

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Mercuriale, Girolamo. On Pestilence: A Renaissance Treatise on Plague. Trans. and with an intro. by Craig Martin

Franco Mormando

Volume 45, numéro 2, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094843ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39786>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Mormando, F. (2022). Compte rendu de [Mercuriale, Girolamo. On Pestilence: A Renaissance Treatise on Plague. Trans. and with an intro. by Craig Martin]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 329–331. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39786>

© Franco Mormando, 2022



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Mercuriale, Girolamo.

***On Pestilence: A Renaissance Treatise on Plague.* Trans. and with an intro. by Craig Martin.**

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. Pp. 184 + 5 b/w ill. ISBN 9780812253542 (hardcover) US\$69.95; ISBN 9780812224979 (paperback) US\$27.50.

Those who teach courses relating to the plague (as I have done since 2006) know of the dearth of adequate, accessible translations of primary sources, especially full-length ones. That dearth has just become less severe with the publication of Craig Martin's English edition of Girolamo Mercuriale's medical treatise published in 1577. This is a relatively short but comprehensive text by one of the century's most eminent medical doctors, and hence, merits our close attention. Moreover, this newly translated and annotated edition comes from a scholar eminently qualified to confront the difficult task of rendering into modern, readable English an early modern Latin text, especially one extremely technical in nature: with an early background in classics, Martin is associate professor of the history of science and technology in the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage at Università Ca' Foscari in Venice. Martin's edition has all the virtues that one would hope to find in a translated primary source, worthy of both classroom use and scholarly research; namely, an utterly readable and accurate English prose, a well-informed introduction presenting the text from multiple perspectives, a sufficient number of succinct footnotes, a glossary of specialized or arcane terms, and an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

Having read many early modern plague treatises dating until the last European outbreak (Marseille, 1720–22), I found much familiar content in Mercuriale's treatise, medical science on the matter remaining tragically limited in both its understanding of the scourge and its remedies over the long durée of this pestilential chapter of European history that began in 1347. No real progress would be achieved until the late nineteenth century in the aftermath of the birth of new germ theory of disease with the identification of the real culprit, the pathogen known since 1944 as *Yersinia pestis*. One trait that is distinctive in Mercuriale's treatise is its tone: perhaps not surprising for a senior and much celebrated man of his profession, the learned doctor comes across as utterly confident in his pronouncements regarding the causes and diagnosing

of the plague and dictating responses to it, both on the level of individual patients (i.e., medications to dispense) and the collective population (i.e., public health measures to be enforced, above all, quarantine). How could he be so self-confident in view of the facts and the failures that he assuredly had read of in the medical literature and chronicles and had himself seen over the years in actual practice? In reality, in the sizable body of plague literature, one finds open and honest confessions by learned contemporaries: "Save your money and don't bother with the remedies of the *fisici* for they are worthless," advises Florentine scholar-chronicler Francesco Rondinelli in 1633, while Roman doctor Giovanni Pressi, who staffed the city's *lazzaretto* during the 1656–57 pandemic, is obliged to admit that given the profession's ignorance as to the true anatomy of the disease, no sure treatment can be identified, and so everyone invents his own. Be that as it may, on the level of diagnosis, further distinguishing Mercuriale's own approach to the plague is his insistence that epidemics are to be formally judged as such by the authorities not by symptomatology but rather by the rapidity of the disease's spread and its degree of lethality. Unfortunately, as Martin's introduction points out (11), that means that the authorities would only be able to sound the alarm once mortality reached a distressing level. In fact, Mercuriale's treatise can be seen as a formal *apologia* in the tragic aftermath of the author's misdiagnosis of the recent Venetian epidemic that convinced the Serenissima's government to end its quarantine measures, with the result that tens of thousands of citizens perished in the disease's ensuing and most violent recrudescence.

Also distinguishing Mercuriale's professional discussion of bubonic plague among similar clinical treatises (which eschew completely any discussion of theology in considering etiology) are his *obiter dicta* remarks (28–29, 32, 75, 78, 113) acknowledging that epidemics come about or cease to be through the "will of God." He does not elaborate on this point: he did not need to because the "airwaves" of early modern Christian (both Catholic and Protestant) Europe resounded with the omnipresent message of the preachers stating in no uncertain terms that the *causa finalis* of the plague was the wrath of God punishing a sinful humanity. Hence, the ecclesiastics said, explicitly or implicitly, it was useless to search for or dwell on the *causa naturalis* of the plague. If the ecclesiastic authorities had not propagated so vehemently and so incessantly this message, perhaps the true "natural" cause of and remedy for bubonic plague (and many other diseases) would have arrived sooner.

Famed pathologist Gerolamo Fracastoro of Verona (1478–1553) had already hypothesized the contagion was actually disseminated by an invisible living agent, which he called *virus*, and in the next century Jesuit scientist Athanasius Kircher (1602–80) through his microscope examined organic liquid material taken from plague victims and noticed therein distinctive organisms that he called *vermicula* and that he connected to the physiology of the disease. Alas, the intuitions of these men would have no follow up for many years, and many victims, later.

FRANCO MORMANDO

Boston College

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39786>