (and maybe more frequently) some spectacular failures to rise to the occasion. Not the least merit of the book is to record the former without omitting the latter.

Lorenzo Coccoli



**3** JOHN HENDERSON, *Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City*. New Haven (CT) and London: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN 9780300196344, \$ 45.00.

The economic and social impact of epidemics in pre-industrial societies has long been a topic explored and debated by historical research, with the plague acting as an undisputed protagonist. In recent years, these studies have found new life and enjoyed fresh approaches of analysis, also thanks to the formulation of new research questions and the application of innovative methodologies. Efforts have been made to better understand the precise mechanisms and ecological triggers causing the spread, and persistence, of epidemics, as well as to evaluate their impact in society and culture, and the modalities and effectiveness of the institutional responses to the emergencies, stressing the need to escape from geographical, but also chronological, generalizations. For example, to what extent the picture emerging by the studies on Western European is in line or differs from what happened in other parts of the world? Is it possible to identify similar processes in the aftermath of epidemics affecting the same places but at different times?

A significant amount of new research has therefore tried to point out the divergent effects of pestilences on the economies in the short and long run,

the impact of demographic shocks caused by the plague on the distribution of wealth and income, the labour markets and the social mobility. The recent global pandemic, fortunately less lethal than the plague but whose effects on societies and economies are far from negligible, has multiplied the studies on these topics, both contemporary and over the long run. John Henderson, with his latest book, is, however, above all suspicion about having taken advantage of this new wave of fashionable research, firstly because of the date of its release, secondly—and more importantly—because this work is the result of a long and meticulous archival research and the culmination of a series of studies on the topic carried out by the Author over the years.

*Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City* is a vivid reconstruction of the experience of a city in 17th-century Italy, Florence, during a plague epidemic that caused the death of about 12% of the population, which at the time amounted to 75,000 souls. The overall picture the book provides is deep and richly structured, also because it is massively based on the extraordinary documentation preserved in the Florentine archives, which the Author was able to take advantage of by choosing and effectively combining sources of various nature. Most of these are official records, such as the history of the epidemic written by the librarian of the Grand Duke Francesco Rondinelli or the collections of edicts, but also the diaries of eyewitnesses and, above all, the precious material produced by the Health Officers (*Ufficiali di Sanità*), that is, the correspondence between the officers, and the judicial records. The latter in particular are the perfect source to deliver a cross-section of everyday life of different social classes during ‘a year of plague’. I use this expression not by accident, because from this point of view *Florence Under Siege* recalls Giulia Calvi’s 1989 book, *Histories of a plague year. The social and the imaginary in Baroque Florence* (translation of the Italian published in 1984), which used the same documentation to develop an analysis of the structures and the symbolic codes of the Health Commission’s criminal proceedings. Henderson’s study, building from this work, adopts on the one hand an analytical approach, by carrying out a numerical analysis of the trials, their seasonal and gender dynamics, the types of crimes committed and the categories of punishments that were imposed. On the other hand, it places the crimes committed against ‘public health’ in the broader context of the public struggle against the plague, even emphasizing its demographic and socio-economic impact.

In short, the Author's aim is to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to compose a wide-ranging outlook able to portray the effects of the plague in Florence in the years between 1630 and 1633, focusing on health, religious, administrative and economic aspects alternately. This kaleidoscopic methodology also intends to move away from a narrative exclusively focused on the opposition between the rich and the poor, between 'the government and the governed', by offering an interpretative grid in which the horizontal links operating in the society prevail over the vertical and hierarchical ones where the lower levels simply suffered and passively accepted the measures decided from above.

The structure of the book is a direct consequence of the Author's intentions: while Part I analyses the development of the public health policies operated by the government, with a particular attention to the environment (both urban and rural), the role of the medical science and the various forms of quarantine, Part II is thematic and examines the phenomenon through the lens of religion, isolation hospitals and the survival strategies put in action by the Florentines dealing with disease, death and massive regulation. An Epilogue reflects around the attitude of the Grand Ducal administration towards the brief but shocking return of the plague in 1632. While this scheme helps to manage the amount of information that the sources are able to supply to the scrupulous researcher, it necessarily ends up causing some repetition of concepts or, at least, the recurrence of topics already introduced in previous sections, as a consequence of the change in the point of view from which the facts are analysed.

In particular, the first chapters—after a review of the bibliography on the origin and the spread of the plague in Early Modern Northern Italy—report on the preventive measures taken by the health administration as the disease approached Tuscany, including the provision of *cordons sanitaires* along the borders, and then address the problems associated with the calculation of mortality through an in-depth examination of a wide range of documents of a demographic nature. Chapters 3 and 4, on the other hand, emphasise the many challenges faced by the *Ufficiali di Sanità*, especially in terms of understanding the environmental factors associated with the diffusion of the plague, and the solutions that they gradually decided to adopt. In this broad section of the book the ambivalent nature of the government's attitude towards the lower strata of society emerges, a balance between intolerance (the 'poor' seen as co-responsible

for the worsening of the epidemic because of their uncivilized lifestyle) and charitable and caring feelings. From this perspective, the stereotyped figure of the poor who often appears in legislation fades to emerge as a person living in flesh and blood, embedded in a network of social relations indispensable for the development of effective survival strategies. These elements are made explicit in chapter 5 which examines in detail the impact of health policies (such as quarantine) on the population through the analysis of the factors underlying the outbreak of the plague. The parish of San Lorenzo is used by the Author as an observatory, and its number of infected and buried inhabitants was analysed in relation to the topographical and social profiles of the specific streets. It was therefore possible to assess the impact on mortality of the policies for the removal of the sick and their confinement in *lazzaretti* (“feared more than death itself”) or in other isolation establishments.

The Author remarks, however, that in Baroque Florence the power of ‘spiritual medicine’ was considered stronger than any measure adopted by governments. This consideration is the starting point for chapter 6, which deals with the religious strategies and practices adopted by the Church to appease God’s wrath; the religious aspect is also an important theme in chapter 7—dedicated to the *lazzaretti*—since Florence relied largely on the adaptation of existing convents and churches (as well as patrician villas on the outskirts of the city) to guarantee the isolation of the infected. Combining again a quantitative and qualitative analysis, the Author underlines the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these institutions, and emphasizes the dichotomy of the attitudes towards them: they were used as a means for moral and social control, as well as for the marginalization of poverty, but they also were an effective instrument for the provision of medical services and the public expression of Christian charity.

Chapter 8 suggests, finally, a more systematic analysis of the connection between the government and the governed, offering, as mentioned above, a quantitative review of the trials celebrated by Health Officers. The judicial records revealed a complex world of offences, punishments, attempts by citizens to circumvent the law and contradictions in the management of cases by judges, often reflecting the compassion for the offenders or the confusion of being involved in the network of the judicial process. How much was Florence able to learn from the experience of the 1630-31 epidemic? Which policies were ulti-



mately effective and worth re-proposing and consolidating? The Epilogue helps to answer these questions by comparing the impact and the reactions to the return of the plague in 1632-33.

In conclusion, adopting an exquisitely interdisciplinary approach, the book offers an effective 'total history' (albeit local) of the response of an important city such as Florence to a health emergency whose socio-economic effects are observed from different points of view, the government and 'the street' levels (even if a greater emphasis could perhaps have been placed on the fact that, although the attitude towards the poor was the result of complex dynamics, the consequences of the plague were not 'socially neutral', hitting the lower strata of society harder) and framed within the wider range of the relationship of interdependence existing between the Capital city and its countryside.

*Francesco Ammannati*



*"Presentation to the King", in Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia, Informazione del pestifero, et contagioso morbo..., 1576, f. 74v.*