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'Giudicho essere più ghuadagnio lo spendere qui che 'l ghuadagniare chosti' The Plague in the Buonarroti Correspondence among Anxieties, Professional Dilemmas and Medical Beliefs

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of the plague in early sixteenth-century Italy from the perspective of one Florentine family, the Buonarroti, based on their vast correspondence. The paper explores the way the Buonarroti family members gave voice to their anxieties, particularly with regard to the violent outbreak that swept across Italy in the 1520s. It also examines the advice that family members gave each other, assessing the extent to which this reflected recommendations found in contemporary medical literature. These recommendations most often amounted to fleeing to isolated places, and avoiding contact with individuals and with potentially infected objects. Recommendations about prayers are also found. Comments on the notion of 'bad' air are especially frequent, showing that a close association between the concept of contagion and the concept of corrupt air existed not only in medical literature, but even for lay people. The paper underlines the dilemmas the Buonarroti family members (several of whom were wool merchants) faced when it came to choosing between saving their businesses or protecting their health. Finally, it explores writers' perceptions of social differences, which times of plague might accentuate: their views of servants and of the poor, during outbreaks, were ambivalent, oscillating between compassion and anxiety.

Keywords: *Florence, Micro-histories, Plague, Private letters, Renaissance*

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, a number of studies on the plague have aimed to illustrate the realities of everyday life and the perspective of common people, reflecting a growing interest in a view 'from

below' in the history of medicine (on which, see Porter 1985). Lloyd and Dorothy Moote (2004), for instance, examine historical letters, diaries and parish documents in order to provide an account of London's great plague of 1664-1665. Keith Wrightson's micro-history (2011) offers an account of the 1636 plague outbreak in Newcastle-upon-Tyne from the perspective of one scrivener of wills, Ralph Tailor. Evelyn Lord's account of the 1665 plague in Cambridge (2014) reports the experiences of a number of people from different walks of life, ranging from a college fellow to a servant, from a prostitute to a fisherman's wife.

Through a reduction of the scale and a focus on well-defined smaller objects, such as 'a single event, or a village community, a group of families, even an individual person' (Ginzburg and Poni 1991, 3), micro-histories enable scholars to reconstruct individuals' experiences and, at the same time, to discover new elements by paying attention to small details. In this sense, a micro-historical study of ordinary people's experience of the plague can help understand aspects of the time's culture, such as people's attitudes, values and beliefs, as well as the social bonds that shaped their community (Wrightson 2011, xi). Micro-histories also place emphasis on individuals' agency, exploring their choices and their strategies, and attempt to bring together social and cultural history: on the one hand, they explore lived experiences and the meaning that individuals attributed to those experiences; on the other hand, they point to deep historical structures and ways of thinking, which place those meanings in context (Magnússon and Sziártó 2013, 4).

Micro-histories have a particularly strong tradition in Italian historiography, where this approach was originally developed. When it comes to plague studies in this tradition, and in relation to Florence in particular, a micro-historical approach with a focus on history 'from below' was notably adopted by Calvi (1984), who examined trial proceedings from the year 1630 in order to shed light on the behaviour and responses of the poor, of women, and even of children. This line of enquiry has been taken up by Henderson (2020), who, in his recent study of the violent plague outbreak of 1630-1633, combines the examination of Florentine official records with an analysis of eyewitness accounts such as diaries, as well as judicial records that provide insights into the behaviours of individuals from the lower echelons of society.

While judicial archives have been mined for information, private correspondence in early modern Italy remains largely unexplored in this respect, with the exception of the private letters by Francesco Datini, mentioned by Paul Slack (2012, 68) when looking for 'alternative' voices to reconstruct the experience of the plague.

In fact, private letters have several advantages. They are personal accounts and, as such, provide insights into people's thoughts, experiences and emotions (Halldórsdóttir 2007). Compared to memoirs and narrations of the plague, which tend to be written long after the events described took place and to present a set of traditional motifs and imagery (Wrightson 2011, 7-8), they are close to the language of immediacy (Elspass 2012), and are usually written as the events unfold. Furthermore, by providing access to the voices of different people, they enable us to get a glimpse into a social network or family life.

Private correspondence is the source on which I draw in the present study, which examines the lived experiences of the plague in early sixteenth-century Italy from the perspective of one Florentine family, the Buonarroti, and their network.

The Buonarroti correspondence, much of which has been edited for historical and artistic purposes as a result of interest in the artist Michelangelo Buonarroti and his contacts, is composed of more than 1800 private letters produced by over 250 individuals, the majority of whom were writing between 1496 and 1570. Most of these letters are of a practical nature, exchanged as they were between family members, friends and co-workers in order to share personal or professional information and advice on a number of issues. Documents of this

type are therefore a valuable source of information for an investigation of personal experiences of the plague in Florence and elsewhere. In the letters, epidemics prove particularly significant in the ten years between 1520 and 1530, during which they are mentioned in more than forty letters in the edited corpus alone.

My investigation was carried out on the whole edited corpus (Barocchi and Ristori 1965-1983, quoted hereafter as CARTEGGIO; Barocchi *et al.* 1988-1995, quoted hereafter as CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO),¹ and on unpublished letters preserved in the Archivio Buonarroti. For the unpublished correspondence, I focused on letters written in the 1520s (since this was a period that saw frequent outbreaks of the plague, and the edited correspondence from this decade mentioned them frequently).

These private documents are used here to investigate a number of questions: the ways in which the plague entered everyday discourse; how family members or their colleagues and friends expressed their anxieties; the way they supported each other in the face of an outbreak; the advice that was given, and the extent to which this reflected recommendations found in contemporary medical or pseudo-medical literature. The financial and professional dilemmas experienced by individuals will also be explored, along with the perception of social differences that the epidemic helped to accentuate. Thus, an exploration of a family's lived experiences of the plague can shed light on cultural and social aspects of the time: what were individuals' medical beliefs, and how much would these influence their actions? When faced with a choice between business and health, what values would prevail? Would social and family ties hold firm in front of a disastrous event like the plague?

2. *Mapping the Plague in the Buonarroti Correspondence*

This investigation focuses mainly (but not exclusively) on the protagonists of the Buonarroti letter corpus: the artist Michelangelo (1547-1564) and his three brothers, Buonarrotto (1477-1528), Giovansimone (1479-1548) and Gismondo (1481-1555). The four brothers were born into a Florentine family of the minor aristocracy (Hatfield 2002, 222-223), who were related to some prominent Florentine families, but who were nonetheless experiencing serious financial difficulties when Michelangelo and his brothers were born (Hatfield 2002; Wallace 2010). Michelangelo had chosen an artistic career, an unusual choice for a boy from the minor aristocracy (Wallace 1992). Spending most of his life working in Florence and in Rome, he went on to become immensely successful, over time accumulating enormous wealth and managing to greatly increase his family's fortunes. The other brothers became wool merchants, with help from Michelangelo, who financially supported them in the opening of a workshop in Florence in 1514.

The Buonarroti brothers were prolific letter writers, and they would frequently exchange information on all sorts of subjects: their business, their whereabouts and their health. In the letters they wrote, and in those that they received from their numerous correspondents, the plague features frequently. It is most commonly referred to by the term *peste* (thirty-two occurrences) or its more archaic variant *pesta* (three occurrences), 'plague'. Other commonly used but somewhat more generic terms are *morbo* (thirteen occurrences) and *moria* (twelve occurrences) which could be used to indicate the plague or, more generally, any epidemic that spread rapidly and with lethal effects (according to Battaglia and Barberi Squarotti 1961-2002,

¹ I am grateful to the Memofonte foundation, which provided me with digital copies of Michelangelo's edited corpus of correspondence.

s.v. *morbo* and *moria*). The Tuscan variant *infruenza/infruentia* (three occurrences) ‘infectious disease’ is also sporadically used in the corpus to indicate an epidemic, and the word *sospetto* ‘suspicion/symptom’ is used to indicate the first signs of an epidemic. It is quite easy to map these references, and their frequency, onto the occurrences of epidemics that have been reconstructed for sixteenth-century Italy (see Corradi 1867; Biraben 1975-1976).

Chronologically, the earliest references relate to an epidemic that struck Bologna in 1507 (which was probably not the plague; see Corradi 1867, 16), where Michelangelo was working on a colossal statue for Pope Julius II. As early as March, the artist informs his brother Buonarroto that the epidemic (*moria*) is ‘cactiva, perché non lascia persona dov’ella entra’ (CARTEGGIO I, 32) (bad, because it does not leave anyone whom it enters). Three years later, news of the plague reaches Michelangelo’s brother Giovansimone from abroad, in a vivid depiction of the epidemic that swept Lisbon in 1510, provided by his correspondent Giovanni Morelli, a Florentine merchant who had relocated there (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 23-24). It appears from the correspondence that Giovansimone himself was contemplating moving to Portugal for business, but decided against this course of action, probably in part because of the plague.

In letters written in the 1520s, the plague becomes ubiquitous. This is not surprising, as a major epidemic swept across Italy from 1522 until the end of the decade (see Corradi 1867, 31-92; Biraben 1975-1976). On the basis of the calculation of mortality rates carried out on the Florentine Dowry Fund (Morrison *et al.* 1985), Florence was worst hit in the period between 1527 and 1531, when at least 20-25 per cent of the population of the city is likely to have died. Indeed, in the summer of 1528, the plague killed one of the protagonists of the Buonarroto corpus, Michelangelo’s brother Buonarroto.

After 1530, mentions of the plague become sporadic, in keeping with a decrease in the number of outbreaks in the next few decades.²

3. Quantifying the Plague

As noted above, references to the plague are particularly abundant in the Buonarroto correspondence in the 1520s, reflecting the major outbreak that characterised that decade. Letters from this period are filled with constant updates on the state of the plague. At times, these are of a reassuring and optimistic nature, including expressions of relief because of a decrease or lack of new infections, as well as a request by Michelangelo’s friend and business manager Giovanfrancesco Fattucci in Rome to tell his mother ‘che si faccia vezi, e che nonn abbia paura del morbo, perché ce n’è poco et quasi niente’ (1524; CARTEGGIO III, 66) (to relax, and not to be afraid of the plague, because there is little or none). More frequently, however, the updates concern the rapid spread of the epidemic and the danger that it poses. It is very common for writers to attempt to quantify the increase in the plague, usually by estimating not the number of individuals, but the number of households that are affected each day:

² In November 1562, however, a letter from the tailor Lorenzo Mariottini in Rome discusses a fever that was known at the time as ‘mal del montone’ or ‘mal del castrone’ – an epidemic that Corradi has identified not as plague, but rather as a respiratory disease that rapidly spread through Europe causing a high mortality rate (Corradi 1867, 190-195): ‘Noi stiamo tuti col male del montone, e c’è amalato li 3 quarti di Roma e ce ne muore asai ... Idio sia quello che c[i] aiuti, che, secomdo si dicie qua, tuta Italia è imfetata di questo male e fa di gran dani’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO II, 136) (We all have the *mal del montone*, and three quarters of Rome are ill and many are dying ... May God help us because – so they say here – all Italy is infected from this disease and it is causing great damage).

Qui v'è da 4 dì in qua rinovato 3 o 4 case di peste, ne' medesimi luoghi. (by Buonarroto in Florence, October 1523; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 205) (There has been a new outbreak of plague in 3 or 4 houses over the last four days)

[La] moria non cre[s]cie se non una casa o insino a 2 per dì. (by Buonarroto in Florence, July 1524; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 224) (The epidemic grows no more than one or two households per day)

Qua è di molta peste, e hongni di ne rinuova 8 o 10 chase. (by Tedaldo Della Casa in Rome, June 1526; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 249) (Here there is a lot of plague, and everyday it strucks 8 to 10 households)

In one case, the writer gives a precise count of the infections, totalling more than nine thousand cases: 'ungni dì ne ammala assai, in modo che dove in Borgho era 300 malati, oggi ve n'è 9101' (by Battista Figiovanni in Rome, August 1532; CARTEGGIO III, 428) (every day many people get ill, such that in Borgho, where there were 300 cases, there are now 9101).

Frequently, and especially in the updates sent from Florence by Buonarroto, these numbers are accompanied by lists of acquaintances who have fallen ill or died, which connect these objective pieces of information to more personal news:

... morì di morbo Nicholò Lenzi, el quale à di molti figlioli. (by Buonarroto in Florence, July 1524; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 224) (Nicolò Lenzi, who has many children, has died of plague)

... giovedì amorbò Giovanni di Bertino Rucelai in Borgo Ognisanti, c[i]oè in chasa sua. (by Buonarroto in Florence, July 1524; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 226) (On Tuesday Giovanni Bertino Rucellai fell ill in his house in Borgo Ognisanti)

... èvi morte parechi persone; infra l'altre è Ghabriello d(e)l Bosco. (by Buonarroto in Florence, April 1528; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 297-298) (Several people have died, among whom Ghabriello del Bosco)

De' chasi di ser Simone Guidi, io t'ò avisato come morì di peste è più d'un mese ... De' chasi de la peste, senpre fa qualche cosa, e ogi è morto Giovanbatista Strozi e la moglie e chosì è morti di molti che t'ò avisato ... (by Buonarroto in Florence, April 1528; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 299-300) (About ser Simone Guidi, I told you he died of plague over a month ago ... The plague keeps doing damage, and today Giovanbattista Strozzi and his wife have died; and so have many who I told you about. ...)

2 dì fa morì el prete, c[i]oè ser Andrea. (by Buonarroto in Rovizzano, May 1528; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 304-305) (Two days ago the priest, ser Andrea, died)

4. *Voicing Anxieties*

In his study of the 1636 plague outbreak in Newcastle, Keith Wrightson notes that the language of emotions was for the most part muted in his sources. This absence of emotional language, rather than showing that individuals lacked 'the words to articulate distinctively the feelings that they experienced' (2011, 91), is likely to have reflected the type of sources used in his study, i.e. wills dictated to a scribe, whose primary aim was to assign property, not to disclose feelings. In the Buonarroti correspondence, the language of emotions is by no means muted. Anxieties about the plague emerge strongly, as in Giovanni Morelli's description of the fear that has struck him and his whole household during the plague outbreak in Lisbon in 1510. He uses the metaphor of a chessboard to illustrate the uncertainty of the current times, claiming that everyone is 'in sul tavoliere rispetto alla pesta che c'è grande' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 23-24)

(on a chessboard because of the plague which is raging). He has been beside himself with fear because his own roommate has died:

Vi prometto da un mese in qua sono stato fuori di me, che ditta pesta ci dette in forsa: de la quale s'è morto uno g[i]ovane Tomaso del M(aestr)o, fratello d'Ant(oni)o del M(aestr)o, el quale dormiva chon eso mecho, el quale morì in 2 di: alsi altri strani di chasa, sì che vedete se siamo stati in grandissimo trav[a]glio. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 23-24) (I swear that for one month I have been out of my mind, because this plague has put us in great danger. A young man, Tomaso del Maestro, brother of Antonio del Maestro, who lodged with me, died of the plague. He died in two days: and so did other foreigners in the house, so you can imagine in what agony we have been)

As he goes on to relate, he was not alone in being terrified by close contact with cases of plague, as another Florentine merchant seems to have fallen ill with fear:

Alsi pochi di fa s'è morto uno merchatante di choteste part(i) nomato el Pingnolo, e stando in sua chasa Lesandro del Vingna è malato, e quali dichano nonn è peste. An me pare abia male più di paura che d'altro: el quale stette sempre in chasa di ditto Pingnolo infino che morì; sì che, chome vi dicho, gli è venuto uno pocho di febre, più per paura che altro. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 23-24) (Just a few days ago a merchant from your parts named Pignolo died. Lesandro, who was at his house, is ill. They say it isn't plague. I think he's ill from fear more than anything else, since he was always in the house of this Pignolo until he died. So that, as I say, he got a bit of a fever more out of fear than anything else)

The word *paura* 'fear' emerges in frequent connection with the plague (CARTEGGIO I, 240; CARTEGGIO II, 360; CARTEGGIO III, 66, 254, 428; CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 23-27, 144-145, 269, 295). It is repeatedly used, for instance, by Michelangelo's father in a letter written in December 1522, in front of the prospect of a plague outbreak in Florence:

... veduto la chactiva disposizione del tempo e la paura degli uomini e' grandi suspecti, bene che io sia vecchio e doglioso e mortale, tucta volta, pure, essendo di charne, ò paura anch'io. (CARTEGGIO II, 360) (because of the bad weather and mens' fear and major first signs [of plague], although I am old, ailing and mortal, since I am made of flesh I am also scared)

Anxieties for the wellbeing of relatives are also frequent. In May 1524, Giovanfrancesco Fattucci from Rome explains to Michelangelo that the plague is widespread, but explicitly asks him not to tell his mother in order not to worry her (CARTEGGIO III, 78). In the midst of the 1527 outbreak, Michelangelo, in Florence, receives an anguished letter from his father who was expecting him in the nearby village of Settignano, and is afraid he might have fallen ill: 'Michelangniolo, abbiàno maninchonia, perché dicesti di venire stamani e non se' venuto. Abbiàno paura non abbi male, Iddio cie ne ghuardi' (CARTEGGIO III, 254) (Michelangelo, we are worried, because you said you would come this morning and you didn't. We are afraid that you might be ill, God forbid!).

5. *A List of Recommendations*

Members of the Buonarroti family would also frequently give each other advice on what to do in the face of an outbreak. First of all, when the plague is mentioned, there are frequent, generic recommendations to take care (*cura*) and to be careful (*fare buona guardia*, or *stare a buona guardia*): (CARTEGGIO II, 376; CARTEGGIO III, 78; CARTEGGIO III, 78, 428; CARTEGGIO

INDIRETTO I, 21-22, 71-72, 221, 225, 227-228). We can perhaps imagine what these *cura* and *guardia* might have consisted of by browsing contemporary medical manuals, or city statutes and regulations;³ however, some of the advice shared by the Buonarroti and their circle is specific. In the following sections, these pieces of advice are examined in relation to the knowledge and beliefs that were widespread at the time.

5.1 'Be the First to Flee'

The most common advice that the Buonarroti gave each other during an epidemic was to flee crowded cities as early as possible, and to head towards isolated places. This was indeed the first and most frequent recommendation found in medical or pseudo-medical plague literature, and frequently given by authorities themselves (Benvenuto 1996, 98-102). To escape early and far at the first signs of plague was the first and most emphatic advice given, for instance, in the very popular *Consilio contro la pestilentia* written by the humanist Marsilio Ficino, first printed in Florence in 1481 as an aid to the Florentine population, and in Antonio Cermisone's *Recepte* (1483-1484: fol. a¹), also reprinted several times in the sixteenth century.⁴

This recommendation was common knowledge among the Buonarroti family, to the extent that it could be used as a metaphor by Michelangelo during times of war. In 1512, learning about the sack of Prato, where citizens had been massacred by the Spanish troops who were now moving towards Florence (see Tozzini Cellai 1991), Michelangelo, writing from his residence in Rome, urged his family to flee the city as fast as they could. He begged them to leave everything behind, 'perché molto più vale la vita che la roba' (because life is much more valuable than goods), and asked them to act 'chome si fa alla moria siate e' pr[i]mi a fugire' (CARTEGGIO I, 135) (like you would do in an epidemic: be the first to flee).

It was usual for aristocrats and wealthy merchants to take refuge in country villas, where their tenants would procure what was necessary for their families (Benvenuto 1996, 100); indeed, the Buonarroti family members did this, or considered doing so, multiple times during epidemics (see, for instance, CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 221, 269, 291-292, 297-298, 302-303).

Cities were considered the main hubs of contagion, as Buonarroti's brother-in-law Tedaldo Della Casa comments in a letter sent from Mugello in August 1527, advising Buonarroti, currently resident in Settignano, to come and stay at his house because he would be 'piu dischosto da Firenze' (more distant from Florence). Tedaldo informs his brother-in-law that he and his mother have not yet sent a payment to Florence because 'chiunque uiene infirenze pare che quasua sia asospetto' (whoever goes to Florence is regarded as potentially infected up here) (Archivio Buonarroti XXVI, fol. 57^v).

It was common knowledge that the more isolated a place was from common trade routes, the more shielded it would be from contagion. In 1523, Michelangelo's cousin Donato Del Sera reflected on this when he invited the artist to come and stay in Petrognano, praising the fortunate conditions that seemed to grant that town protection from the plague:

... sono nel deserto, ché qua non chapita se none chi vi[ene] a posta, et chredo che Dio abbi fatto questo paese in uno certo modo che hor[dina]riamente non ci può il morbo. Che chosi li piaccia mantenere.

³For an overview of the advice given by medical or pseudo-medical literature, see Benvenuto (1996, 95-110). On measures implemented by local governments in early modern Italy, see Cipolla (1981; 1986) and Benvenuto (1996, 145-184).

⁴On Ficino's text and its popularity, see Katinis (2007).

(CARTEGGIO II, 379) (I am in the desert, because here no one passes except those who are coming here on purpose, and I believe God had made this town in such a way that the plague cannot normally reach it. May He want to preserve it this way)

5.2 Avoiding Contact with People and Servants

Contact with people who might be infected was a major source of concern for the Buonarroto family members. There are several comments that reveal this worry. Learning of the death from plague of his friend Nicolò Lenzi in 1524, Giovansimone not only expresses his distress,⁵ but also reminds his brother Buonarroto to be careful because of their shared connections: ‘Credo che fusse parente del tuo chassiere; sì che abiti cura’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 227-228) (I believe he was a relative of your cashier: so be careful).

When Buonarroto discusses the death of ser Simone Guidi in April 1528 with Gismondo, he observes that ser Simone might already have been ill when he visited him: ‘chredo, sechondo me, che fusi amalato sino quando andamo a chasa sua el tuo Chavaliere ed io, perché morì la seguente domenicha’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 297-298) (I believe, in my opinion, that he was ill even when we went to his house, the Cavaliere and I, because he died the following Sunday).

Contact with workers and with servants was particularly feared. In a letter from 1527, in the midst of a violent outbreak, Michelangelo’s father Lodovico comments with relief that a servant who was ill had not developed any further symptoms, and might have only been drunk (CARTEGGIO III, 254). In a letter from the same year, Gismondo expresses his concern about living above a family of shoe-makers: ‘Io abito qua all mio poderino, e sto chon gran paura, perché io isto sopra a questi chalzaiuoli’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 269) (I live here in my little estate, and I am very scared because I live above these shoe-makers). For this reason, Gismondo has decided to prepare lodgings that will allow him to get away. This might simply indicate that he was concerned about contact with people, although this worry might also align with some recommendations given in medical literature, according to which the plague might spread more easily in houses that are contiguous (Ficino 2007 [1481], 207). In April 1528, Buonarroto similarly explains that he has sent away a worker from the house in which he has quarantined his family (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 297-298).

Workers and servants were thought to be very dangerous because of their unchecked mobility, something that Giovansimone explains clearly in a letter written in November 1523, recommending that Buonarroto should be cautious: ‘richorda a chotesti gharzzoni ch’abino l’occhio dove vanno, e anche alle serve, perché sono molto pericholose, queste serve, nello andare atornno’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 208-209) (remind these workers to be careful where they go, and remind also the women servants, because they are very dangerous, these women, going around).

Fear of contagion by contact was in line with recommendations given in Florence. In the 1520s, faced with news of a serious outbreak of plague in Rome, the Florentine Confraternita della Misericordia – a society devoted to providing poor relief – had entrusted the physician Girolamo Buonagrazia with the production of a manual that would contain preventative measures to limit contagion in Florence. Buonagrazia’s manual (1523), to be distributed to the seventy-two officials (*Capitani*) of the confraternity, recommended that, because the plague seemed to be spreading from Rome, rather than to originate from corruption of the air, social gatherings were to be avoided, especially indoors (Buonagrazia 2015, 61).

⁵ ‘M’è dispiac[i]uto grandemente, ch’era mio co(n)pare’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 227-228) (It has greatly grieved me, because he was my friend).

5.3 *Avoiding Infected Objects*

Another piece of advice that was shared by the Buonarroti family members was to avoid contact with objects that came from infected areas. This recommendation is also in line with what was recommended in plague manuals. Ficino, for instance, advised ‘ogni persona che abbi grande riguardo al tocchare le cose chessarecano da luoghi morbati’ (Ficino 2007, 169) (every person to be very careful not to touch things that are brought from infected areas).

In a letter sent from Piazzano in 1523, Buonarrotto’s wife Bartolommea warns him not to touch the coat she has recently sent him, because the courier might have contracted the plague:

Òvi mandato ell vostro gabano per Menico, e poi c[h]e io ve l’ebi mand[a]to s’è levato qua su una boce che mona Maria, sorela di Francescho Bruni, è morta di morbo; e se gl’è vero, Menico Pini v’è pegalato: sì che vo’ dovete sapere. Se gl’è vero, lo dovete sapere sì che tocatelo manco che vo’ po[te]te, infino che io non vi mando altro. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 212) (I have sent you your coat through Menico, but after I sent it, it was said in town that mona Maria, sister of Francesco Bruni, has died of plague; if it’s true, Menico Pini is at risk: so that you must know. If it’s true, you must know: so touch it as little as you can, until I send further news)

Similarly, in a letter sent from Florence in the midst of the outbreak of 1527, Michelangelo warns his brother Buonarrotto not to touch the letters he sends by hand (‘Non tochare le lectere che io ti mando chon mano’) (CARTEGGIO III, 252).

5.4 *Being Wary of the Air, Heat, and the Moon*

In early modern Italy, the concept of contagion in the medical world seems to have coexisted with, rather than stood in opposition to, the notion of putrid and corrupt air derived from the Greek medical tradition (Henderson 2003; Cavallo and Storey 2013). Miasma and pestilential air were usually considered the primary causes of plague.⁶

As mentioned before, Ficino recommends leaving a place stricken by pestilence as early as possible, before infections have started to spread, when the first signs of plague are detected in the air. His indications, in line with the Greek tradition, warn that pestilential air is recognisable as hot and humid, clouded and dusty, and affected by warm winds. He recommends escaping ‘prima che sia el primo de’ dodici milia segnati’ (Ficino 2007, 208) (before the first of twelve thousand is stricken).

This idea seems to have been taken very seriously by Michelangelo’s trusted carpenter Piero Basso. As soon as he fell ill in Rome in July 1508, Piero left for his hometown of Settignano in a feverish state, disregarding the opinion of everyone around him, because he was afraid of being contaminated by the air. At least, this is what a very worried Michelangelo recounts to his brother Buonarrotto shortly afterwards, asking him to check whether Piero has made it safely to Tuscany:

⁶ On the history and popularity of this Hippocratic idea, see Gourevitch (1995); on the notion of *miasma* in Hippocratic and post-Hippocratic medicine, see also Jacques (2012). According to Cavallo and Storey (2013, 70), the preoccupation with the quality of the air increased even further in the sixteenth century, probably because of repeated outbreaks of the plague, but also, perhaps, because of an actual change in climate. This concern even resulted in detailed instructions on how to locate and design healthy homes that would be protected from bad air and unhealthy winds (Cavallo and Storey 2013, 70-112). The Buonarroti correspondence is witness to this concern, for example in Michelangelo’s enquiry about the quality of the air when considering the purchase of a house near Fiesole in September 1518 (CARTEGGIO II, 81).

Avisoti come Piero Basso si partì di qua martedì mactina amalato, o volessi io o no. Èmene saputo male, perché sono restato solo e anche perché ò paura non si muoia per la via; ma e' s'era chacciato tanta paura nel chapo di questa aria, che mai non ce l'ò potuto tenere, e chredo sarebe guarito in quatro dì, se ci fussi stato, per quel che m'era decto da altri. (CARTEGGIO I, 75) (Piero Basso left from here on Tuesday morning while he was ill, no matter what I wanted. This made me sad because I have been left here by myself and I'm also afraid he might die on the way; but he'd become so terrified of this air, that I couldn't keep him here, although I think he would have got well in four days if he had stayed, from what some people have told me)

Luckily for Piero, the journey did not cost him his life, as we hear from Buonarroto's reply that he had made it safely to Settignano and had recovered (CARTEGGIO I, 77).

Michelangelo, however, was not immune to similar ideas himself: in the same month he blamed the air in Rome for causing his brother Giovansimone, who was visiting him at the time, to become ill, and suggested that he return to Florence where the air was supposedly better:⁷

Giovan Simone si sta qua, e questa sectimana passata è stato amalato, che non m'à dato pichola passione oltre a quelle che i'ò; pure ora sta assai bene. Chredo si tornerà presto chostà, se farà a mio modo, perché l'aria di qua non mi pare facci per lui. (CARTEGGIO I, 70) (Giovan Simone is here, and this past week he has been ill, such that he has caused me great concern on top of the cares I already have; but now he's very well. I think he will come back to Florence soon, if he follows my advice, because I don't think the air here suits him)

A number of correspondents blame ill health and even the deaths of their friends on the quality of the air. In June 1517, Buonarroto informs his brother Gismondo that he and a certain ser Lorentino have felt unwell in Rassina, attributing this to 'questa ariac[i]a trista' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 109-112) (this horrible air). In fact, Buonarroto had asked Gismondo to procure him and ser Lorentino some cassia (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 86-88), a remedy that was recommended as an antidote against plague (Ferro 1565, fol. 18^v).

In July 1532, Michelangelo receives a letter from the Venetian painter Sebastiano Del Piombo who laments the death of their friend and colleague, the clockmaker Benvenuto Della Volpaia, which he specifically relates to the quality of the air in Belvedere:

Tornato da Fondi io ho trovato morto el povero nostro Benvenuto, che in vero mi parse cossa molto fora di proposito, et Dio sa quanto mi è doluto; et ridicovi ancora che l'aria de Belvedere non è buona et cet. (CARTEGGIO III, 419) (As I returned from Fondi I found that our poor dear Benvenuto had died, which really was a terrible thing to me, and God knows how much this has saddened me; and I tell you again that the air in Belvedere is not good)

The air was thought to be particularly corrupt and toxic in the summer months. This is undoubtedly linked to the fact that plague outbreaks reached their peak in this season (Morrison *et al.* 1985), something that is actually due to the life cycle of fleas (Cipolla 1986, 33). In 1517 Buonarroto's wife, Bartolommea, attributes the illness and death of people around her to the hot season.

E' caldi ... ci so' qua mo[l]ti gra[n]di e amalaci di mo[l]ta ge[n]te. La Lisabeta mia sorela ista male e àno paura c[h]e la no si muoia qui, e Teda[l]do à auto dua o tre vo[l]te la febre ... e Benedeto Rinieri è

⁷ In fact, the air in Rome was thought to be particularly bad because of its exposure to damp westerly and southerly winds (Cavallo and Storey 2013, 80).

mo[r]to. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 144-145) (The heat ... is great and many people are getting ill. My sister, Lisabeta, is sick and they are afraid she might die here, and Teldaldo has had a fever two or three times ... and Benedetto Rinieri is dead)

It is for this reason that Bartolommea decides to wait until September to travel, and that we find frequent recommendations, throughout the Buonarroti correspondence, to avoid travelling in the heat. Summer was considered particularly dangerous because the heat would cause changes in the quality of the air to which the human body would be particularly vulnerable.⁸

In the summer of 1532, the ambassador to the Duke of Urbino Giovan Maria Della Porta begs Michelangelo not to travel from Florence to Rome ‘considerato il pericolo che è della mutation de l’aere, per ogni luogo, de questa staggione, e molto più dall’una sproportionata a l’altra, come sarebbe dal vostro sottile a questo grosso’ (CARTEGGIO III, 417) (considering the danger that is found in changing air everywhere in this season, and especially from one air to another that is different, as it would be from your thin air to our thick air). The sculptor Pier Antonio Cecchini similarly mentions the risks that Michelangelo would run of falling ill, travelling from thin to thick air in his journey in the midst of the summer heat (CARTEGGIO III, 421).

A look at medical literature clarifies these recommendations. Medical treatises frequently made a distinction between *aere grosso* (literally, ‘thick air’) and *aere sottile* (‘thin air’): *grosso* appears to indicate misty (and therefore humid) air, which was usually considered more dangerous, whereas *sottile* is used to indicate transparent, dry air. The physician Gabriele Falloppio from Modena, in his Latin treatise *In Hippocratis librum de vulneribus capitis* (1566), maps these types of air onto different locations, drawing a distinction between Italian cities characterised by thick air (*aer crassus*), such as Venice and Ferrara, and those characterised by thin air (*tenuis*), such as Florence, in keeping with the view expressed by Michelangelo’s correspondents (Falloppio 1566, fol. 39^v).⁹ Particularly during the summer, travelling from one area where the air was ‘thick’ to one area where it was ‘thin’, or viceversa, would have been risky. According to Falloppio, if one has an injury to the head, ‘si quis nutritus in tenui aere eat ad locum crassiorem, vel e contra, si vulneretur in aere illo facile moritur. Sed indigenae non interficiuntur ita facile’ (Falloppio 1566, fol. 40^r) (if someone who has been bred in thin air goes to a place where the air is thick, or the other way round, if that person is hurt they are likely to die; but those who stay in their native air will not die so easily).

⁸ In the words of an anonymous treatise printed in Venice at the end of the seventeenth century, entitled *Svegliarino* (1691, 23-24), ‘la state rabbiosa, per la gran mutation dell’aere fassi veleno’ (the terrible summer, because of the strong mutation of the air, becomes poison). On the danger posed by changes in the quality of the air, see also Buonagrazia (2015, 44).

⁹ The expression *aere grosso* (*Inferno* XVI 130, XXXI 37) / *aer grasso* (*Inferno* IX 82) is even used by Dante to characterise the air in the *Inferno*. The *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (1970-1978; s.v. *grosso*) proposes the meaning of ‘dense’; in fact, the term appears to refer to an atmosphere that is in particular misty and humid. In *Convivio* (III IX.12), Dante explains that the air changes ‘di sottile in grosso ... per li vapori de la terra che continuamente salgono’ (from thin to thick ... because of vapours that keep rising from the earth), and in his commentary on the *Commedia*, Giovanni Boccaccio explains that the expression *quell’aer grasso* (*Inferno* IX 82) is due to the smoke and fog, which must have made the air thick. Boccaccio notes that ‘in questo dimostra l’autore quello aere grasso dovergli essere assai noioso; e ciò non ci dee parer maraviglia, considerando chi egli era, e onde venia’ (Boccaccio 1831, 264) (in this the author shows that he must have really disliked thick air; and this should not surprise us, considering who he was, and where he was from): Boccaccio could be referring, here, to the thin quality usually attributed to the air in Florence. The same meaning of misty and humid seems to be implied in the sixteenth-century dialogue *I capricci del bottaio* by the Florentine author Giovanbattista Gelli, in which the formation of the rainbow is attributed to the way the sun colours ‘l’aere grosso & vaporoso’ (Gelli 1546, fol. 6^r).

It is evident that these beliefs were also held, to some extent, by Michelangelo's correspondents. They also help to explain Domenico Buoninsegni's indecision about whether to send the artist Baccio d'Agnolo to assist Michelangelo in Carrara in November 1516, on the grounds that Baccio is not used to changing air, and maritime airs are humid and therefore particularly dangerous:¹⁰

Non ne lo vogl[i]o strignere, ché non vorrei esser chausa di farlo amalare, atteso che lui non è uso a mutare aria; e maxime che questo anno le arie marittime sono pexime, benché, essendo venuto el freddo, doverà esser passato la trista stagione. (CARTEGGIO I, 218) (I don't want to force him because I don't want to cause him to get ill, considering that he is not used to changing air; and especially this year, in which the sea airs are terrible, although, considering that the cold has come, the bad season should have passed)

Among the factors that would make the air unhealthy and contagious, great importance was given to astral phenomena in medical literature. People were advised to be particularly careful around the full moon and the new moon (see, for instance, Ficino 2007, 176).

This belief is clear in a letter from Luigi Gianfigliuzzi, Buonarroto's business partner, describing the plague in Naples, which links the worsening of the outbreak to the full moon: 'Circha de' chasi della peste, ci va all' usato peg[i]orando, e alla quinta decima della luna fece più che 'il solito' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 267-268) (About the spread of the plague, it's getting worse, and by the full moon it struck harder than usual).¹¹

5.5 *Seeking the Expertise of Physicians*

Doctors are mentioned several times in Michelangelo's correspondence (nineteen times in the edited corpus), but they do not feature prominently when the plague is mentioned. There is only one instance in which the opinion of a doctor is specifically sought and valued, in order to assess whether an epidemic is lethal: in a letter from Bologna in 1507, Michelangelo complains that the Bolognese population seem to underestimate the dangers caused by the epidemic. The artist asks Giovansimone to send a Florentine physician to Bologna in order to warn the locals of the potential risks:

Tu mmi scrivi d'un cierto medico tuo amico, il quale t' à dicto che lla moria è uno chactivo male e che e' se ne muore. ò charo averlo inteso, perché qua n'è assai, e non si sono achorti anchora, questi Bolognesi, che e' se ne muoia. Però sarebe buono e' venissi di qua, che forse lo darebe loro ad intendere cholla sperienza, la qual cosa a lloro gioverebbe assai. (CARTEGGIO I, 39) (You write to me of a doctor who is your friend, who has told you that the epidemic is a bad disease and that people die from it. I'm grateful for having learnt this, because there is a lot of it here, and these Bolognese have not yet realised that you can die from it. It would therefore be good if he came here, because maybe he could make them understand this through his experience, which would be very helpful to them)

¹⁰ On the negative qualities attributed to sea air in the sixteenth century, see Cavallo and Storey (2013, 72).

¹¹ Over a century before, in 1405, a letter by Piero Giusto Benintendi was similarly discussing the link between the phases of the moon and the plague in Genoa: 'Qui a Genova è ancora la moria, e morsene monto bene no ostante che la luna abia fato' (Piatoli 1932, 94-96) (Here in Genoa there is still the plague, and many people are dying although the new moon is gone). The importance of the moon in medical matters is, in fact, also underlined by Buonarroto in a letter concerning the health of their father, informing Michelangelo that the doctor has declared him safe after the new moon (1516; CARTEGGIO I, 226).

5.6 *Praying*

In almost half the cases,¹² mentions of plague are accompanied by references to God and divine will. Correspondents frequently expressed their wish that God would spare them from the plague, or thanked God for having protected them. Some of these references are stereotypical, and may constitute somewhat fixed formulae. Praying to God, however, was something that was also recommended in medical literature. The aforementioned plague manual by Buonagrazia (1523), which had been commissioned in Florence in 1522 in order to recommend practical measures to limit contagion from Rome, consisted of a scientific treatise in Latin, followed by a short series of instructions in the vernacular, which targeted those who did not know Latin, and who were in need of ‘cose breve, expeditie et utile’ (2015, 69) (brief, simple and useful things).¹³ The practical instructions given included the need for confession, prayer and charity in order to appease God’s wrath, with plague described as a divine scourge designed to punish men for their sins (*ibid.*). Indeed, a number of prayers that invoked protection against the plague were printed throughout Italy: in Florence, a collection of prayers entitled *Tanie del rimedio contra la peste & tribulationi* were given to the printing press during the 1527 outbreak. A compilation of medical advice put together by Giovanni Pacalono from Padua even features a prayer to the Virgin to be carried around during outbreaks of the plague (‘oratione devotissima per portar addosso in tempo di peste’; Pacalono 1555, fols π16^v-17^r) (most devout prayer to carry around in times of plague).¹⁴

In Michelangelo’s correspondence, the need to recite prayers is made explicit in Giovanni Morelli’s 1510 letter from Lisbon, in which the merchant states that ‘qui in questa città è di molta peste; sì che, vedete, ò bisogno delle orazione’ (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 21-22) (in this town there is a lot of plague; so that, you see, I need prayers). Some of the letters in Michelangelo’s correspondence explicitly ask the addressee to pray for the health of the writer, as in Buonarroti’s request to Gismondo to pray God for him because of the growing outbreak (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 295), and in Fattucci’s request to Michelangelo ‘Pregate Idio per me che mi canpi da questo morbo’ (CARTEGGIO III, 72) (Pray to God that he should save me from this illness). Michelangelo himself, in a letter written in 1549, states that he believes in prayers far more than he believes in doctors (CARTEGGIO IV, 324).

6. *Social Differences and Plague*

Most of the letters that discuss the plague are written by people of relatively high status. Indeed, the wealth and status of the correspondents determines their experience of the plague, frequently allowing them to escape Florence. The description of the ‘lockdown’ in the countryside by Michelangelo’s friend Giovanni Gellesi from Prato, during the outbreak that had struck Rome in 1522, captures a very aristocratic experience, somewhat reminiscent of the time spent in isolation by the young men and women portrayed in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Gellesi recounts

¹² In the edited corpus, comments on the plague are accompanied by reference to God in 25 instances, out of a total of 61 instances where the plague is mentioned.

¹³ I am grateful to the Confraternita della Misericordia for kindly gifting me a copy of the modern edition of this work (Buonagrazia 2015).

¹⁴ It was typical to pray the Virgin Mary as intercessor to God in times of plague. St. Sebastian and St. Rocco were also frequently invoked as miracle-workers against the plague (Benvenuto 1996, 135-137). On the importance attributed to prayers during plague epidemics in early modern Italy more generally, see Benvenuto (1996, 129-142). See also Cipolla’s analysis (1986, 195-269) of the tensions that arose in the Tuscan village of Monte Lupo in 1630 between religious and civil authorities.

how he and his friends, after a miraculous escape from Rome, are passing the time in quarantine, hunting and fowling in an estate owned by the Cardinal of Como:

Noi, cioè Tomaso Strozi, Bartolomeo et io, havemo corso pericolo, et non picholo, di peste che ci morì uno servidore quale con tucti noi haveva praticato. Pur, per gratia di Dio, semo sani, e al presente ci troviamo tucti a Castel chiamato Giubileo, dove non è altri che noi, della qual stanza ce n'è comodato el cardinale di Como per sua gratia ... Attendiamo a ragnare e a caciare, che il luogho è assai comodo tucto facciamo per passare questi tempi adversi della peste, qual, chome dicono, va diminuendo, - che a Dio piaccia cessarla. (CARTEGGIO II, 361) (We – Tommaso Strozzi, Bartolomeo [Angelini] and I – have run a great risk of catching the plague, because a servant who had contact with us all died. However, thank God, we are healthy, and at present we are all at a place called Castel Giubileo, where there is no one but us. This lodging was given to us by the Cardinal of Como in his grace ... We spend our time fowling and hunting, because the place is very suitable. We are doing everything to pass these adverse times of plague, which, they say, is decreasing – may it please God to make it stop)

We have seen, however, that workers and servants are sometimes mentioned, mostly as dangers to be avoided because they moved around freely. The descriptions of the situation in villages or cities during outbreaks also sometimes allows writers to express their perception of the conditions of the poor. According to Gismondo, during the plague in Settignano in 1527, the poor are starving, which worsens the outbreak because 'vanno di qua e di là e a Firenze' (people are going here and there and to Florence) in order to get food (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 269). In his description of the plague outbreak in Naples in 1527, Luigi Gianfigliuzzi identifies the poor as the hardest hit as they are the ones who have nowhere to flee to: 'ci resta poche persone excetto che li poveri, che non àno dove fugire, e delli gentiluomini non se ne vede nessuno' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 267-268) (there are few people left except for the poor, who have nowhere to escape, and no gentleman is to be seen).¹⁵

7. *The Choice Between Health and Business*

In the Buonarroti correspondence, family members frequently commented on the impact of the plague on their work and finances. The artistic work of Michelangelo was itself hindered by epidemics as early as 1507. Working in Bologna on the statue of Pope Julius II, in February Michelangelo first wrote to his father that there were early signs of an epidemic in Bologna, but explicitly asked him not to spread the rumour because he might not find any worker in Florence who would be willing to come (CARTEGGIO I, 27). A couple of months later, he explained to his brother Buonarroto that indeed the assistant who was supposed to come from Florence was nowhere to be seen, most likely because of the epidemic that had struck Bologna (CARTEGGIO I, 28).

In the mid-1520s, the disruption caused by the plague made it difficult for Michelangelo to receive instructions from the Pope, as Fattucci explained to him on many occasions:

Charissimo Michelagnolo, per l'ultima mia vi scrissi come nonn avevo auto risposta da Nostro Signore circa la libreria; né manco n'ò auta ora, rispetto alle faciende et rispetto alla difficoltà per conto del morbo. (May 1524; CARTEGGIO III, 74) (Dearest Michelangelo, I wrote to you in my last letter how I had not

¹⁵ In an official document dated 2 April signed by the Neapolitan nobleman Galeazzo Cicinello and other people in power, we similarly read that Naples is completely deserted because of the great plague, and that the only gentlemen that have remained are those who are governing the town, together with those who were too poor to flee (Sirleo 1910, 57).

been able to hear from our Lord about the library; and I haven't yet had his reply, because of the current events and because of the difficulties caused by the plague)

Honorando Michelagnolo, io non ò risposto prima alla vostra perché Nostro Signore sta rinc[h]iuso per la peste. (June 1526; CARTEGGIO III, 230) (Dear Michelangelo, I haven't replied before to your letter because our Lord is locked in because of the plague)

Michelangelo himself was instructed not to work on the Medici library in Florence while the plague was ongoing: 'quando sarà passato il sospetto del morbo, allora atenderete alla libreria, et non prima' (June 1524; CARTEGGIO III, 80) (when the fear of the plague ceases, then you shall work on the library, and not before).

It is, however, on the difficulties encountered by merchants that the Buonarroti correspondence provides most information. These troubles particularly affected the wool workshop of which Michelangelo's brother Buonarrotto was the main administrator. In 1524, Iacopo Gianfigliuzzi, Buonarrotto's partner, advised him to get on with business as soon as the plague relents because 'sannza tessere e far de' panni nonn si ghuadanngnia' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 236-237) (without weaving and making clothes there's no earning). Another business associate, Luigi Gianfigliuzzi, wrote in April 1527 from Naples, where the plague was raging, offering a vivid account of the disastrous consequences of the plague on the city and, in particular, on Buonarrotto's business:

... li merchanti, fatto e paghamenti di lane, che d'ora in ora s'aspettano li spacci, si partiranno, perché el simile farà la chorte e li tribunali, che di g[i]à àno mandato a fermare le stanze e ognuno sè provisto; e partendosi, bisognerà fare pensiero, per questa state, di non avere a fare niente. E del risquotere peg[i] o che mai, ché tutti e debitori se ne sono andati, chi qua e chi là, e quelli pochi restatoci, chiedendo loro danari ti dichano villania; e volendo andare per via di iustizia, oltre a che pocho si tiene, pare che abi mille torti, e anchora non sono tenpi da volerla adoperare. Bisogna v'achordiate cholli altri, c[i]oè d'averè patienza e preghare Iddio migliori stag[i]one, che per più chonti bisogno n'aviamo. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 267-268) (The merchants, once they have concluded their wool payments – the proceeds should come any day now – will leave. The court and the tribunal will do the same, since they have already found lodgings, and everyone has got ready. And once they have left, we will have to get used to the idea that we will have nothing to do this summer. And cashing in is more difficult than ever, because all the debtors have left, hither and thither, and as for those few who are still here, if you ask them for money they insult you. And if you want to take legal action, aside from the fact that you won't get much, it looks like you are the one in the wrong, and it's not yet time to use legal means. You must do as everyone else: be patient, and hope that God give us better times, because we really need them)

The following year, Buonarrotto, who would die from the plague a few weeks later, informs his brother Gismondo that he has had to close his shop in Florence. He explains that he is out of business because no one is currently working, except at great personal risk:

E non ti maravigliare de l'esere fuori o vero in vila, perché a Firenze non si fa nula e quello pocho fa', non fa' senza grande pericholo, perché del chontinuo c'è de la peste e ogni g[i]orno ce n'è qualche casa di nuovo. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 308-309) (Don't be surprised that I'm out of Florence and in the countryside, because in Florence no one works and the little work that is done, is not done without great danger, because the plague keeps raging and everyday it breaks out afresh in some household)

Faced with difficulties with business and finances, the Buonarroti brothers would frequently ask for advice or give each other recommendations on what to do. The most common concern was choosing between the need to continue their professional activities and the need to flee the

crowded city, a dilemma that was also explored by Moote and Moote (2004) in the context of London's great plague, and by Slack (2012, 68), also in relation to Francesco Datini's indecision whether to flee from Florence at the turn of the fifteenth century.

In June 1524, Giovansimone writes from the village of Piazzano to his brother Buonarroto, admitting that he cannot offer any definite advice on what to do, as he is not in Florence himself, but suggesting nonetheless that his brother should flee. He emphasises that life is more precious than money, and also reminds Buonarroto of the many obligations he has (possibly to his wife and children), which mean he needs to stay alive:

Tu mi di' che lla peste va chrescendo tucta via, ed i[o] lascerò pensare a te, che meglio ne puoi dare iudicio perché se' presente, se gli è i[l] meglio fugire ho stare fermo; a me parebbe da ritrassi più presto che tu puoi, e giudicho essere più ghuadagnio lo spendere qui che 'l ghu[a]dagniare chosti. Pure fa' quanto ti pare. Io t'ò detto el mie parere, e mi pare, sechondo che Tedaldo mi schrive, che lla vi faccia assai danno; e sechondo dice, infra pochi dì se ne vuole venire quassù, e mi pare ch'egli la 'ntenda che nel morire non v'è nulla di buono, e tanto più a chi à hobrighi de' quali à tu. (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 221) (You tell me that the plague keeps increasing, and I will let you decide, because you can choose better than I can, since you are there, whether it is better to flee or to stay. But it would seem to me you had better get away from there as soon as you can, and I believe there is more to earn by spending your money here than earning money there. But do as you choose. I spoke my mind, and I understand, from what Tedaldo writes to me, that the plague is doing a lot of damage there. From what he writes, he means to come here in a few days, and he appears to realise that there is no use in dying, all the more for someone who has as many obligations as you have)

In August 1527, a very worried Giovansimone is invited by his brother Gismondo to flee his current residence and come to stay with him, if he so wishes. Gismondo reflects that the danger is everywhere,¹⁶ admits that he does not know what to advise his brother and recommends that he should do whatever he thinks best. However, he also suggests that his brother should not worry about spending money in order to decrease the risk of contagion. In particular, he advises Giovansimone to dismiss a worker, Balena, from his house, because he may have had contact with cases of the plague, or, alternatively, to build him a separate entrance to the house. Gismondo assures Giovansimone that he himself has been happy to spend quite a large sum of money in order to prepare lodgings that are safer and more isolated (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 269).

In the same month, Michelangelo is considering accepting the Office of *scrivano straordinario de' Cinque del chontado* in Florence in order to have his brother Buonarroto do it, but he reflects that it would be a bad idea for his brother, currently resident in Settignano, to work in the city during the outbreak, and advises him accordingly (CARTEGGIO III, 251). In a subsequent letter, Michelangelo reiterates this advice in stronger terms, assuring Buonarroto that he will help him financially as much as he can:

A mme parrebbe di rifiutarlo ... per chonto della peste, che mi pare che la vadi tutta via di male im peggio, e non vorrei che a stanza di quaranta ducati tu mecessi a pericolo la vita tua. Io t'aiuterò di quello che io potrò. (CARTEGGIO III, 252) (I think it best to refuse it [the office] ... because of the plague, because it seems to be getting worse and worse, and I don't want you to risk your life for forty ducats. I will help you as much as I can)

This recommendation is very similar to one that the artist had given a few years before to his business manager Giovanfrancesco Fattucci in Rome, in the midst of a new outbreak in

¹⁶ 'Tuti portiamo gran pericholo' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 269) (We all carry great danger).

September 1525. On that occasion, Michelangelo had urged Fattucci to come back to Florence immediately, and to abandon any professional concern:

Altro non m'achade, se non dirvi questo che voi laciatte stare la facienda mia e le vostre anchora, e che voi torniate, perché intendo che la peste ritorna a gran furia, e io ò più caro voi vivo che la facienda mia achoncia. Però tornate. (CARTEGGIO III, 166) (I have nothing else to say, except telling you to leave my business and yours, and to come back, because I understand that the plague is coming back very strongly, and I care more to have you alive than to have my business cared for. So come back)

In May 1528, it was Buonarroto's turn to remind Gismondo that his health was more important than money during the plague, in an attempt to comfort his brother over the disastrous state of his finances: 'E pensa che de la briga ce n'è per ogniuno, e se tu se' sano, ti basta. Sì che non ti dolere, a questi tenpi' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 304-305) (Remember that everyone is in trouble, and if you are healthy, that is enough. So don't be sad, at these times).

No matter the circumstances, the advice that the four Buonarroti brothers gave each other was the same, when it came to choosing between escaping the plague and protecting their own professional interests: to put aside any financial concerns, and place their own health first. This remained true in circumstances that did not involve the plague. When Michelangelo narrowly escaped death when a column fell and nearly killed him in 1518, Buonarroto gave his brother this advice:

Parmi, sechondo me, che tu deba stimare più la persona tua che una colona e che tuta la chava e che il Papa e tutto il mondo. E qui mi pare che co[n]sista la prudenza d[e] li homini valenti, d[i] rispiarmare prima l'animo e 'l corpo suo ... (CARTEGGIO II, 85) (I believe that you should value your life more than a column or the whole quarry or the Pope or the whole world. And I believe this is the wisdom of worthy men: to spare first one's soul and one's body)

8. Conclusion

The Buonarroti correspondence has provided insights into a Florentine family's experience of the plague, especially with relation to the outbreak that swept across Italy in the 1520s. In this period, members of the Buonarroti family would do more than simply sending each other updates concerning the current state of the plague. By sharing their experiences, and commenting on the numerous acquaintances that had fallen victim to the epidemic, they gave voice to their anxieties and emotions. In this respect, personal correspondence emerged as important because it frequently describes feelings, whereas emotions are muted or at least filtered in documents such as wills or trial proceedings, and frequently stereotyped in memoirs.

This body of correspondence presented, of course, limitations as a source. An important aspect relates to the evidence that has not come down to us: it is in most cases a chance whether some letters survived and some did not. For instance, although the correspondence records the Buonarroti family's growing anxiety concerning the state of the plague in the first part of 1528, it is completely silent in relation to Buonarroto's death from plague in the summer of that year. This can only be reconstructed by means of other sources, and it is therefore important to acknowledge that there are gaps in this family's experience of the plague that the correspondence cannot fill.

Moreover, this body of correspondence enables us to paint a Florentine family's experience of the plague through the voices of both men and women, but this experience was inevitably affected by being part of an elite of relatively well-off citizens. The direct voices of individuals of low status

are absent, in this case. Yet, in the descriptions of the dramatic state of cities and countryside during outbreaks of the plague, writers' perception of the conditions of the poor emerged.

This investigation has also revealed that personal correspondence may be used to understand ordinary people's medical beliefs and the way these affected their actions. The Buonarroto family members frequently shared practical advice, and these recommendations reflected in part the advice given by medical treatises and health authorities alike. Most commonly, recommendations amounted to fleeing to isolated places, and avoiding contact with individuals and even with potentially infected objects. It is interesting that many of these recommendations appear to be common sense even by modern standards, and that the correspondence does not contain complex lists of recommended diets, perfumes or moral behaviours that made up a substantial part of most early modern plague manuals. Recommendations about prayers are present, however, and comments on the notion of 'bad' air are especially frequent, in line with the medical beliefs of the time. Just as in medical literature, even lay people seem to have drawn a close association between the concept of contagion and the concept of corrupt and pestilential air.

Finally, this investigation has explored the very real, personal dilemmas faced by Florentine individuals when it came to choosing between saving their businesses or protecting their health. Readily coming to each other's aid in order to provide practical solutions – including safe lodgings, or financial help – family members in the correspondence would invariably advise each other to place their own health first. In the words of Giovansimone, 'giudicho essere più guadagno lo spendere qui che 'l ghu[a]dagniare chosti' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 221) (there is more to earn by spending your money here than earning money there); in the words of Gismondo, 'non ti churare di spendere 2 o tr[e] ducati per chanpare la vita' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 269) (don't worry about spending two or three ducats to save your life); in the words of Michelangelo, 'non vorrei che a stanza di quaranta ducati tu mettesti a pericolo la vita tua' (CARTEGGIO III, 252) (I don't want you to risk your life for forty ducats); and in the words of Buonarroto, 'pensa che de la briga ce n'è per ogniuno, e se tu se' sano, ti basta. Sì che non ti dolere, a questi tempi' (CARTEGGIO INDIRETTO I, 304-305) (Remember that everyone is in trouble, and it's enough that you are healthy). The range of solutions and support network the Buonarroto brothers devised and created in times of crisis suggests that, in line with what was found by Wrightson (2011, 98) for early modern England, and contrary to a view that sees epidemics as completely destructive of the social fabric, individuals' obligations and family ties could hold firm.¹⁷

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