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JFA. 6 (1977) 4 (213-220)

THE PLAGUES OF 1675 AND OF 1813 IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

by PAUL CASSAR

Of the 3 major outbreaks of plague that struck the Maltese Islands since the end of the 16th century – 1592, 1675 and 1813¹ – those of 1675 and of 1813 have inspired two authors to compose verses about them. The 1675 epidemic is dealt with by Don Melchiorre Giacinto Calarco from Alicata in Sicily who wrote an allegorical poem entitled *Melpomene idillio nella peste di Malta*. It is dedicated to 'My Most Illustrious Lord and Master' Fra Don Emaldo Mox of whom Calarco professes to be 'not only his servant but his chained slave'. Mox was a Spanish Knight of the 'Sacred and Most Illustrious Religious (Order) of Jerusalem, Commander of the Command of Spluga Calva and Valfagona, First Chamberlain of the Most Eminent Prince Fra D. Nicolao Cotoner, Grand Master of the aforesaid Religion and Prince of Malta and Gozo' (Figure 1).

The author makes no claims to literary fame; on the contrary, he apologizes for his lack of erudition. The only information we have about him is that he was living in Valletta in October 1677.

The poem, in free verse, was published in Catania in 1677. The only copy I know of in Malta is in a private collection. The author begins by describing his sea-crossing to Malta from Sicily during a moonlit night, his landing at St. Paul's Bay and his entry into Valletta. He is impressed by the beauty of Maltese women and alludes to their love affairs with the knights.

The Muses of poetry, Calliope; of lyric, Erato; of music, Euterpe; of history, Clio; and of tragedy, Melpomene, come to Malta,

*Del sacro monte lor verdi rive
poste in oblio, verso le nostre sponde
mosser le piante.....,*

to sing of the fragile and fleeting beauty of our women.

MELPOMENE
IDILLIO
Nella Pette di Malta

Composto dal D. Don Melchiorre Giacinto
Calarco del Regno di Sicilia, e Citta
dell'Alicata.

All'Illustrissimo mio signore, e padrone
Collendissimo il signor Fra Don
Erinaldo Mox Cavaliere de la
Sacra, & Illustrissima Reli-
gione Gerofolimitana.

Commendatore de le Comende di Spluga
Calua, e Valfagona, e primo Camarriere

Dell'Eminentissimo Prencipe Fra D. Nicolo
Cotener gran Maestro de la predetta Reli-
gione, e Principe di Malta, e del Gozo.

In Catania nel Palazzo dell'Illustrissimo
SENATO, Per Diego Falson

1677:

Marchese di Spagnoli

Donne vostre bellezze
Condite di dolcezze,
Son dell'eterno Sole,
Che gira la gran mole
Hor piovoso, hor sereno,
Ombra fugace e rapido baleno.

Il vostro adorno viso,
Raggio di Paradiso,
Vola, passa e sen fugge
Col tempo che lo strugge.
Qual fieno o polve al vento,
Caderà deformato in un momento.

The Muses, after thus hinting at the impending calamity, return to Mount Parnassus. The plague breaks out but there are doubts as to whether the illness is 'contagious' or not. In the meantime the people are sickening and dying. Medical 'experts' are brought over from Sicily and France (Figure 2). Some attribute the cause of the epidemic to the influence of the stars; others blame some occult poison.

Melpomene and the other Muses return to Malta to lament the death of so many women,

Cb' una suol furia
A tante veneri
Potesse uccidere

and of valorous knights who

Ne spada cingono
Ne lancia impugnano
Inermi porransi
Scoverti al tumulto.

Social life is disrupted:

Sospesi i tribunali,
Derelicta le piazze con le strade
Anzi tolto il commercio,
E se si traficava, eran le merci
Denudati cadaveri e sospiri.

Viddesi l'isoletta triunfante
Caduta da la sfera de' contenti,
Ira bersaglio, e scuopo
De' fulmini del Cielo.

Figure 1. Titlepage of *Melpomene* a poem dealing with the events of the plague of 1675.

Ma nell'atto pietoso
 L'istessa sposa amata,
 Come se de' Serpenti del deserto,
 Aduccider con baci appresso hauesse,
 Baciando l'uccideua.
 Cadeua il figlio esangue,
 E mentre quella sconfolata madre
 Lacerandosì il petto,
 Al caro pegne con sospiri ardenti
 Fini baci d'Amor stampaua in bocca
 Di pestiferi fiati il cor recinto.
 Languida tramortiuua.
 O'quãto all'hor caduca, o'quãto frate
 Si conobbe d'ogn'vn la vita humana.
 Sel'uiuere. e morire
 In vn suol batter d'occhio esisteuua.
 Nulla l'arte giouò, nullail sapere
 De' filici periti
 Medici Che de' franchi, e dà sponde Sicane
 di Frã. Con le sue squadre elette
 cia. Si il nostro Gedeone
 cilia Con somma diligenza se condurge,
 chiama Se pria che dà Larte,
 ti dal O con medica man guarito fosse
 Gran L'infermo moribondo,
 Maestr Era il medico ucciso da' infermo.
 Nel vicinato di morte,
 Ai più famigliari era l'aterdetto' Pro-

Procurar non potende
 Ad altri la salute
 Senza appressar à se stesso la morte,
 Poi che era di più viui
 Carnefice vn suol morto,
 Et in premio e mercede
 Rendea la morte, à chi l'hauea sepol- mogle
 O quanti femiuui (to
 Sotto i morti sepolti,
 Quanti dal fuoco inceneriti e spenti,
 Triunfaua sul carro
 Degl'estinti la morte
 Tanto ue più crudele,
 Quanto deuoratrice di più uite.
 Inesforabil perche senza orecchio
 E si vedea dall'ossa aride, e serche
 Quanto dura e crudel ella si fosse
 Mentre col piè scarnato
 Di calpestrar i morti mai fatolla,
 Le ceneri de' uiui tormentaua,
 L' hore de' femiuui misurando.
 Con polue de' sepolti.
 Mà chi ridir potrà le varie guise
 Di pianger, e morire?
 Quant'innocenti spirauan la vita
 Pria che l'aure vitali?
 A quanti tra le fasce ancor legati
 Era rotto lo flame de la vita?
 Tal'vn mentre dal seno E deli-

Figure 2. Specimen pages from *Melpomene*.

In the midst of this disaster, the knights exert themselves to help the plague-stricken and succour the needy:

*Discorreuan per tutto coraggiosi
 A la misera gente suggerendo
 E del proprio suo
 E del comun erario le vicende;
 Facendo veder presso le pareti
 De' cadaveri infetti.*

In the meantime a relic containing the bones of Santa Rosalia, through whose intercession Palermo had been delivered from the plague, is brought to Malta from Sicily. It is carried to the Conventual Church of St. John amid the jubilant pealing of bells, the firing of petards and the implorations of the people for divine mercy:

*E quella galeria che fa corona
 Al campanile de la Chiesa madre
 Del divin precursore
 Con varji lumi coronati i tetti
 E di fiaccole accese li balconi,
 Ribumbando per tutto il suon lo sparo
 De le campane, de li mortaletti
 Con le sante reliquie se processe
 All'aspettata beneditione.*

.....
*All'hora il popol tutto in atto humile
 Pietà, disse, Signor, Pietà pietade,
 Ecco in cener ridotto
 L'infrancibile scudo de la fede.*

God hears their prayers and the plague comes to an end:

*Intese il buon Iddio di Malta i pianti
 I singulti, i sospiri
 E di somma pietade il cor ferito,
 Figli, rispose e disse,
 Mi penetiaro il core
 Con le ruine tue
 De le vedove e orfani li pianti,
 Deb' riposa, deb' godi.*

.....
*ti prometto
 Quella pace ch'l Ciel se con la terra.*

The plague of 1813 is the subject of three sonnets and a poem

of 17 *terzine dantesche* by Gioacchino Ermolao Barbaro. They all bear the same title *Per la peste di Malta nell'anno 1813* and form part of a collection of Italian verse published in 1843.² One of the sonnets and a few *terzine* are reproduced here to give an idea of the author's style:

PER LA PESTE DI MALTA DELL'ANNO 1813

*Io ben la vidi allorchè il mio si pose
Miserò fral su queste altere mura
Per cui l'arte sudò, sudò natura
Superbe, insuperabili famose.*

*Io ben la vidi orribil nube, e ascose
Con le nere ombre, e monti, e ogni pianura
Nunzia fatal di più fatal sciagura
Nube, che in se chiudea mistiche cose.*

*E ben lo fu quando per te s'aperse
Malta infelice, e assai meriache e fiera
Suoi tristi eventi contro te converse.*

*Ombra vana non fu, ma atroce e nera,
Che di fiele letal il suolo aperse,
Che tolse il lume, e l'Uom condusse a sera (p. 19).*

The plague is resembled to a sinister black cloud that overshadows Malta and brings death and destruction in its wake. It is of interest to note that a modern artist, who painted an allegorical representation of the plague events of 1675 in the Basilica of St. George at Gozo (1957), also makes use of a black cloud to symbolise the threat of invasion of that island by the plague.³

In the following *terzine*, the author stresses the impotence of the medical profession to check the spread of the disease and the uselessness of the remedies at their disposal to treat the sick. In fact, he lost three of his children in 1813.

.....
*La seguace d'Ipocrate e Galeno
Studiosa gente a cui ciascun vorria
Fidar la cura del comun veleno*

*In van s'aggira nella peste via
Con tutti i fogli, che ha già divorato
Della latina, e greca libreria,*

*E per avverso alto voler del fato
Con util sempre, e splendida mercede
Il ministero del morir gl' è dato.*

*Invan con medica arte, invan si crede
Trarsi del tempo dall'ingiurie, e affanni
Se pertinace, il suo voler si vede.
..... (pp. 67-8)*

Gioacchino Ermolao (d. 1814) was the son of the lawyer Carlo Antonio Barbaro (1720-98) from Valletta who was created Marquis of St. George by Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan in 1778. Gioacchino studied at Pistoia and on his return to Malta was appointed Jurat and Captain of one of the Order's regiments. He enjoyed the reputation of being a man of letters 'well versed in literature and the fine arts'.⁴

Comment

The onslaught of disease on a large scale has prompted several men of letters to record in prose the medical events of which they were witnesses. One recalls, for instance, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* where he tells of the ravages of the plague of 1348 in Florence; Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* which deals with the pestilence of 1665 in London; and G.M. de Piro's *Ragguaglio storico della pestilenza che afflisse le isole di Malta e Gozo negli anni 1813 e 1814* (Livorno, 1833) concerning the plague of Malta of those years.

Epidemic disease has also inspired poets to preserve its memory in verse. Francesco Petrarca wrote a poem called *Il trionfo della morte* to commemorate his beloved Laura who died of the plague in 1348; Girolamo Fracastoro, doctor and poet, published a poem - *Syphilitidis sive morbi gallici* - in 1530 at Verona about a mythological herdsman named Syphilus who, in his impiety, was smitten by the gods with an infectious disease whence the name of syphilis is derived; 32 years earlier Francisco Lopez de Villalobos, active in the 16th century, wrote a poem of 72 stanzas on the same theme - *Tratado sobre las Pestíferas Bubas*; the French adventurer and poet François Villon, who flourished in the mid-15th century, is reputed to be the author of another poem about syphilis - *Ballade sur la grosse verole*; François Marie Arouet de Voltaire also sang, in verse, of Francis I's syphilis; and the poet Tan-Nan left a poem called the *Death of the Rats* inspired by a plague epidemic in Yunnan in the second half of the 18th century.⁵ The Abate Enea Gaetano Melani Sanese, Protonotary Apostolic and member of the Order of St. John, wrote a long poem on *La peste di Messina accaduta nell'anno 1743* of which he was an eyewitness.⁶

Compared with the old masters, Calarco and Barbaro are cer-

tainly not first-rate poets and their verses find no place in the world of great literature. Written in a rhetorical and conventional vein, these poems present no profound thoughts or original ideas. In spite of the fact, however, that these compositions do not rise to any literary heights, it has been considered worthwhile to draw attention to them as pointers to the type of literary culture prevailing at the time and as examples of a genre of literature that attempts to bring the world of poetry into relation with contemporary medical events and with their impact on Maltese society.

NOTES:

¹CASSAR, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, pp. 164-87.

²BARBARO, G.E. *Versi toscane*, Malta, 1843, pp. 19-21 and 66.

³BEZZINA, J. *Il-pittura fil-Bazilka ta' San Gorg*, Malta, 1965, p. 53.

⁴MIFSUD BONNICI, R. *Dizzjunarju Bio-bibliografiku*, Malta, 1960-68, pp. 24-25.

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MONTALTO, J. Personal communication, 14th October 1976.

⁵HENSCHEN, F. *The History of Diseases*, London, 1966, pp. 80, 128 and 131.

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⁶Ms. 214, National Library of Malta, Valletta.

CHANGES IN THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL PATTERN OF DISEASE IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

by F.F. FENECH – R. ELLUL MICALLEF – M. VASSALLO

RUDOLPH Virchow, the German Pathologist who is considered the father of medicine, in the middle of the last century, wrote that 'Medicine is a social science and that politics is nothing less but medicine on a large scale'.¹ In fact the incidence and pattern of disease in any community reflect not only the standard of medical care but also, and possibly to a greater extent, the socio-economic conditions of the country. In Malta, there are few accurate records of the incidence of diseases 50 years ago let alone a century ago.² However in a report of the Barracks and Hospital Improvement Commission on the Mediterranean Station published in 1863, it is stated that in 1851, when the civilian population was 90,021, the death rate was 25.5/1000 population.³ It is relevant to point out that at that time 57.5% of all deaths were in children under 5 years.⁴ This catastrophic death rate in the under fives reflected the state of very unhealthy conditions present both in the towns and villages of the Island. Though it is true that Medicine has changed more in the last 50 years than it had done in the previous 500 years, in Malta it is only since the end of the 2nd World War that the situation started to improve.⁵ Indeed before 1940, the pattern of poverty and its harmful effects on health were plain to see.⁶ The purpose of this communication is to discuss the changes in the pattern of disease which occurred before and after 1940 and to underlie the importance of these changes as an index of the state of health of the community.

The population of Malta had shown a steady increase, interrupted only during the war years 1940 to 1943, till 1962 when the net increase in the population has been controlled.⁷ The factors which brought this about were the marked reduction in infant mortality from 257.5 per thousand live births in 1932 to 19.9 in 1974 as well as