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Afterword

Alessandro Pastore
University of Verona (<alessandro.pastore@univr.it>)

1. The cultural and academic backgrounds of the authors of these contributions are either Italian or British, except for the case of one German English Studies scholar. Nevertheless, they have not restricted their research to 'their own backyard' but, on the contrary, have foregrounded 'otherness'. They have investigated public health policies or the issues discussed in correspondence reaching the island's shores from Italy or the peninsula from Britain. Furthermore, the research areas covered by contributors vary from literary analysis to linguistics, and history, including the history of art. The contributions are representative of the various members of university departments ranging from PhD candidates to a distinguished emeritus professor in his discipline.

Though the specialized knowledge of the authors is not aligned and homogeneous (thanks to those responsible for the selection of the contributions), the sources, either addressed singularly or collectively, emerge initially as the starting point and foundations on which to build the evaluation of the impact and effect of the spread of a plague throughout the material, cultural and social conditions of the early modern period. In the words of Medieval specialist Arsenio Frugoni: 'Every source – Jacques de Chabannes de La Palice should console himself – is a witness for us' (2021, 18).[1] Witnesses can prove to be closer to objective reality or more subjectively inclined (consider here the emotional and affective component of human relations) and this emerges from the textual evidence and footnotes in the contributions selected by Donatella Pallotti and Paola Pugliatti. Like witnesses in a trial, they turn out to be more or less reliable. Therefore our sources must be carefully questioned and, if necessary, linked with others.

Leaving aside theoretical questions, let us turn to a more concrete example in the guise of Ann Carmichael's contribution. She has explored the death registers of the Duchy of Milan from

[1] The text of the Afterword was translated from the Italian by John Denton. Unless otherwise stated, translations of passages quoted in languages different from English are editorial.

1450 to 1525, essential documentation for calculating the 'regular' and 'extraordinary' death rates, the latter being due to what is conventionally termed 'plague'.[2] Relevant demographic research is now exceptionally refined, but what interests the author and her readers is data classification and their use for 'naming' rather than 'numbering'. Attention is thus not in the direction of the prehistory of statistics and large-scale calculation (i.e. a whole urban area) or a smaller one (i.e. a single parish) but rather, on the one hand, in that of 'forensic culture' involving the identification of the cause of death to be found in the *Libri Mortuorum* and, on the other, the possibility of extracting information on the family and social networks of the deceased. The source is structured differently from the well-known London *Bills of Mortality* and their 'privileged status as proto-science' and can provide, as well as an explanation of the symptoms involved in the fatal diseases, a route followed by the 'fragile lives' of the poor in eighteenth century Paris (*vies fragiles* reconstructed by Arlette Farge) (1992),[3] leading to 'history from below' including that of the victims of the plague.

On the other hand, the contribution by Alessia Ceccarelli on Genoa from 1528 to 1664 belongs to 'history from above' inasmuch as it reflects the role of politics in dealing with the plague and the city government's awareness in its efforts to preserve stability at risk from problems of supplies and an increase in the numbers of the poor. Popular unrest and political upheavals were no rarity in Genoa's history in early modern times. Thus, the prevention and control of contagious diseases were a component of local politics, arguably to a greater extent than in other urban areas. Returning to sources at the hub to her discussion, the author turns to administrative measures, diplomatic correspondence, but especially the writings of nobles and intellectuals, together with attention to religious texts associated with the plague. One example of the last category is a public prayer written in Genoese dialect in 1578 by Paolo Foglietta. In the surviving manuscript, an attempt is made to suppress civil discord, dangerous for local unity. The use of dialect and the character of the oration foreground the ambiguity or rather the deceitfulness of the source, a product of well-educated circles but with popular addressees in mind. Besides, the piece highlights an interesting interpretation: some members of society foreground the concept that social conflict is in itself a plague-like phenomenon corrupting public life and exhibiting a characteristic common to the individual body and the body of society. Writers dealing with political theory like Jean Bodin, original physicians such as William Harvey, and not forgetting William Shakespeare (*Macbeth* and *The Life and Death of King John*) and Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*) made use of this metaphor in the general sense or listed the exact correspondence between the parts of the body and the hierarchical structure of society. In this context, there is abundant space for the links between contagious diseases and popular uprisings to which the Genoese sources also refer (Pastore 2006, 17-35).

Obviously, the political control of the plague foregrounded in Ceccarelli's contribution is closely linked up with the health aspect, owing to the growing importance of the medical profession either at the individual level or by way of professional corporations representing physicians and surgeons. Advice, suggestions and proposals concerning the prevention of infection, or means of limiting it were widespread throughout Europe after the invention of printing; although, owing to much repetition, specific aspects can be identified by reading between the lines, and examining specific texts in their context. The example provided by Stefania Biscetti

[2] Some scholars have used the adjective 'historical' to single out epidemics called 'plague' by the late medieval and early modern sources in contrast with the contagious phenomenon identified by French physician Alexander Yersin who discovered the pathogen in Hong Kong in 1894. See Alfani 2010, 131-142.

[3] See also the section dealing with 'Les vies fragiles' in Brandli and Cicchini 2021.

is appropriate: the variations introduced between 1578 and 1665 in the 'Advice' for the Cure of the Plague, published by the Royal College of Physicians in London, are a reflection of the greater or lesser authority of the physicians evaluated on a basis of their behaviour during the plague emergency, the circulation of new theories (Paracelsianism and the greater authority of chemical preparation of medicines rather than Galenic physiology), and the role of new professional and social networks (i.e. the Society of Apothecaries) on the health scene. Specific reference to linguistic details which might seem of minor interest (such as the alternative from 'necessary' to 'might be necessary' in the context of health policy) turn out to be a reliable method to encourage and apply in other areas.

In the 1636 edition of the 'Advice', the words 'according to the custom of Italy' appear: this was by no means an unimportant remark, but a major reference to the innovative activity going on in the health departments of the Italian States, as of the late middle ages. This phenomenon had already been dealt with by C.M. Cipolla and is returned to in detail in Jeanne Clegg's contribution. We know that, in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Privy Council had collected information on the policies of foreign countries to deal with the spread of contagious diseases, but had been 'slow in developing comprehensive plague policies' (Henderson 2020, 265). Clegg directs our attention to *Due Preparations for the Plague, As Well for Soul as Body*, a 'minor' text by Daniel Defoe in contrast with the same author's major work, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) which does incorporate and re-work the material assembled for the minor work. The Boards of Health based on the Italian model spread throughout Europe, but in Britain it was only the alarming news about the plague in Marseilles in 1720 that gave rise to drastic arrangements such as quarantine and *cordon sanitaire*. There was no united political approach to the problem. The Tories, and also the dissenting Whigs, opposed such measures as 'repugnant to the lenity of our mild and free government' (29), and a reduction of freedom for commerce. Even well-known physicians such as Richard Mead, toned down the effects of the new health policy and opposed risking individual rights by recourse to oppressive choices for individuals and society. *Due Preparations* is evidence of a critical attitude of a writer like Defoe, who had been engaged in trade, albeit not very successfully, and was thus able to understand the negative impact of a stop to, or at least limitation of the movement of people and goods. His approach to the matter is of particular interest. His text is not technical, prescriptive or rule-bound, but sets out to offer his readers of the time (and also those of the present) a moral and educational stance. This explains the presence of 'Accounts of Fact' based on memory and personal experience aiming to make his text 'as Historical as [he] could' (31). Thus, from the chosen viewpoint (i.e. that of the sources, underpinning the contributions in this issue), Defoe's piece stands out, among other reasons, owing to its aim to insert exemplary historical cases in the narrative thread illustrating patterns of behaviour and action of individuals or the community to be followed during a plague.

More than a century earlier, a few letters exchanged by members of the Henslowe family with the actor Edward Alleyn, while London was suffering from the plague and theatres were closed, shows how valuable this type of documentation is as a resource illustrating the somewhat devastating effect of the epidemic on social and affective relations. From spring to summer of 1593, the letters contain advice on how to avoid infection, by praying certainly, but also following practical hygienic rules (keeping the house clean, washing the doors, surrounding the windows with abundant aromatic herbs). But the letters, also thanks to the skills of the person reading them, do not only show the variables but also the constants: some apparently marginal details such as references to spinach and beans planted or growing in the garden, information on the difficulties involved in selling a horse, show how the writer was eager to follow the routine

of daily life when it was endangered by morbidity and mortality. Even the expressions used to sign off the letters such as 'wiffe tylle death' or 'frend till death', are no banal rhetorical formulas but rather are a sign of the present uncertainty, and foreground the continuity of feelings even present in the address 'my good sweett mouse' directed from Alleyn to his wife Joan.

Turning to a different cultural and social environment (a family of Florentine merchants in contrast with the world of the theatre in London), and having access to a larger number of published and unpublished letters, Eleonora Serra has the same problems to deal with, but comparison between the two sources discloses similarities and differences in facing up to the risks for human survival and the economic activities of the Buonarroti family. Private letters can be a useful source of information on perception of the plague by members of the lower classes, even though the words were filtered through writers, thus reflecting the educated classes. The Buonarroti family of wool merchants brothers to Michelangelo provide information on the reactions of their servants and the poor, but their main worry is to monitor the situation (we are in the 1520s) on the basis of protection of the family network from the plague, both in the spiritual and health-related areas, the main worry being to protect the family business. News from Naples in 1527 on failure to pay for goods, debtors fleeing from the city and interruption of activities of the law courts bear witness to the widespread anxiety of the business community, which we have already seen in seventeenth century Britain, in the face of restrictions of business transactions and movement of people. Nevertheless, reading between the lines, letters reveal emotional reactions unusual among the usually calm members of the merchant class used to calculating investments and profits, as in the remark of Buonarroto Buonarroti that the health of his brother Michelangelo was worth more than anything else 'stimare più la persona tua che una colona e che tuta la chava e che il Papa e ttutto il mondo'[4] (65). These are isolated words but they show the ties of parental affection, which are worth more than the powerful figure of the Pope in Rome. However, we do not have authentic voices from below which other sources would be able to give us, such as 'popular' autobiographies or low class witness testimony at trials.

With reference to sources, it is worth recalling a tool of investigation that has recently become popular, i.e., the material history of domestic furnishings and objects in daily use. Considering the history of artistic and craft production and social history of daily life, Edward Rendall and Isabella Rosner deal with small bags in the shape of frogs as containers of perfumed substances believed to be able to halt the spread of the plague. The choice of a somewhat obnoxious reptile, especially in Britain – between the late-sixteenth and the early-seventeenth century Bishop Gervase Babington spoke of the frog as 'a foul and filthy creature' (in Thomas 1983, 57), and the French were described as frog eaters – may seem highly unusual in contexts such as jewel production and a perfume shop-sign, though it is documented also in other contexts. The precious materials used to make the *frog pouch* and the precious perfume content (musk, civet, grey amber) make it an exclusive object combining protection from the plague with possession of an elite item. The references in the plays of Shakespeare and Jonson to the magical powers of frogs' blood and flesh allows Rendall and Rosner to link their use in therapy to theatrical texts, although, arguably, a more integrated link between such different sources could have proved useful for readers.

Apart from Richard Mead, who has already been mentioned, another British physician is the subject of the contribution by Manfred Pfister. This is the case of Thomas Browne, the author of the well-known *Religio medici*, whose *De peste*, a short but important work among the texts studied by the authors of this volume. Beyond all expectations, the text does not reflect Browne's individual and professional experiences (he had been in Padua in 1632 during the final

[4] (value your person more than a column and a whole stone quarry and the Pope and the whole world).

stage of the plague and later as a physician in Norwich which had been struck by the plague in 1665) but is grounded in the study of ancient and modern writers on the subject. One is also surprised by the fact that, during the most glorious days of the Royal Society and therefore the period of experiments in nature and biological life, treatment of the subject matter is erudite and traditional (unsurprisingly, a point of reference is the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher). Erudition and tradition may well be present but the approach to the subject matter is not dogmatic. Actually, the text ends with a series of questions of greater or lesser consequence for the modern reader (for example, whether the plague can spread thanks to so-called 'untori',[5] or whether the plague had existed before the Great Flood). Many questions lead to doubts and remain without a definite answer from Browne.

2. The above-mentioned documents, however different, are the pieces of a puzzle and together offer a composite picture of the perception of the plague by contemporary witnesses and an overall view. Other pieces of the puzzle could contribute to a comprehensive picture with the added sources produced by the lower classes, as mentioned by Eleonora Serra in her contribution. Autobiographies, chronicles, wills and testimony by trial witnesses can present a view from below, albeit on occasion these are delivered by a notary or clerk of the court. There are two examples. James Amelang, the leading expert on popular autobiographies, noted that the Catalan tanner Miquel Parets changes the register of his writing with the beginning of the plague in Barcelona in 1651, puts aside the impersonal description of political and military events and 'shifted to narrating in emotionally changed language how he and his family suffered during the plague months' (1998, 187). In Bologna twenty years previously, during an epidemic that killed 25% of the city's population, justice was still operative against major and minor crimes, among the latter prosecution of women who disobeyed the ban on leaving their homes, and when arrested and questioned, attempted to explain their acts. A prostitute maintained that she had been apprehended as she was about to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Madonna di San Luca, and claimed: 'Io ho fatto la puttana ma da questi giorni in qua che è questo rumore di peste mi sono ridotta al ben fare'.[6] The woman was trying to lessen her responsibility but her statement shows that the emergency (the 'rumore di peste') is the cause of a change in life expectancy and a possible switch in individual and group behaviour patterns.

These are fragments of history from below which could easily increase, and which have enriched social history, the pioneers of which include E.P. Thompson and Natalie Zemon Davis and other world-wide historians. Concerning epidemics and their impacts, close attention is due to the sources transmitting the voices of the people also linking them to the fear and anxiety of those in power with regard to the actions and reactions of the lower orders. In this sense, comparing the situation in early modern Britain and the Italian states is valuable. The claim of a member of the city administration of Norwich that he was more afraid of the poor than the plague (Corfield 1972, 268; Pastore 1991, 38) expresses a common view that a plague is a threat to public order and could encourage crime. The title of a broadsheet – *The Poor Man's Friend and the Gentleman's Plague* – circulating during a revolt among country folk in Nottinghamshire in the early seventeenth century (Underdown 1985, 115; Pastore 1991, 71) semantically equated the nobility with the plague. In Milan a statement originating among the governing elite is eloquent:

[5] 'anoiters': deliberate individual plague spreaders.

[6] Archivio di Stato di Bologna, *Tribunale del Torrone*, 5733, cc. 35r-37r (I have been a whore, but in these days with the plague around I decided to do something good for a change). See Pastore 1991, 94.

i poveri si vanno consumando con la distrattione di quei miseri avanzi che il mancare già qualche anno di lavorerii e la fame passata gli ha lasciato. Se non si pascono, siamo certi di disordini gravi e di niuna obedienza, e già se ne sentono qualche voci e si vegono gravi preludii.[7]

How can the risks of subversion encouraged by the spread of epidemics and their disastrous social and economic effects be overcome? The combined effect of high death rates and the spread of infection have given rise to the argument that the seventeenth-century plague crisis had contributed to Italy's economic decline (see Alfani 2013). To reduce the negative effects of the crisis, the widely accepted solution appears to have been a combination of aid and strict punishments (i.e, charity and control) behind the political decisions concerning poverty and marginality. The latter are the social group who suffered the most and were more likely to die; this was the opposite of the widespread belief that the plague kills male and female bodies, without any distinction between sovereigns and peasants, popes and country priests, high class courtesans and female town workers. Analysis of chronicles and population registers and medical reports has highlighted differentiated mortality (i.e. different levels of infection between different strata of the population and the less likely survival of those at the bottom of the social pyramid) (see Cipolla and Zanetti 1972, 201). The humanist Baldassar Castiglione gives us a somewhat sketchy but cogent view when he wrote in a letter sent from Rome in the autumn of 1522: 'Qui in Roma sono pochissime malatie, excetto una che fa per tutte, che è la peste: che invero mena la falce della morte … È vero che pochi homini di cunto sono morti, ma questi poveretti cascano come le foglie de gli alberi quando vien l'inverno' (Castiglione 2016, 480).[8]

If, as we have mentioned, the charity-control combination lies behind the reaction to social crises, it is also possible – following Michel Foucault – to apply a binary model to the plague emergencies: if the plague is 'as a form, at once real and imaginary, of disorder', then it has, 'as its medical and political correlative discipline' (1995, 198). If the dialectic image of the relationship between high and low in society suggested by this formula is convincing, it is also true that all models must be examined when applied to a contingent historical reality. Thus there must be constant attention to the variables and subtle differences qualifying the cases analysed, especially the plague situations and their context.

Another observation concerning the method arises from the fact that in the volume edited by Donatella Pallotti and Paola Pugliatti there are contributions dealing with Britain and the Italian states and that in a number of cases there are references to health policies in a country other than the one dealt with by the author. The question arises of whether a comparative analysis is opportune and the advantages and risks of so doing. Marc Bloch, one of the twentieth century's leading historians, provided a couple of essential rules to follow: 'a certain similarity between the facts being examined … and a certain dissimilarity between the contexts where these facts have taken place' (1995, 33). There is no doubt that a comparison between Britain and Italy will lead to greater understanding of the plague crises, noting similarities but avoiding the misleading ones, and having clear understanding of the 'perception of contrasts'. This precaution implies comparison between situations in a specific time span so as to avoid what

[7] Archivio di Stato di Milano, *Sanità*, parte antica, 286, 12 giugno 1630 (the poor are wearing out and, having lost even certain small jobs which were left after the past famine, are starving. If they are not given food, they will not calm down and there will be violent disorders and disobedience). See Pastore 1991, 210.

[8] (Here in Rome there are very few illnesses except for one which is worse than any others. The plague wields the sickle of death … It is true that few gentlemen of quality have died but the poor fall down like leaves from the trees when winter comes).

Lucien Febvre called 'the sin of sins' for the professional historian (1978, 7), and which is the case with commentators and journalists who have drawn improper comparisons between the acute respiratory pathology characteristic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and 'historical plagues'.

There is no doubt that the contributions to this volume illustrate a sample of reflections on the plague epidemic both from the material and emotional perspectives. Marc Bloch stated that the historian like the ogre in the legend smells human flesh (1949, 18), and there is no doubt that the damage caused by the plague on the bodies and minds of people who lived several centuries ago still calls upon our attention and interest. We cannot rebuild the past in a laboratory. It remains a distant country but traces can be found both openly and between the lines, with the aim of deepening our knowledge of people, what José Saramago describes as 'an immense net of arms, a lighting of eyes, a noise of steps within an anthill' (2018, 129).

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