

Inclined to Putrefaction

Erin Maglaque

FLORENCE UNDER SIEGE: SURVIVING PLAGUE IN AN EARLY MODERN CITY

by John Henderson.

Yale, 363 pp., £30, July 2019, 978 0 300 19634 4

In the cold autumn of 1629, the plague came to Italy. It arrived with the German mercenaries (and their fleas) who marched through the Piedmont countryside. The epidemic raged through the north, only slowing when it reached the natural barrier of the Apennines. On the other side of the mountains, Florence braced itself. The officials of the Sanità, the city's health board, wrote anxiously to their colleagues in Milan, Verona, Venice, in the hope that studying the patterns of contagion would help them protect their city. Reports came from Parma that its 'inhabitants are reduced to such a state that they are jealous of those who are dead'. The Sanità learned that, in Bologna, officials had forbidden people to discuss the peste, as if they feared you could summon death with a word. Plague was thought to spread through corrupt air, on the breath of the sick or trapped in soft materials like cloth or wood, so in June 1630 the Sanità stopped the flow of commerce and implemented a cordon sanitaire across the mountain passes of the Apennines. But they soon discovered that the boundary was distressingly permeable. Peasants slipped past bored guards as they played cards. In the dog days of the summer, a chicken-seller fell ill and died in Trespiano, a village in the hills above Florence. The city teetered on the brink of calamity.

By August, Florentines were dying. The archbishop ordered the bells of all the churches in the city to be rung while men and women fell to their knees and prayed for divine intercession. In September, six hundred people were buried in pits outside the city walls. As panic mounted, rumours spread: about malicious 'anointers', swirling infection through holy water stoups, about a Sicilian doctor who poisoned his patients with rotten chickens. In October, the number of plague burials rose to more than a thousand. The Sanità opened lazaretti, quarantine

centres for the sick and dying, commandeering dozens of monasteries and villas across the Florentine hills. In November, 2 100 plague dead were buried. A general quarantine seemed the only answer. In January 1631, the Sanità ordered the majority of citizens to be locked in their homes for forty days under threat of fines and imprisonment.

In his *Memoirs of the Plague in Florence*, Giovanni Baldinucci described how melancholy it was ‘to see the streets and churches without anybody in them’. As the city fell quiet, ordinary forms of intimacy were forbidden. Two teenage sisters, Maria and Cammilla, took advantage of their mother’s absence in the plague hospital to dance with friends who lived in the same building. When they were discovered, their friends’ parents were taken to prison. At their trial, the mother, Margherita, blamed the two girls: ‘Oh traitors, what have you done?’ Another pair of sisters found relief from the boredom of quarantine by tormenting their brother. Arrested after one of the Sanità’s policemen saw them through an open door, one of them explained in court that ‘in order to pass the time we dressed our brother up in a mask, and we were dancing among ourselves, and while he was ... dressed up like that, the corporal passed by ... and saw what was going on inside the house.’ Dancing and dressing up were treacherous actions, violating the Sanità’s measures to control movement, contact, breath. But loneliness afflicted people too.

Ordinary people understood just as well as doctors and magistrates that disease spread through ‘seeds of contagion’, and yet Florentines flouted the quarantine in ways that were both petty and risky. Monna Betta d’Antonio didn’t see the plague as a reason to stop mending her son’s clothes. With her son quarantined on the floor below, she rigged up a pulley:

This morning I had let down a basket out of my upstairs window, because my son had asked me to mend a pair of trousers, so I let down the basket so that he could put them inside for me, since he was locked up and quarantined in the rooms beneath mine. Then a gentleman of the Sanità arrived and saw the basket and made me go to prison.

‘Last Wednesday,’ Antonio di Francesco Trabellesi testified,

I was walking towards Porta alla Croce, and when I was close to the gate the widow Monna Maria, who was locked in her house by the Sanità, called out of the window and asked me how I was. I said to her that I was fine, and while I was talking to her the police officers came and took me to prison.

From the point of view of the Sanità, the poor were constitutionally incapable of acting in the greater interests of the city. Tracing early cases to understand the spread of the outbreak, Francesco Rondinelli, a contemporary historian of the plague, placed the blame on poor people who had selfishly visited friends and

family despite the risk of contagion. He told the story of the wife of a baker who went to nurse her daughter in Trespiano but returned home sick herself, and then spread the plague among her household, resulting in the deaths of seven others. The wife of a builder went to nurse her sick sister. When her sister died, the woman took the shirt she had been wearing at her death and gave it to her daughter. This 'loving action had cost her dearly': she, her husband and their daughter all died. In both cases, these women were looking after family members and recycling much needed clothing; in Rondinelli's view, their carelessness and self-interest worked to spread the plague through the city.

No doubt the poor sometimes privileged their relationships with friends, children, siblings and neighbours over the 'common good'. But the wealthy acted no differently. Pandolfo Sacchi, a renowned court painter, was allowed to travel to a Medici villa to take up his commission to paint frescoes in the gallery. A wealthy couple, Virginia Baldovinetti and Lorenzo Frescobaldi, were given permission by the Sanità to have a wedding Mass in San Lorenzo. Rather than being forced to commit the bodies of their relatives to the mass graves outside the city walls, gente più civile were allowed to bury them in family tombs in their parish church (as long as they were buried deep and blanketed in quicklime). When the wife of the Sanità's chancellor died of the plague, her body was buried in church. But the servants who nursed her were quarantined.

The poor were judged not only careless but physically culpable, their bodies frustratingly vulnerable to disease. The early decades of the 17th century in Europe saw widespread famines, sky-high grain prices, declining wages, political breakdown and violent religious conflicts. (This is the 'general crisis of the 17th century' that important male historians like to debate.) One Florentine administrator, surveying the surrounding countryside, reported that even before the epidemic struck, villages were 'full of people, who feed themselves with myrtle berries, acorns and grasses, and whom one sees along the roads seeming like corpses who walk'. The city was not much better. A diarist in Florence in 1630 noted the 'many poor children who eat the stalks of cabbages that they find on the street, as though, through their hunger, they seem like fruit'. Famine was compounded by the steep decline of the textile industry in the city, as producers in England, Holland and Spain undercut prices; the number of wool workshops halved between 1596 and 1626. These long, lean years of unemployment and hunger had left Florentines acutely susceptible to the coming epidemic.

Along with the poor, other marginalised groups were thought to be 'inclined towards putrefaction'. Jews, feared 'because of the appalling smell which arises from all their bodies', were locked in the ghetto. Prostitutes were also targeted by the Sanità: the excessive heat generated by sex was said to corrupt the body, rendering it vulnerable to infection. And yet sex was both intimacy and work; it

was difficult to abandon both. Giulia di Filippo was caught by the Sanità working with another prostitute and sentenced to ride a donkey backwards through the city, a card round her neck describing her crime. Prostitutes were punished for ordinary friendships too. Lucrezia di Francescho Bianchi was arrested for visiting her friend Maria, the miller's wife: Lucrezia argued in court that since she 'did not want to remain alone at home, I went to stay in this house of the miller's wife, who is my friend, thinking I had not done anything wrong, and I found myself in a house of good people'. The scribe noted that Lucrezia and Maria had arranged the visit by shouting to each other from the windows of their homes.

In the eyes of the city's magistrates, the poor were both victims and criminals, defenceless in the face of infection but also walking, breathing, dancing vectors of contagion. While locked in his own house during the quarantine, the physician Antonio Righi, who advised the Sanità on medical matters, translated this contradiction into metaphor. Righi wrote a treatise in which he likened the health of the body politic to that of the individual diseased body. Noble members of society were the vigorous organs of the polity, the heart and the brain of the city, organs robust enough to fight off sickness. The poor were the lowly organs that attracted and even bred disease: 'If the disease is in the city, they receive it and retain it, as if they were the glands of society.' In Righi's opinion, the plague in Florence didn't enter the city from beyond its walls, but swelled and gathered virulence in the bodies of the poor.

Susan Sontag claimed that the danger of this common metaphor, the 'medical model of the public weal', was that it entitled the state to lop off the diseased components. But glands are not easily amputated, and neither were the poor: 17th-century governments could not eliminate whole populations, infectious though they might be. The Sanità's ultimate aim, of course, was to rid the city of the plague, but in the meantime, the population had to carry on. The plague was both quarantined and moving through the streets, at once contained and dispersed, the sick among the well, the living among the dying. Neither metaphor nor quarantine was perfect.

Ordinary life was suspended during the epidemic. Confraternities,

associations that brought laypeople together for charity work and socialising, could no longer hold meetings. Public sermons were forbidden. The city's schools were closed. Taverns and inns were shut. Gambling dens and barber shops were closed, ball games forbidden. Rondinelli remembered that, without a carnival celebration, 'football was never played, nobody went around in masks, and no

comedies of any kind were performed, or performances, or joyful events ... thus during the summer there was no palio which of necessity implied a great crowd.' Workplaces were shut too. Simone di Piero Ciotti broke quarantine to return to his print shop after three of his children died and one was confined in the lazaretto. (As it turned out, the parish priest who buried the three children testified to the Sanità's court that they hadn't died of plague, but had 'smelled of worms', a hint of the more ordinary tragedies that befell Florentines before the plague arrived.) It's hard not to imagine that Ciotti returned to work to escape the grief reverberating through his house. Churches were also gated and Masses prohibited. Parish priests stood in the street to hear parishioners' confessions through doors and windows, covering their mouths with waxed cloth to withstand the 'seeds of disease'. Portable altars were built on street corners, so that Mass could be heard in several streets at once. On Sunday mornings, the priest rang a small bell to alert people confined to their homes that Mass was about to begin. Rondinelli watched:

And who had heard an entire city praying at the same time all together ... through the tenderness it was not possible to contain the tears ... and a most beautiful thing in some roads with poor people to see lights at every window; and all the praises of the Mother of God resounded everywhere; in this way verifying the common proverb that the poor sustain two things better than the rich: that is, justice and devotion.

He found the scene moving from the freedom of the street. But what would it have felt like from behind a barred door? The plague meant that life was interrupted by barriers: the walls of the home, the waxed sheet between lay person and priest, the otherworldly beak worn by the plague doctor as he dosed patients with medicine.

The Sanità arranged the delivery of food, wine and firewood to the homes of the quarantined (30,452 of them). Each quarantined person received a daily allowance of two loaves of bread and half a boccale (around a pint) of wine. On Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays, they were given meat. On Tuesdays, they got a sausage seasoned with pepper, fennel and rosemary. On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, rice and cheese were delivered; on Friday, a salad of sweet and bitter herbs. The Sanità spent an enormous amount of money on food because they thought that the diet of the poor made them especially vulnerable to infection, but not everyone thought it was a good idea. Rondinelli recorded that some elite Florentines worried that quarantine 'would give [the poor] the opportunity to be lazy and lose the desire to work, having for forty days been provided abundantly for all their needs'.

The provision of medicine was also expensive. Every morning, hundreds of people in the lazaretti were prescribed theriac concoctions, liquors mixed with ground pearls or crushed scorpions, and bitter lemon cordials. The Sanità did devolve

some tasks to the city's confraternities. The brothers of San Michele Arcangelo conducted a housing survey to identify possible sources of contagion; the members of the Archconfraternity of the Misericordia transported the sick in perfumed willow biers from their homes to the lazaretti. But mostly, the city government footed the bill. Historians now interpret this extensive spending on public health as evidence of the state's benevolence: if tracts like Righi's brim over with intolerance towards the poor, the account books of the Sanità tell an unflashy story of good intentions.

But the Sanità – making use of its own police force, court and prison – also punished those who broke quarantine. Its court heard 566 cases between September 1630 and July 1631, with the majority of offenders – 60 per cent – arrested, imprisoned, and later released without a fine. A further 11 per cent were imprisoned and fined. On the one hand, the majority of offenders were spared the harshest penalties, of corporal punishment or exile. On the other, being imprisoned in the middle of a plague epidemic was potentially lethal; and the fines levied contributed to the operational budget of the public health system. The Sanità's lavish spending on food and medicine suggests compassion in the face of poverty and suffering. But was it kindness, if those salads and sausages were partly paid for by the same desperate people they were intended to help? The Sanità's intentions may have been virtuous, but they were nevertheless shaped by an intractable perception of the poor as thoughtless and lazy, opportunists who took advantage of the state of emergency.

Early modern historians used to be interested in the idea of the 'world turned upside down': in moments of inversion during carnival when a pauper king was crowned and the pressures of a deeply unequal society released. But what emerges from the tangle of stories in John Henderson's book is a sense that for many the world stood still during the plague. The disease waned in the early summer of 1631 and, in June, Florentines emerged onto the streets to take part in a Corpus Christi procession, thanking God for their reprieve. When the epidemic finally ended, about 12 per cent of the population of Florence had died. This was a considerably lower mortality rate than other Italian cities: in Venice 33 per cent of the population; in Milan 46 per cent; while the mortality rate in Verona was 61 per cent. Was the disease less virulent in Florence or did the Sanità's measures work? Percentages tell us something about living and dying. But they don't tell us much about survival. Florentines understood the dangers, but gambled with their lives anyway: out of boredom, desire, habit, grief. To learn what it meant to survive, we might do better to observe Maria and Cammilla, the teenage sisters who danced their way through the plague year.