

## 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 1813<sup>1</sup> – those of 1675 and of 1813 have inspired two authors to compose verses about them. The 1675 epidemic is dealt with by Don Melchior 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 Ernaldo 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 Peste di Malta

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

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

*Commendatore dè le Comende di Spluga  
Calua, e Valsagona, e primo Camarriere*

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

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

1677.

*Diego Falsaperme*

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

*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,

*Ch' una suol furia  
A tante veneri  
Potesse uccidere*

and of valorous knights who

*Ne spada cingono  
Ne lancia impugnano  
Inermi porransi  
Scoverti al tumulo.*

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.*

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 efangue,  
 E mentre quella sconsolata madre  
 Lacerandosi il petto,  
 Al caro pegno con sospiri ardenti  
 Fini baci d'Amor stampaua in bocca  
 Di pestiferi fiati il cor recinto.  
 Languida tramortiuua.  
 O'quáto all' hor caduca, o' quáto frale  
 Si conobbe d'ogn'vn la vita humana.  
 Sèl'uiuere. e morire  
 In vn suol batter d'occhio còsistea.  
 Nulla l'arte giouò, nullail sapere  
 De' fisici periti

Medici  
 di Frá-  
 cia, e Si-  
 cilia  
 chiama-  
 ti dal  
 Gran  
 Maestr  
 Che de' franchi, e dà sponde Sicane  
 Con le sue squadre elette  
 Il nostro Gedeone  
 Con somma diligenza se condurre,  
 Sè pria che dà Larte,  
 O con medica man guarito fosse  
 L'infermo moribondo,  
 Era il medico ucciso da' l'infermo.  
 L'vsar atto pietoso  
 Nel procinto di morte,  
 Ai più familiari era interdetto'

Pro-

Procurar non potendo  
 Ad altri la salute  
 Senza apprestar à se stesso la morte,  
 Po'che era di più viui  
 Carnefice vn suol morto,  
 Et in premio e mercede  
 Rendea la morte, à chi l'hauea sepol-  
 O quanti semiuui  
 Sotto i morti sepolti,  
 Quanti dal fuoco inceneriti e spenti,  
 Triunfaua sul carro  
 Degl'estincti la morte  
 Tanto uie più crudele,  
 Quanto deuoratrice di più uite.  
 Inefforabil perche senza orecchio  
 E si uidea 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' semiuui 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 stame de la vita?  
 Tal'vn mentre dal seno

E deli-

il Padre  
 abbáto  
 naua il  
 figlio,  
 & il ma-  
 rito la  
 mogle  
 (to

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

*Discorrevan 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 rovine tue  
De le vedove e orfani li pianti,  
Deh' riposa, deh' godi.*

.....  
*ti prometto  
Quella pace ch' l Ciel fe 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.<sup>2</sup> 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  
Misero 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 meriace 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.<sup>3</sup>

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'.<sup>4</sup>

*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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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:

- <sup>1</sup> CASSAR, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, pp. 164-87.
- <sup>2</sup> BARBARO, G.E. *Versi toscane*, Malta, 1843, pp. 19-21 and 66.
- <sup>3</sup> BEZZINA, J. *Il-pittura fil-Bazilka ta' San Gorg*, Malta, 1965, p. 53.
- <sup>4</sup> MIFSUD BONNICI, R. *Dizzjunarju Bio-bibliografiku*, Malta, 1960-68, pp. 24-25.
- BARBARO, R. *I Barbaro, Venezia e Malta*, Malta, 1912, p. 92.
- MONTALTO, J. Personal communication, 14th October 1976.
- <sup>5</sup> HENSCHEN, F. *The History of Diseases*, London, 1966, pp. 80, 128 and 131.
- GORDON, B.L. *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine*, London, 1960, pp. 703 and 708.
- <sup>6</sup> Ms. 214, National Library of Malta, Valletta.