

FERRARA, Bartolomeo da (2024). *Tractatus predicandus in ciuitate pestilenciata*. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni (ed.). Firenze: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 304 pp., ISBN 978-88-9290-316-6.

Plague treatises became *best-sellers* throughout the Second Plague Pandemic. In Europe, hundreds were written after April 1348, when the Catalan physician Jacme de Agramont composed the first known one, eager to help prevent the arrival in Aragonese lands of the disease that was then ravaging the Central Mediterranean. The advent of printing, from the second half of the 15th century on, created new conditions for this spreading, and plague treatises were always a safe editorial choice. With so many works surviving, what makes one specific plague treatise among all the others worth critical editing and publication today as a relevant, representative—but simultaneously unique—example of its kind?

This text, critically edited by Giovanni Paolo Maggioni and enriched by introductory studies by Chiara Crisciani, Tommaso Duranti and by the editor himself, was produced by a Dominican friar and inquisitor, Bartolomeo da Ferrara, while plague was devastating Ferrara, in 1424. As the editor stresses, it goes beyond the usual explanatory, prophylactic, or therapeutic plague treatise, adopting the structure of a medical text to produce a theological (although not apocalyptic or penitential in tone) dissertation in times of pestilence, using medical vocabulary within a sustained utilitarian metaphor. Despite the interest in its content, this treatise did not achieve widespread dissemination, was never previously printed and survived in a single manuscript until now. This way, its interest lies entirely in its content and not in the study of the influence it may have had on its readers.

The three introductory chapters account for half the length of the present edition. In the approximately fifty pages occupied by the first one, Tommaso Duranti offers the context of production of the edited text, studying plague outbreaks and human reaction to them in the cities of Ferrara, Padua and Bologna in the 15th century. As Duranti demonstrates, plague historiography has usually shown less interest in 15th-century outbreaks because they lost their ‘novelty’ when compared to the 14th-century waves and lacked the continental impact and/or narrational dramatism that the 1300s and some early modern outbreaks had or assumed. Tommaso Duranti exposes the context of production of Bartolomeo’s treatise while studying the 15th-century plague, the evolution of 15th-century sources documenting plague in that area of Italy, the works of a half-dozen other authors on plague – all of them with

different backgrounds and agendas – and the approach of local authorities, revealing the spatial, temporal, and cultural context in which Bartolomeo da Ferrara wrote.

The second study, written by Chiara Crisciani, moves from the environment and the context to Bartolomeo da Ferrara himself. Collecting his biographical data, the author reviews the Dominican preacher's broader body of work, which extends beyond the *Tractatus*, dissecting his work as a whole. The themes and *auctoritates*, which form the basis on which the preacher author builds his treatise receive here the expected attention. Starting from the structural options, which show that it is fair to question whether this is truly a treatise, or if the definition of this original work should somehow be challenged or at least nuanced (something that the author does on his own, with digressions into terms such as *opusculum*, *tractatus* or *sermo*), one wonders whether the text could constitute a sermon in itself. Crisciani suggests that this treatise may have worked as a *summa* of previous preachings by the author, offering a 'textbook' for composing sermons during times of plague.

Built on a Thomist foundation and enriched with a broad range of theological, astrological, and medical knowledge, as well as plenty of biblical extracts, the treatise does not, however, mention an extended list of authorities in any of these domains. The result is not a collection of sermons, but a treatise explaining causes and offering 'spiritual medicine', useful on an individual level, but focused on the collective—a community, in this case the city of Ferrara—while providing ample material for preachers undertaking the difficult task of preaching in a time of plague. Offering rational explanations, consolation and spiritual solutions, where the *materia medica* appears literally and metaphorically, it never loses the focus on the *natural origin* of everything, God and his will, true origin of every corrective or penitential pestilence, consequence of abundant and grave sins. Chiara Crisciani contextualizes the production of Bartolomeo da Ferrara among the authors of plague sermons in 15th-century Northern Italy, complementing the medical context provided by the study of Tomasso Duranti and completing the panorama of plague writing at that time and region in a wider comparative way between healers of the body and those of the soul and emphasising the *spiritual medicine* that precedes all physical evaluation or intervention behind the argument of Bartolomeo.

The last and shortest introductory chapter, by Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, editor of the text, discusses the unique features of the sole surviving manuscript and the challenges of editing it in this volume. Although surviving

in a single manuscript, the codex is not an autograph. While not in itself a problem, the challenge lies in the copyist's limited knowledge of written Latin, which contains errors that comparison with Bartolomeo's other works reveals were not his. Questions around the structure of the tractate, as well as cited sources and respective authors, are equally included.

These three chapters offer essential critical support for the reader of the edited text. A dense *opus*, complex in structure and argument, the whole volume represents an opportunity fully seized, allowing all potentially interested specialists—plague historians, theologians, sermon scholars, medical historians, and others—to access an important and hitherto little-publicised source, even when the focus of research is not, from the outset, the philological study of the form, or the history of the thought it contains.

Editing this treatise is therefore an opportunity to reach and study a text produced in a time when plague became a frequent, but not a domesticated phenomenon. Populations struck by the disease feared it in its familiarity—maybe even more than the surprised 14th-century populations that faced the same problem in superlative ways. The mobilization of an entire literate elite, much broader than the medical milieu itself, demonstrates how the plague—although a recurrent and frequent phenomenon in the 15th century—continued to represent a source of disruption with each new outbreak. It required the intervention of physicians, preachers, and civic authorities: those who sought to heal bodies, those who cared for souls and those who worked to preserve social order and everyday life until normalcy could return. The intellectual tensions between those who sought the healing of bodies, and those who accused the former of neglecting spiritual health, demonstrated that all of them were familiar with the main medical theories about the origin and the fight against the plague. It was the focus on the body or soul that separated both.

This critical edition is not isolated in its purpose. Our own recent pandemic context increased the awareness of epidemic phenomena of the past and the opportunities for medical historians to recover and bring many important texts to the present. In the last few years, texts with similar motivations, produced in very different contexts, were finally made available to the public in accessible and scientifically robust editions¹. This critical edition

¹ To mention only two cases, I would like to point out *A Peste de Hamburgo. Tratado breve da sua natureza e causas*, a 1596 text by the Portuguese-Jewish physician Rodrigo de Castro wrote in Hamburg and published in a critical bilingual (original Latin and Portuguese) by the Portuguese publisher Afrontamento, in 2021, edited by Bernardo Mota, Cristina Santos Pinheiro and Gabriel A. F. Silva, and *Merits of the Plague*, a 15th-century text by Islamic scholar and poet Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, edited by Joel Blecher and Mairaj Syed and published in 2023 in the prestigious collection Penguin Classics.

is a strong example of how to do it, hopefully leading the way to the edition of other still-unknown or scarcely accessible manuscripts containing plague treatises.

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