

Cesare Mocca. *Discorsi preservativi e curativi della peste: Col modo di purgare le case & le robbe appestate.*

Ed. Rafaella Scarpa. Biblioteca dell' "Archivum Romanicum" Serie I: Storia, Letteratura, Paleografia 413. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2012. xxx + 52 pp. €14. ISBN: 978-88-222-6232-5.

Many great urban plagues of the early modern centuries have received little historical attention when compared to their social, economic, and demographic costs. It is difficult to understand why these recurring, protracted catastrophes

become little more than caesuras in the histories of towns, cities, and regions. Raffaella Scarpa, in editing a short, obscure, practical plague treatise does rely on prior work by Francesco Cognasso (*Storia di Torino* [1978]) for positioning the plague of 1630 within the history of the Savoyard Piedmont, for the plague marked a watershed moment, coinciding with the death of the elderly duke and with military upheavals across Northern Italy. But her real achievement is to give what initially appears a second-tier, derivative plague treatise importance in another historical context. Even though Scarpa's introduction to provincial surgeon Cesare Mocca's treatise unfortunately substitutes long block quotations from other authorities for her own authoritative voice as a student of linguistic nuance and change in the Piedmont, she sees the utility of this kind of treatise in fresh ways.

Plague treatises changed surprisingly little from the Black Death to the great pandemics of the seventeenth century. They were formulaic to the point that even vernacular offerings such as Mocca's make it difficult to determine what, if anything, authors of these treatises learned from recurrent plagues. Their claims to offer unique experiential wisdom for the public's good seem to be mere conventions requisite to an almost invariant template of plague treatises. Scarpa does not explore the possibility that a crafty publisher in 1630 (Giovanni Francesco Zavatta) recognized Mocca's 1599–1600 treatise (published originally in Carmagnola) as a money-maker. In the meantime Mocca had moved from the hills to the great city and became a physician in the court of Duke Charles Emanuel I of Savoy.

Relying on Matteo Moltolese's *Lo male rotonto* (2004), Scarpa dissects the ways in which this pared, pragmatic advice book breaks a few of the patterns and linguistic habits still common among Mocca's more famous contemporaries. Foremost among these was the Paris-trained Turinese academic physician Giovanni Francesco Fiocchetto, of greater interest to historians of medical science for his rejection of celestial causes of plague and his attention to the subtle clinical symptoms of plague's prodromal phase. Zeroing in on Mocca's choice of small words diverging from an international "medical vernacular" — Moltolese's characterization in *Lo male rotondo* — Scarpa makes this study a contribution to analyses of dialectical changes within the polyglot Savoyard state, highlighting what was not homogenized into centuries of formulaic phrasing. Scarpa also explores the ways in which Mocca actively alters some conventions of the standard plague treatise, even as he complies with the overall prescriptive and schematic organization. Mocca's syntax is sparse, avoiding the usual tendency to translate morbid phenomena into an effusive array of similes and metaphors for pathological findings. At the same time he offers almost nothing about the management of plague in institutional, municipal, or ecclesiastical contexts, whether within Turin or in any of its subject towns and hospitals.

The physician in this treatise is eerily isolated from his historical milieu, managing instead his own fears of entering the plague victim's presence or parsing his diagnostic choices of diet versus surgery to relieve the telltale swellings and save

the patient's life. We need Fiochetto, who had greater power and standing within Turin proper, to learn about the "devastated city" that Savoy's capital became, securing the greater interest his prolix tractate has for local historians, as well as for historians of science and medicine. Mocca, the provincial outsider not even rewriting or revisiting his 1599 text, instead immerses us into worlds where local food choices or names for common things provide the evidence of active reengagement with a common literary genre. One of the more memorable of Mocca's reflections is his gentle ridicule of scared colleagues, preparing themselves for hours to enter the sickroom, then scouring their bodies and clothing in vinegar when they returned to the safety of home. He wondered why they just didn't go to the assignation in the nude, then duck by the pharmacy afterward to run around in a scented chamber. These are the small moments of uncertainty in a crisis, but illustrate perhaps the reluctance to jostle received advice in centuries of plague.

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