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'Representing Infirmity in Early Modern Florence' in *Representing Infirmity in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Federica Jacobs and Jonathan Nelson (Routledge, London, November 2020).

John Henderson
Representing Infirmity in early modern Florence¹**Introduction**

The visual representation of infirmity and disease in early modern Italy has until recently tended to have been studied through simplistic models of retrospective diagnosis imposed onto evidence produced many centuries earlier for **other** purposes than that of modern medical science. The main problem with these approaches is that they have often failed to take into account **both different** conventions and symbolic systems of representation. This has been compounded by assumptions that past disease categories coincide with our own, though these beliefs may have been shaken somewhat by the recent vigorous debates about the identity of plague, the most lethal epidemic to have hit pre-industrial Europe.²

Plague, and to a lesser extent leprosy, has tended to dominate the discussion by historians of the representation of disease in medieval and early modern renaissance Italy.³ In comparison, few studies deal with other major epidemics of the time, such as the Great Pox, smallpox, or endemic diseases, such as malaria or even influenza. This may be partly because the signs and symptoms of plague, and above all the bubo, have been seen as the most readily recognisable when viewed through the optic of a post-Yersinian world, following the discovery by the French scientist of the cause of plague.⁴ However, it must also be remembered that the ontological concept of disease only gradually emerged in medieval and renaissance Europe. In other words, the vast majority of sicknesses were seen as collections of symptoms, rather than specific diseases, thus presenting considerable problems of representation and, for us, of interpretation.

The other obvious imperative to consider when approaching this subject is the context in which a particular work of art was produced, and how it reflected the purpose for which it was painted or sculpted. The vast majority of images associated with plague were produced for religious contexts, whether imploring the intervention of a particular patron saint for the mitigation of an epidemic or, and this was often linked, reflecting the terrible impact of plague on a city. Well-known representations of these scenes range from the later fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century and beyond. One of the best known is the Florentine triptych of *Saint Sebastian* by Giovanni del Biondo of c.1375 (Opera del Duomo, Florence).⁵ While the central image shows the saint shot full of arrows, in one of the surrounding panels the dead and dying are strewn across the urban landscape, with people collapsed in houses and streets, while a nun is placed in a bier ready for burial. On the left-hand side there is a group of well-dressed men and women imploring Sebastian and Mary to intervene with the vengeful God punishing the city for its sins. Though the artist may have been referring to the plague of Pavia in 680, Florentines would have seen their own city represented here; the presence of holy protectors would have provided a significance over and above the specific time and place.⁶

Even more dramatic images date from 300 years later during the two major seventeenth-century plague epidemics of 1629-33 and 1656-57. These include Guido Reni's processional standard, the *Pallione del Voto* of 1630 (Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna).⁷ It was commissioned by the Bolognese city government to be carried through the streets in late December as part of the Reggimento's vow to the Madonna of the Rosary, in which they asked for her intercession and in return promised to provide collective acts of piety.⁸ The canvas is divided into three sections with the top part showing the Madonna and Child seated on clouds; underneath were the city's patron saints praying for her intercession. A small section at the bottom shows a scene outside the city walls during the epidemic, the well-

ordered transport of the sick and dead. Seen together, the banner demonstrates the power of faith and the success of Bologna's policies to manage the epidemic.⁹ Another equally famous image shows the opposite: Domenico Gargiulo's depiction of the plague in Naples in 1656 is a horrendous scene of hundreds of corpses and the dying in a large piazza, Largo Mercatello, joined together in a deadly struggle with death, painted between 1656 and 1660 (Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Naples).¹⁰ A few coffins were being deployed, but emphasis is placed above all on the indignity of large numbers of abandoned semi-clad corpses left for all to see in a public space. The living try desperately to cope with the dead, but the confusion is emphasized by the upturned cart in the left-hand foreground from which bodies tumble out. As in other plague images of the time, this is a votive picture and therefore includes the divine presence of the Virgin Mary seated on a cloud. While Reni's *Palliotto* shows the Madonna full of grace and the Christ as a child blessing through His gaze, Gargiulo represents Christ as an adult, and Mary in her role of interceding for the people, desperately trying to persuade her irate son from destroying the city's population. The two methods of representing the dangers of plague in Bologna and Naples coincidentally reflected relative levels of mortality, 24% compared with 50%.¹¹

These painted scenes, along with countless others associated with plague, reflect the close association between the individual's sick body and the body of the city; the ire of God was thus visited on all inhabitants to punish their collective sins. Participation in processions and private repentance were prescribed to deflect God's anger, as were personal and communal prayers to patron saints to mitigate the effect of the epidemic once it had arrived. But how far were the painters or patrons of these images interested in depicting the symptoms of disease? Both Giovanni del Biondo and Domenico Gargiulo simply showed pale dead bodies, which had collapsed and expired on the spot; even in the case of the Neapolitan scene, while many of the bodies were semi-nude, this did not lead the painter to depict a wide

range of buboes and other symptoms associated with plague. The aim in these two paintings, as in the case of the scene at the bottom of Guido Reni's banner, was to show the impact of plague on the sick body of the city rather than on the individual body, and to demonstrate personal and civic reactions to the crisis.

The votive chapels and churches commissioned by individuals, families and cities in gratitude for their recovery from an epidemic also provided the context for a wide range of works of art representing sickness and infirmity. It is this theme which this chapter will explore through iconographic evidence deriving from early modern Florence and its surroundings. While plague imagery for late medieval period Tuscany is well-known, the topic remains under-studied for early modern Florence, especially when compared with other Italian cities, such as Milan, Rome and Naples.¹² The aim will also be to move beyond plague and to raise wider questions about how infirmity and bodily suffering were represented through the twin themes of medicine and religion. How far were specific, readily identified attributes of particular sicknesses shown, given, on the one hand, contemporary humoral understanding of disease as a collection of symptoms, and, on the other, that the role of the vast majority of these images was devotional?

Representing plague in the seventeenth century

Italy saw the return of plague with considerable severity in the seventeenth century, with two main episodes. The first between 1629 to 1633 affected northern and central Italy from Milan to Florence, while the second in 1656-57 principally impacted the southern part of the peninsula, most famously in Rome and Naples, though it was also carried north to Genoa and the Ligurian coast. Many of these city states adopted similar secular measures to combat the epidemic, based largely on disinfection, quarantine and isolation. Meanwhile, the Church aimed to enlist the advocacy of a series of local saints to persuade God to divert the arrows of

disease elsewhere through the organisation of religious processions and the veneration of shrines. All this led as well to the commissioning by Church, State and individuals of a wide range of votive churches, chapels and altarpieces and statues, which shared common themes but also reflected regional variations. The Tuscan capital will be examined within a wider geographical context to assess the points of similarity and difference in the representation of infirmity.

Before concentrating on the few representations of plague which appear in Florence in this period, it is necessary to outline the physical symptoms recorded by contemporaries to see how they might have been reflected visually in art. Dr Antonio Pellicini, who wrote a treatise on plague at the request of the Florentine College of Physicians in November 1630, provided an outline of the main signs:¹³

there appear sometimes on the skin, not just unusual spots (*macchie*), and different types of petechia, but also boils, and horrible pustules, not less evident in the visible watery vesicles, than in their odious blackness and the legitimate form of malign carbuncles; and also swelling further outside the lymph nodes (*emuntorii*), commonly called ‘gavoccioli’ or buboes.

FIG. 3.1 HERE

The most vivid depiction of a plague bubo in Florence in this period was in a fresco painted by Pietro Dandini for the cloister of Sant’Antonino in the Observant Dominican church and convent of San Marco (Fig. 3.1).¹⁴ It is shown clearly as a raised dark brown swelling under the left arm of the prostrate sick man at the centre of the composition, one of the traditional sites of infection. While he appears as semi-clad, to his left a fully dressed woman has

collapsed on the ground, appealing for the spiritual salvation offered by Antonino. If the woman's appearance does not demonstrate obvious swellings or signs, her pale face and weakness may reflect other symptoms mentioned by Pellicini – 'the most acute and fevers, with a putrifying mass of humours and ... excessive headache'.¹⁵

When Dandini painted his fresco of Sant'Antonino visiting the sick in 1693, his contribution to the decoration of the cloister represented the culmination of an almost century-long process. Starting in the late sixteenth century, many of the leading Tuscan painters of the period adorned lunettes with the major episodes in the life and miracles of the Florentine Archbishop. As in these other images, the aim of this lunette was the glorification of Antonino's saintly actions, so the depiction of symptoms of the plague was subservient to the main message of saintly charity and penitence. Most probably this was an historical recreation of a bubo; it is unlikely that Dandini would have seen a plague victim, since he was born in 1646/7 and he spent the first ten years of his life in Florence, which had remained free from plague since 1633. He would probably have copied the symptoms of plague from pictures or prints he had seen as a young man in northern Italy; he had spent two years studying in Venice, from where he visited other cities, among which were Bologna, Modena, and Parma.¹⁶ This influence is confirmed by the disposition of the figures in Dandini's fresco. They reflect the iconography, more common in northern Italian than Tuscan art, of San Carlo Borromeo carrying and administering the viaticum to those dying from plague, who were shown in the open air as he passed through the streets. Like Borromeo, Sant'Antonino, during the Florentine epidemic of 1448-9, was seen as protected by God through the sanctity of his charitable mission, underlining the strength of spiritual medicine.¹⁷

Dandini's Sant'Antonino is a striking image by an important artist associated closely with the Tuscan grand-ducal court. It would appear, however, to be in contrast to the more

general conclusions of art historians who have examined plague art in early modern Italy. It has been argued, for example, by Christine Boeckl that by the seventeenth century there were fewer direct pictorial representations of the symptoms of plague on the human body in Italy, with emphasis shifting away from exclusive concentration on suffering and towards the efficaciousness of healing.¹⁸ Sheila Barker has detected a similar shift in seventeenth-century Rome, reflected, for example, in GiovanBattista Vanni's *St. Sebastian being treated by Irene and Companions* for the Florentine confraternity of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (1630-32).¹⁹

Various reasons have been put forward for this perceived shift, both religious and medical, but above all due to the influence of the Council of Trent. The increased Tridentine emphasis on the role of the sacraments as the true path to salvation is seen as having led to greater stress on representations of saintly persons carrying the Host to the sick and dying. These scenes also underlined Christian charity, reflecting the role of the new Orders in tending to the desperately sick, especially the Jesuits, Camilliani, San Giovanni di Dio, and the Capuchins.²⁰ If the depiction of the nursing of the sick underlines the importance of male religious orders, the representation of Irene and her companions also reminds us of the vital role of female nursing staff, who worked voluntarily in hospitals across Italy and elsewhere in Europe. While saints, such as Catherine of Siena and Elizabeth of Hungary, made their names in nursing the sick poor, it was the large numbers of women who belonged to Third Orders or subscribed to the Rule of St Augustine, who performed so many duties in medieval and early modern hospitals, from nursing to feeding the sick and, as reflected in Irene's role, performed minor surgical operations and administered herbal remedies.²¹

The greater stress placed on representations of treatment is thus seen as complementary and parallel to the renewed emphasis on the sacraments.²² The emphasis in iconography away from more traditional themes of plague arrows raining down on individuals and cities led to more commissions reflecting the cure of the soul and the body.

The use of physical medicines can be seen in the growth in the number of pictures of Tobias curing his father's blindness, or the Good Samaritan tending to the sick traveller, and the growing popularity of the depiction of a scene following the attempted martyrdom of St Sebastian. Instead of being represented as pierced with arrows, he was shown with St. Irene and her assistants treating his martyred body.²³ In all these contexts, it has been argued, that the physical manifestation of disease thus assumed less importance than the acts of care and cure.²⁴

Given the identification of these newer themes in plague iconography in some parts of Italy in the seventeenth century, it is worth asking how far these general patterns were always reflected to the same extent at the local level, given the fiercely independent nature of Italian politics and different local artistic traditions. In Venice and the Veneto, for example, the attempted first martyrdom St Sebastian continued to be an important theme in the post-Tridentine period.²⁵ San Rocco also remained important, appearing in his traditional guise, demonstrating his bubo, alongside other saints imploring for the intercession of the Virgin for the cessation of an epidemic. A boost to his visual presence was provided by the foundation of the Scuola di San Rocco, with Jacopo Tintoretto's lavish canvases for the confraternity's meeting hall painted between 1564 and 1588.²⁶ A century later, a particularly dramatic image was provided by Antonio Zanchi's enormous canvas of the *Plague in Venice in 1630*, which was finished for the staircase of the Scuola di San Rocco in 1666.²⁷ It depicts the semi-nude abandoned bodies of the sick and dead being piled unceremoniously into boats to be taken off to Lazaretti for treatment or burial. The corpses were clearly identified as plague victims by the prominent black buboes on exposed parts of their body, as on the man in the right panel whose corpse is being man-handled from the bridge down into a boat in the canal underneath.

Visual representation of plagues in seventeenth-century Florence

This wider discussion helps us to assess how far the iconography of plague and other epidemic diseases in Florence fits the picture traced for other parts of seventeenth-century Italy. Tuscany was unusual compared with Lombardy and the Veneto because it had not experienced plague for a century; the last episode to have affected Florence was in the 1520s, while other cities, particularly in the north of Italy, had suffered from severe outbreaks in the mid-1570s.²⁸ The epidemic of plague in Florence, which began in summer 1630, lasted for about twelve months, and returned briefly a year later, leading to the death of about 12 per cent of the population of Florence's estimated 75,000.²⁹ As I have outlined in some detail elsewhere, both religious and secular measures taken by Church and State in Florence had much in common with those adopted by other Italian states, including cordons sanitaire, the inspection and disinfection of houses, establishment of special plague pits, Lazaretti, along with religious processions and the celebration of mass within churches and then the whole population was quarantined, portative altars were erected in streets throughout the city.³⁰

The central nodes of processions were the Cathedral, the Servite church of Santissima Annunziata, and the Dominican church of S. Marco. These events were organised by the Church in conjunction with and the approval of the governing regime and the Health Board. Key to this collaboration was Grand Duke Ferdinand II and members of his family and court, who participated in the processions.³¹ The churches of Santissima Annunziata and S. Marco attracted the most significant artistic patronage in these years, reflecting the local popularity of the relics of Sant'Antonino at the latter and the miraculous shrine at the former.³² As in Rome during the 1656-57 plague, the Florentine epidemic had a clear impact on the pattern of commissions, stemming from private and institutional patrons.³³ Members of the grand-ducal family were prominent among those who paid for a range of artistic commissions. In 1632, the year after the epidemic, they enriched the chapel of the Madonna with valuable silver

votive objects, and commissioned the architect Matteo Nigetti to reconstruct the Sagrestia of the Madonna,³⁴ which housed Jacopo Vignali's large altarpiece, *The Madonna and Saints*, including Gregorio Thaumaturgus, a healer and worker of miracles, and Valentino, a protector against plague.³⁵

During these years a series of artists, including Vignali, were commissioned to paint a number of images of Sebastian in Florence and its immediate surroundings during the first thirty to forty years of the seventeenth century. It was above all the first attempted martyrdom that continued to be popular in and around Florence, far out-numbering representations of his actual martyrdom. For example, Vincenzo Dandini's altarpiece of this subject, originally commissioned in the late 1630s for the Compagnia di San Sebastiano in the parish church of San Mauro a Signa, shows Sebastian tied to a crucifix, pierced by arrows shot by a series of archers who surround him, and small streams of bright red blood are shown issuing from his wounds.³⁶ In the early 1640s, Vignali's pupil, Carl Dolci, painted a *St Sebastian* which shows his youthful body before his first martyrdom, untouched by wounds, holding arrows in his left hand.³⁷

As Giovanni Pagliarulo has shown in his important study, Jacopo Vignali (1592-1664) remained the pre-eminent painter in Florence of scenes and saints linked to natural disasters in these years, and patrons often turned to him when choosing to depict Sebastian during the plague epidemics of 1630-33.³⁸ Two altarpieces of St Sebastian were commissioned for churches outside the city. Just to the north, at Montughi, in the church of San Martino, Sebastian was shown in a crucifixion scene in the company of a number of saints, including Carlo Borromeo, Filippo Neri, and Antonino (1631).³⁹ Better known was his *Madonna and Saints*, commissioned by the abbot of the Abbey of San Bartolomeo at Badia a Ripoli, towards the end of 1630. It was to be placed in the chapel dedicated to St Sebastian, which had been built 100 years earlier during the last epidemic of plague in Florence. Among

the saintly intercessors imploring the Virgin and Child for their intercession were Sebastian, Rocco, Giovanni Gualberto, and Thomas; the latter was included as the personal patron saint of Abbot Davanzati. While Sebastian was shown tied to a tree in the traditional iconography, what makes this image somewhat different was that instead of his body being pierced with arrows, there were a series of bleeding wounds in his neck, arm, and right-hand side, after the arrows had been removed, possibly a reference to the broader theme of his treatment.⁴⁰

Another altarpiece including Sebastian was commissioned in 1634 from Lorenzo Lippi as an ex-voto in thanks for the community of Ronta in the Mugello escaping plague.⁴¹ The Madonna and Child are seated on a cloud, adored by Saints Rocco, Sebastian, Anthony of Padua, and two local patron saints, Michele and Donato, with the parish church in the background.⁴² The young St Sebastian gazes in adoration at the Virgin, seemingly unaware of the two arrows which pierce his body.

San Rocco had remained an established presence in the Florentine area, as reflected in Vignali's altarpiece for the Badia a Ripoli and Cesare Dandini's *Assumption of the Virgin* in Santissima Annunziata, both dating from late 1630 to early 1631.⁴³ In all three paintings San Rocco is shown kneeling and either looking or pointing upwards to the Virgin, carrying his staff and sometimes accompanied by his dog. The plague bubo is discretely represented on his leg: at Santissima Annunziata there is a slight swelling below his left knee, at Ronta there is a small blemish on the skin, above his right-hand knee, both of which were closer to the earlier stages of the disease than when the bubo is full blown, as in Dandini's fresco in San Marco.

Carlo Borromeo was the other plague saint who became increasingly important from the later sixteenth century, although he was much less common in Tuscany than in northern Italy, particularly in the Milanese area, where he had been archbishop and made his name tending to the sick during the epidemic of 1575-56, reflected in the well-known series of

paintings, the *Quadroni* in Milan cathedral, discussed by Jenni Kuuliala in this volume.⁴⁴

Andrea Comodi had apparently been commissioned in c.1636 to paint an altarpiece on the theme of *San Carlo Borromeo praying for the cessation of the plague*, for the church of San Carlo dei Barnabiti in Florence.⁴⁵ Comodi's painting has not survived, but in three previous versions Borromeo is shown kneeling in front of a large ebonised crucifix mounted on an altar for the cessation of the plague in Milan. In the background there is a desolate scene populated with dead or dying figures, with emphasis placed on the white nude corpses of the plague stricken. As in the case of the Neapolitan altarpiece by Domenico Gargiulo, the aim was to emphasize the act of abandonment, rather than close depiction of symptoms.⁴⁶

FIG. 3.2 HERE

The most detailed surviving representation of the impact of the plague on the Florentine urban landscape, attributed to Luigi Baccio del Bianco and painted some time before 1657, also provides little in the way of detailed symptoms (Fig. 3.2).⁴⁷ There are scenes of the sick and dead being taken to hospital or for burial in covered biers, underlining the vital role of members of the Archconfraternity of the Misericordia, who carried the sick to Lazaretti and the dead to plague pits. The presence of plague is alluded to in a number of other ways, including the man dressed in black in the middle foreground, who is holding his nose to avoid breathing in the corrupt vapours associated with the disease, and in the left-hand corner the upturned cart belonging to the fumigators, who have allowed possessions belonging to the sick to cascade onto the ground. The only figure in the picture who was very evidently sick was the pale, well-dressed man in the centre foreground, who had collapsed in the street, and over whom a physician was bending and feeling his pulse for vital signs of life. His evident social status was emphasised by the close proximity of the physician; contemporaries recounted medical personnel kept a distance from the sick unless they were affluent.

From the representation of the bodies of diseased individuals, the final section will return to the theme of the visualisation of the physical suffering of holy bodies, through wounds and torture, as a metaphor for infirmity.

Physical suffering and Infirmity

The first attempted martyrdom of Sebastian has been compared with the popular medieval image of the Man of Sorrows, where viewers were invited to share in the bodily sufferings to encourage them to do penitence.⁴⁸ As we have seen for other parts of Italy, in Florence an emphasis came also to be placed more generally on the wounded body of saints. The aim was also to underline the efficacy of healing by holy people, following the long tradition of the role of medieval saints and the new Catholic religious Orders. Within this context, it is not always clear whether the marks on the body were the result of wounds or sores, and whether therefore they represent the result of torture or disease. For the original viewers this distinction may not be that significant, since the representation of a wound may have been transmuted into a sore to reflect more closely the patron's concern with sickness.

FIG. 3.3 HERE

Jacopo Vignali specialised in the representation of this nexus between religion and medicine, as reflected clearly in *Christ showing his wounds to St Bernard of Clairvaux* (fig. 3.3). The painting was commissioned in 1623 by the Miniati family for the Florentine church of saints Simone e Giuda. The only known representation of this subject in Florence from this period,⁴⁹ Bernard, accompanied by two angels, is shown throwing up his hands in dismay and looking at Christ with deep compassion. Christ himself kneels with his back horizontal to the ground and points with his left forefinger to the bloody wounds or sores, presumably inflicted

during the flagellation. Bernard was closely associated with healing miracles, providing spiritual medicine to treat the wounds. Christ's wounds were intended to lead viewers to participate in His sufferings and were an invitation to do penance for individual and general sin which causes sickness. Furthermore, as *Christus Medicus*, He was seen as curing the spiritual and physical sicknesses of the population.⁵⁰ Giovanni Pagliuolo has suggested that these sores or wounds in Vignali's painting may refer to the effects of typhus, which had afflicted Florence in these years (1620-23), and during which over 3,000 people died in the city.⁵¹ Apart from the congruence of the dates of the commission and of the epidemic, Pagliuolo has suggested that Christ's wounds reflect a rash, one of the main symptoms of this disease. A clear contemporary description of the symptoms of lenticular fever, associated with exanthematic typhus, was provided by the well-known Veronese physician Girolamo Fracastoro in his book *De contagione et contagionis morbis* (1546): 'About the fourth or seventh day, red, or often purplish-red spots broke out on the arms, back and chest, and looked like flea-bites (punctiform), though they were often larger and in the shape of lentils, whence rose the name of the fever'.⁵² Though it could be argued that there were large spots on Christ's back, some of which were purplish-red, these could equally be read as the effect of a severe beating. Whether or not Vignali was directly representing lenticular fever, the wounds could equally well be a symbolic representation of general physical suffering from endemic and epidemic diseases present in the city in these years.

This altarpiece is important for the depiction of the lacerations on Christ's back and the reference to Bernard's miraculous healing powers. Similar themes were also explored at the time in secular painting, such as the works by Giovanni Battista Vanni and Ottavio Vannini depicting a scene of curing from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Here Erminia helps her beloved, the crusader knight Tancredi, by cutting off her hair, which has miraculous healing properties.⁵³

Jacopo Vignali at San Marco

The final section of this chapter will explore further the joint themes of physical suffering and the curative role of saints in relation to one of Vignali's most important commissions between 1623 and 1630: four paintings for the pharmacy of San Marco, which had been newly redesigned in the early seventeenth century.⁵⁴ These canvases are no longer on the premises of the pharmacy, but are nearby in a corridor off the cloister of Sant'Antonino. While the subjects of these four substantial canvases reflect iconographic themes current in seventeenth-century Italy, their combination in the same place gives special strength to their underlining message, the Christian endorsement of the combined power of physical and spiritual medicine. The panels, in chronological order, are: *Tobias and the Angel* (1623), *The Baptism of Constantine* (1623-4), *St Peter treats St Agatha* (1623-4), and *The Good Samaritan* (1630).

FIGS. 3.4-3.5 HERE

Miraculous healing is the central theme which unites these four images, especially relevant to their location within the pharmacy of a religious Order. The first picture to be commissioned was set in a rural landscape and shows Tobias, accompanied by his faithful dog, gazing at an enormous fish (fig. 4). The other main figure was the Archangel Raphael, dressed as an affluent young man, who was the patron saint of travellers and renowned for his miraculous powers as a healer. Tobias is shown holding a knife in his right hand, and, under the guidance of Raphael, making an incision in the fish's side in order to extract the fish's gall, which was to be used as a medicine to anoint the blind eye of Tobit, his father, to restore his sight.⁵⁵ To the left of the fish's head lies a small white and gold medicinal jar, or albarello, with the lid beside it, into which the gall would be placed and which he carried to his father (Fig. 3.5).

Many fifteenth-century Florentine paintings of Tobias and the angel show them walking side by side, with Tobias carrying the fish (usually much smaller) on their way to administer the gall to Tobit.⁵⁶ Although this traditional iconography did not disappear, by the later sixteenth century more painters placed greater emphasis on treatment, whether the action of extracting the gall or administering it to Tobit.

FIG. 3.6 HERE

Vignali's San Marco *Tobit and the Angel* thus clearly reflects the strength of both spiritual and physical medicine, based, on the one hand, on Raphael's reputation for miraculous healing, and, on the other, on the surgical knife being employed by Tobias and the representation of the albarello, a type of container which would have been found in abundance within the pharmacy itself. The second picture in the series, *The Baptism of Constantine*, painted a year later, also contains a clear reference to the miraculous effect of spiritual medicine (fig. 3.6). Pope Silvester, who is shown baptising Constantine, is elaborately dressed in a crimson-lined cope faced with elaborately woven images of saints, fastened with a clasp containing a large precious stone, underlining his status as the head of the Roman Catholic Church. The Emperor is also richly dressed in clothes encrusted with pearls to denote his status, although the white of his garments would also have been understood as reflecting penitence and humility. This scene thus reflects the power of the unguent of spiritual medicine, as the Pope freed Constantine from original sin, washing away its impurities. However, there was also a sub-text, appropriate for the context of a Dominican pharmacy, since it was believed that Silvester had cured the Emperor through baptism from the physical sickness of leprosy. Although Vignali does not show Constantine with the sores associated with this terrible sickness, the holy baptismal water had evidently already cured

him, just as medicinal unguents and salves wash and cleanse physical wounds and sores on a patient's body.⁵⁷

FIG. 3.7 HERE

The third canvas is a shocking and very unusual scene of St Agatha exposing her bloody chest to St Peter, after she had had her breasts removed through torture (Fig. 3.7). Her patient martyred expression is matched by St Peter's compassionate glance as he spreads unguent on the wounds, taken from a small phial, which he holds in his right hand. It is a curiously intimate scene and is certainly a challenging picture. This image is particularly violent when compared with a contemporary painting by Lorenzo Lippi (1632-4), who shows a much softer and more sensual view of St Agatha, who simply pointing to her bared, right-hand breast, with little indication of the torture she will suffer, except to the *conoscenti*.⁵⁸ Within ten years when Lippi painted another picture of the same subject, he again presents a sensuous, well-dressed young lady, who engages the viewer with her direct gaze. Here too her body is presented as unmutated, but she provides a graphic reminder of her martyrdom, since two breasts are shown in a dish in front of her, while she holds a sharp knife in her left hand.⁵⁹

FIG. 3.8 HERE

The fourth picture was painted in 1630 during the plague epidemic. Vignali shows the Good Samaritan pouring ointment on the wounds of the sickly young man, who, like plague victims in that year, had collapsed at the side of the road (Fig. 3.8). He is shown with a number of abrasions on his body, the worst at the level of his waist. He had evidently already received treatment, because there is a bandage on his right-hand leg above his ankle. Giovanni Pagliaulo in his description of the picture argues that this body covered with sores may very well have been a reference to the body of the plague victim. This may be true in a metaphorical sense, although in terms of more accurate representation, it is difficult when

looking at the picture to determine whether he is suffering from cuts resulting from a beating or the sores of disease.⁶⁰

The role of these four paintings was to advertise the power of these saints and at the same time the healing role of the newly refurbished friars' pharmacy. The central medical message of each picture was underlined by the use of liquids or unguents. In the case of Constantine it was baptismal water which cured him of original sin. While holy water was kept within the church, the other medicines would have been made up and stored in the pharmacy in the types of storage jars represented in some of pictures. This underlines the importance of the process of treatment within the friars' pharmacy and explains Vignali's emphasis on the curative properties of medicines.

Conclusion

In the canvases by Vignali at San Marco, as with the other images discussed in this chapter, spiritual and physical medicine were invoked to work in combination to treat and cure the sick and wounded. While Christ was seen as the divine physician, he also administered punishment for the sins of mankind. Hence the necessity to invoke the help of saintly intercessors, such as Sebastian and Rocco, together with local cults, such as that of Sant'Antonino. However, the Virgin Mary remained the most important and she was represented at the apex of the hierarchy in many altarpieces, as well as being the subject of miraculous images, at the shrines of Santissima Annunziata and Santa Maria Impruneta. Other imperatives behind the visualisation of infirmity included the desire to advertise the role of religious Orders in the care of the sick or the role of cities in successfully defending themselves against plague.

This range of contexts, then, has helped to determine how sickness and infirmity were represented. In the vast majority of cases, the main motivation was religious rather than

medical, which helps to explain why it was less rather than more common to show specific physical symptoms, when a generic picture of a pale, languishing body would serve the purpose. It should also not be forgotten that as Galenic humoral medicine conceived disease as an imbalance of humours and a collection of symptoms, infirmity was not easy to represent in visual terms. The exceptions were major epidemics, such as leprosy, plague, and the Great Pox. While it has been shown by historians that there was a general tendency in early modern Italy to reveal fewer and less marked specific symptoms among saints and individual plague victims, it has been argued here that this pattern was not always reflected at the local levels, as seen in the case of Florence and its hinterland. However, where the iconography of infirmity in Florence does follow more general trends is the greater emphasis placed on the vivid depiction of wounds. Indeed, as has been pointed out in relation to Vignali's oeuvre in the 1620s and 1630s, the wounds themselves may have acted as a metaphor for epidemic disease.⁶¹ Thus, given this variety of motivations and styles of representation, an overly emphatic distinction between sickness, infirmity and wounds risks returning us to the traditional filter of retrospective diagnosis. After all, the aim in depicting physical suffering was to induce penitence within the viewer, which provided hope for individuals and communities to recover from sickness.

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Credit: Museo di S. Marco, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Polo museale della Toscana / Photo: Margaret Bell.

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Credit: Venerabile Arciconfraternita della Misericordia di Firenze.

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Credit: Sailko: Wikimedia Commons: [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported](#) license)

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Credit: Museo di S. Marco, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Polo museale della Toscana / Photo: Margaret Bell.

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Credit: Museo di S. Marco, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Polo museale della Toscana / Photo: Margaret Bell.

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Credit: Museo di S. Marco, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Polo museale della Toscana / Photo: Margaret Bell.

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Credit: Museo di S. Marco, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Polo museale della Toscana / Photo: Margaret Bell.

Plate 8: Jacopo Vignali, *The Good Samaritan*

Credit: B Museo di S. Marco, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Polo museale della Toscana / Photo: Margaret Bell.

¹ I am very grateful to Giovanni Pagliarulo for his help and advice while writing this article, especially his expertise on Jacopo Vignali, and to Margaret Bell for taking many of the photographs used here.

² Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed*; Green, ed., *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World*.

³ Boeckl, *Images of Leprosy*.

⁴ See Lynteris, *Ethnographic Plague*, ch. 1.

⁵ For an image, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni_del_Biondo

⁶ Barker, 'The making of a plague saint', 90-131, and on Del Biondo: 100-102. See also Marshall, 'Reading the Body of a Plague Saint', 237-72.

⁷ For an image, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palla_della_Peste_\(Guido_Reni\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palla_della_Peste_(Guido_Reni))

⁸ Puglisi, 'Guido Reni's *Pallione del Voto*', 403-06.

⁹ Puglisi, 'Guido Reni's *Pallione del Voto*', 404.

¹⁰ For an image, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domenico_Gargiulo, cf. Clifton, 'Art and Plague at Naples', 97-152.

¹¹ Cipolla, *Fighting the Plague*, 101.

¹² Jones, 'San Carlo Borromeo', 65-74; Barker, 'Plague Art', 45-64; Clifton, 'Art and Plague at Naples', 97-152.

¹³ Pellicini, *Discorso sopra de' mali contagiosi pestilenziali*, 6-7.

¹⁴ For a more detailed consideration of this image see: Henderson, *Florence Under Siege*, 156-8.

¹⁵ Pellicini, *Discorso sopra de' mali contagiosi pestilenziali*, 6-7.

¹⁶ Borea, 'Pietro Dandini'.

¹⁷ On the representation of Borromeo during the Milanese plague see: Jones, 'San Carlo Borromeo', 65-96. Images of Borromeo in Venice, for example, from the earlier seventeenth century include: Pietro Damiani, *San Carlo Borromeo e gli appestati*, and Camillo Praccacini, *San Carlo Borromeo in gloria*: see Comune di Venezia, *Venezia e la peste*, 255-6: a.29 and a.30.

¹⁸ Boeckl, *Images of Plague*, 1-9, 113-14; Barker, 'Plague Art', 48-9.

¹⁹

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovan_battista_vanni_deposizione_di_san_sebastiano_1626_01.jpg; cf. Barker, 'Plague Art', 47-8; Guidi and Marcucci, *Il Seicento Fiorentino*, I, 292-3.

²⁰ Boeckl, *Images of Plague*, 108-118. On this theme for an earlier period, see the article in this volume by Diane Bullen Presciutti, and on the Camilliani's nursing role at the Incurabili hospital of San Giacomo in Rome: Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, 171-3.

- ²¹ On the important role of nursing staff in Florence: Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital*, ch. 6.
- ²² Barker, 'Plague Art', 47-49.
- ²³ Guidi and Marcucci, *Il seicento fiorentino*, vol. 1, 124-5.
- ²⁴ Boeckl, *Images of Plague*, 108-118; Barker, 'Plague Art', 47-49.
- ²⁵ Cf. Mason Rinaldi, 'Le immagini della peste', 209-224, 225-286.
- ²⁶ Marshall, 'A Plague Saint for Venice', 153-188; Marshall, 'A New Plague Saint', 543-549.
- ²⁷ For an image, see:
https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Peste_del_1630_a_Venezia_Bozzetto_-_Zanchi.jpg. Cf. Riccorboni, 'Antonio Zanchi', 57-8.
- ²⁸ On plague in Florence in the 1520s see: Henderson, 'Plague in Renaissance Florence', 165-86; and on the 1570s see: Preto, *Peste e società*, and Cohn, *Cultures of Plague*.
- ²⁹ Cipolla, *Fighting the Plague*, 100-1: tables A.1 and A.2.
- ³⁰ Henderson, *Florence Under Siege*, 164-7.
- ³¹ See Henderson, *Florence Under Siege*, ch. 6, for a detailed discussion of these events during the epidemic.
- ³² Henderson, *Florence Under Siege*, ch. 6.
- ³³ Barker, 'Plague Art', 47-48. On Florence see: Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 144; Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' in *Il Seicento fiorentino*, vol. 3, 183-7.
- ³⁴ Pagliarulo (1994), 184, 186; Iarocci, 'The Santissima Annunziata', 210.
- ³⁵ Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 185-6.
- ³⁶ Bellesi, *Vincenzo Dandini*, p. 83: cat. no. 8.
- ³⁷ Bellesi and Bisceglia, *Carlo Dolci*, , 182-3: cat. No. 11; Baldassari, *Carlo Dolci*, 158-9 cat. No 62.
- ³⁸ Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 140.
- ³⁹ Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 158.
- ⁴⁰ Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 153-5.
- ⁴¹ Guidi and Marcucci, *Il Seicento fiorentino. Pittura*, 298-9: cat. No. 1.150
- ⁴² D'Afflitto, *Lorenzo Lippi, 196: Madonna col Bambino e i santi Rocco, Sebastiano, Antonio da Padova, Michele e Donato* (Ronta, chiesa di San Michele, 1634).
- ⁴³ On Dandini, see Guidi and Marcucci, *Il Seicento fiorentino*, vol. 3, 69-73, and for a more detailed consideration of this image see: Henderson, *Florence Under Siege*, 156-8.
- ⁴⁴ On this cycle see Jenni Kuuliala's article in this volume.
- ⁴⁵ Papi, *Andrea Commodi*, 101: cat. no. 32; cf. the earlier examples: *Ibid.*, 90: cat. no. 20; 97: cat. no. 26. Another image of Borromeo appears in Vignali's *Pietà*, in which he meditates on the Passion and Christ's wounds: Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 142.
- ⁴⁶ Papi and Petrioli Tofani, *Andrea Commodi*, 34-5: plate 17; 212: cat. no. 62; registro cronologico, 221-3. Cf. Guidi and Marcucci, *Il Seicento fiorentino*, vol. 2, 144-5.
- ⁴⁷ On Baccio see: *Il Seicento fiorentino*, vol. 3, 76-78.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. Boeckl, *Images of Plague*, 55-6; Barker, 'The Making of a Plague Saint'; Marshall 'A New Plague Saint'.
- ⁴⁹ Guidi and Marcucci, *Il Seicento fiorentino*, vol. 2, 249-50.
- ⁵⁰ Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital*, ch. 4.1.
- ⁵¹ Cipolla, *I pidocchi e il granduca*, 95.
- ⁵² Fracastorii, *De contagione*, 103.
- ⁵³ For these painting see Baldassari, *La collezione Piero ed Elena Bigongiari*, 18 (Pl. 7, Giovanni Battista Vanni), 19 (Pl. 8, Giovanni Battista Vanni, painted in Rome after 1629).
- ⁵⁴ The most detailed discussion of these paintings is in Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994). See most recently, Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali, *San Pietro cura Sant'Agata*, 314-15.

⁵⁵ See also: Giovan Battista Vanni (1600-1660), *Tobiolo e l'angelo* painted in the late 1620s-early 1630s: *Il Seicento*, vol. 2, 294-6.

⁵⁶ For example, Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Tobias and the Angel* of 1460 (Galleria Sabauda, Turin) and Andrea del Verrocchio, *Tobias and the Angel* of 1470-5 (National Gallery London).

⁵⁷ Boeckl, *Images of Leprosy*, 81-2, 110-13. See also the discussion in this volume by Diana Bullen Presciutti of the lepers illustrated in 'La Franceschina'.

⁵⁸ D'Afflitto, *Lorenzo Lippi*, 195: cat. No. 25.

⁵⁹ D'Afflitto, *Lorenzo Lippi*, 240: cat. No. 67.

⁶⁰ Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 146.

⁶¹ See Pagliarulo, 'Jacopo Vignali' (1994), 144.