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Diseases in the Counterfeiters' *Borgia* of Dante's *Inferno*

Dante's Literary Sources, Contemporary Medical Knowledge and Theological Symbolism

The punishments for the souls of the tenth *bolgia* – uniquely in the entire *Inferno* – are diseases: counterfeiters of metal are punished with leprosy along with scabby rashes, impersonators are punished with rabies, counterfeiters of coins develop dropsy – a disease which compels Master Adam to hold his lips apart “as does the hectic” –, whereas false accusers are punished with acute fever. Two Ovidian diseases are mentioned here: the plague of Aegina and the madness of Athamas and Hecuba, which function as prefigurations of the diseases in the *Inferno*. The unjust and collective mythical punishment of the plague, which did not exist at the time of Dante, is overcome by an individual divine punishment: leprosy, which was the *par excellence* disease from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

In this paper, I am elaborating on the following problems: 1) what were Dante's literary and historical sources for the depiction of these diseases; 2) which encyclopaedic works, including contemporary medical knowledge, were available to the author; and 3) the theological symbolism of the diseases. Concerning diseases, medieval theology presents multi-faceted and ambiguous considerations, which Dante surely kept in mind when writing the *Canti* of the falsifiers, even if his concept, which the author explicitly reuses, is the idea of disease as divine punishment. Finally, 4) the ways in which vernacular literature before Dante (Bonvesin de la Riva, Jacopone da Todi) depicted diseases and the main differences between their depictions and the ones found in the *Divine Comedy*.

I. THE PLAGUE OF AEGINA

The first 36 verses of Canto 29 are still concerned with the schismatics encountered in the ninth *bolgia*. Verse 37 begins the description of counterfeiters whose episode continues and gets completed in Canto 30. Thus, *Canti* 29 and 30 work as a ‘twins,’ a solution which is not unparalleled in the *Comedy*. The conjunction of these two *Canti* is not merely a thematic feature; in fact, they could neither be

treated separately from a stylistic point of view (the language is full of *hapax legomena* drawn from medical science), or from that of their mythological allusions.

The specific description of the punishment of these souls is preceded by the emulation of an Ovidian disease, namely, the pestilence of Aegina, which is presented here as the most devastating mythological epidemic, which could only be eclipsed by the utter misery of the infernal landscape:

I do not believe it was a greater sadness to see
 in Aegina the whole people sick, when the air
 was so full of malice
 that the animals, down to the little worm, all fell –
 and then the ancient people, according to what the
 poets firmly believe,
 were restored from the seeds of ants – then it was to
 see, along that dark valley, the spirits languishing in
 different heaps.

(*Inf.* XXIX. 58–66, transl. by Robert M. Durling.)

The first reference to classical antiquity in the *bolgia* recalls the wrath of Juno (which will be a recurring element and of great importance in the *Canti*, inasmuch as it constitutes an antithesis with divine justice determining the structure of afterlife). Juno, by reason of Jupiter falling in love with the nymph Aegina, struck the whole island with pestilence. The only survivor, King Aeacus, having prayed to Jupiter, was granted the ability to repopulate the island, transforming the ants, which he saw passing at his feet, into humans. Dante's three triplets here faithfully follow the Ovidian narrative (*Met.* VII. 523–660), albeit reducing it to its essentials. On a lexical level, Dante's choice of "*cascarón*" (v. 62), which evokes the Ovidian recurrence of "*cadunt*" (vv. 541, 586) and "*ceciderunt*" (v. 595), betrays Ovidian influence. "*Tristizia*" (v. 58) is probably a translation to "*miseræ res*" (v. 614), and the preceding word, "*languir*" (v. 64), undoubtedly stands for Latin "*languor*" (v. 547). Not only did the Ovidian story of the plague of Aegina become a source of these three triplets, but it also inspired many details of different diseases represented in *Canti* 29–30 (Ledda 2012).

Scholars who believe that the classical memory of the plague of Aegina is no more than a literary reference, an element of erudition (Chiavacci Leonardi 2001. 502; Sapegno 1964. 574–575), are unable to explain why Dante recounts the story of people created out of ants, which in fact, at first glance, seems to be an episode without function. But this mythical story must have been particularly important for Dante, who recounts it in the *Convivio* too (IV. 27. 17), explaining how the king "wisely turned to God," and as a consequence, "his people were restored to him." Thus, the author himself stresses the characteristics of the king's pious attitude, who obtains the rebirth of his people by resorting to God.

The king, heard by God, and the reborn people, that is, the *new* one, constitute a contrast with the *old* people of Aegina, who, resorting to Jupiter, drop dead with incense in their hands right before the altar of the ancient deity (*Met.* VII. 587–595).

The souls depicted by Dante as being punished in the counterfeiters' *bolgia* 'inherited' the despair of the *old* people of Aegina and have to face their inability to heal and get reborn. Note that the verbs that Dante associates with Ovid in these passages – *rinascere*, *convertire*, *ristorarsi* – are all verbs that allude to the Christian mystery of the true metamorphosis, namely, the rebirth of Christ (Barolini 1993. 180). At the same time, we see the parallelism and the contrast between the diseases in Dante's inferno and the Ovidian plague: the reason, in both cases, is divine punishment, but "Juno's unjust wrath" (so defined by Ovid) lies in opposition to Dante's infallibly fair system. The comments by Jacopo della Lana and Ottimo (*ad loc.*) explain that this punishment affects the people of Aegina for the lust of Jupiter as well as for the lust of the people themselves. This explanation stems from medieval commentaries to the *Metamorphoses*: Arnulf of Orléans (p. 219), Giovanni del Virgilio (p. 79), Giovanni di Garlandia (vv. 313–314) and Bonsignori (p. 365) describe the analogies between ants and the people reborn from them; on the one hand, in their physical characteristics and habits (namely, they are small and thin, yet strong, dark-skinned, and industrious), and on the other, in their moral ones (being lustful).¹

The different types of pathologies recall different associations, which undoubtedly influenced Dante's choices in the Canti of the counterfeiters. The plague, like other major epidemics, affects people indiscriminately, so that all ages, genders, and different social classes are 'equal' in the disease. It is precisely because of this characteristic (that is, indiscrimination) that Juno may be an example to unjust wrath in the text as someone who, out of jealousy towards a single person, exterminated an entire people and all the animals of the island.

The missing description of the disease in the case of Dante's re-enactment of the Ovidian pestilence and the imitative character of this episode are due to the fact that the author was not familiar with the plague (which thirty years after his death would kill at least a third of the population of the continent, but between the seventh and thirteenth centuries it had not yet reappeared in Europe), if not from literary sources. In the literature of antiquity, this epidemic appears as divine punishment: in the Old Testament, we find the plague in this context at least four times (Ezek. 5,17; Lev. 26,25; Deut. 28,21; Jer. 14,12); in the *Iliad* it is the wrath of Apollo that causes the outbreak; and at the beginning of *Oedipus the King*, the plague ravages Thebes for the sinful presence of Oedipus. In contrast, Thucydides' historical perspective excludes any intervention of the divine, with

¹ On ants in the *Comedy*, see: Ledda 2008. 123–143; Rossini 2002. 81–88; Gualandini 2010–2011.

an accurate description of the plague of Athens (II. 47–53), distinguishing between the causes, the symptoms, and the psychological consequences of the disease. Owing to him, Latin literature uses the plague as *topos*: Lucretius (*De rerum natura* VI. 1070–1286) towards the end of his unfinished work, in 196 verses recounts the plague of Athens, focusing on the scientific causes. Virgil, in the final *excursus* of Book III of the *Georgics*, describes the effects of a cattle plague widespread in his time in Noricum. The latter are fundamental intertexts for the narration of Ovid's plague, which incorporates both the structure and numerous details from Lucretius, yet at the same time it places the description in a mythical frame made up of Juno's wrath and the metamorphosis that took place by Jupiter's will and power. This mythical frame, which reiterates the concept of the epidemic as divine punishment, is maintained, and refurbished by Dante in his verses.

II. THE PUNISHMENT FOR FALSIFIERS OF METAL

The mythical, unjust and collective punishment of the plague – non-existent at the time of Dante – is followed by an individual divine punishment, which was to be leprosy, the par excellence disease² from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Getting back to Canto XXIX: the evocation of the Ovidian myth is immediately followed by the specific presentation of the landscape of the tenth *bolgia*. The souls here, in Dante's definition, used to be "*alchimisti*," but are to be understood as falsifiers of metal, since alchemy at the time was considered – even by Thomas Aquinas – to be genuine science. In Dante's description, the souls lament more loudly than all the sick of Valdichiana, Maremma and Sardinia in the malaria season; they are gathered in a moat that emits a stench "as from putrescent limbs is wont to issue." A further element of their infirmity is weakness, while later we learn of their constant itching with no remedy. By scratching, their nails "dragged the scab" (*Inf.* XXIX. 82); that is, their skin peels off, while in verse 124 Capocchio is called "the other *leper*".

All commentators are therefore uncertain as to the identification of the disease: a large part of nineteenth-century commentators³ believed that the disease afflicting these souls is scabies, and the word *leper* is only a generic label for 'ill person.' A valid argument against this interpretation is that Dante, in the *Comedy*, uses the word *scabbia* only in one further instance, where it must be understood as a metaphor: "Ah, do not pay attention to the dry scales (*scabbia*) / that

² To such an extent that starting from the first decades of the twelfth century, *infirmus* sometimes assumes the specific meaning of leper, just as the word *malaude* in Occitan. See: Bériac 1986. 178.

³ For example. Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Bennassuti (*ad loc.*) and – probably in their wake – Mihály Babits, author of the best-known Hungarian translation of the *Comedy*.

discolor my skin [...] nor to my lack of flesh”⁴ – begs Forese Donati of Dante. The scabies and itching as a metaphor of greed was a widespread moralizing *topos* in ancient literature; see, for example. Horace’s *Epistles* (I, 12: “Miramur, si Democriti pecus edit agellos, / Cultaque, dum peregre est animus sine corpore velox: / Quum tu inter *scabiem* tantam, et *contagia lucri* / Nil parvum sapias, et adhuc sublimia cures?”) and some of Dante’s comments concerning the episode also point to this direction: Guiniforto delli Bargigi (1440, to the verses 76-84), Gregorio da Siena (1867, to the verse 82).

Other commentators, on the other hand, have assumed that *scabies* is to be read as “the scales of the leper” (Francesco da Buti, *ad loc.*). Moreover, a third line of interpretation posits that souls suffer from both illnesses (Jacopo della Lana *ad loc.*), and this is the way in which earthly diseases are overcome in the afterlife.

The most convincing solution is offered by the fact that the encyclopaedias of the time treat scabies and leprosy together (Bosco 1984. 605–606). Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologies* (IV. vii. 10) states that

utraque passio [*scabies et lepra*] asperitas cutis cum pruritu et squamatione, sed scabies tenuis asperitas et squamatio est. Hinc denique nomen accepit [...] nam scabies quasi squamies. Lepra vero asperitas cutis squamosa lepidae herbae similis, unde et nomen sumpsit: cuius color nunc in nigridem vertitur, nunc in alborem, nunc in ruborem.

And Bartholomaeus Anglicus, in his encyclopaedia *De proprietatibus rerum* (VII. 64) maintains that leprosy can be accompanied by scabies. In the case of leprosy:

tuberositates crescunt in corpore multa ulcera minuta et dura et rotunda, [...] unguis ingrossantur [...] et *quasi scabiosi* efficiuntur... corrumpitur eorum anhelitus et eius factore saepius sani corrumpuntur... prurimum, *quandoque, cum scabie, quandoque sine scabie patiuntur*, maculis variis, nunc russis, nunc lividis, nunc nigris, nunc subalbidis in corpore respergantur.⁵

1. Why is it exactly this disease that affects falsifiers of metal?

There is a realistic connection between health problems and the profession of alchemists, already found in Avicenna (1608. II. 2. 47), who stated that silver vapours cause paralysis – a statement that is quoted in Dante commentaries from the 1600s. Moreover, in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* the servant of the alchemist complains of bright smudges on his skin and his constant smell of sulphur owing to his activity (p. 401).

⁴ *Purg.* XXIII. 49–51, transl. by Robert M. Durling.

⁵ Italics mine.

A symbolic explanation is given by the analogy between the definition of leprosy and the theory of alchemy at that time. According to medieval concepts (based on Aristotle),⁶ metals must „die” and rot before they can be reborn and become more noble. Hence, the putrefaction of the material was to be the first step of the alchemical processes. And the first characteristic of the counterfeiters' *bolgia* is precisely a stench analogous to that deriving from “putrescent limbs.” According to Bartholomaeus Anglicus' definition, leprosy is nothing more than the “corruption of the limbs” stemming from “putrefied humours”. The punishment of the alchemists in Dante is analogous to the first step of their activity, yet paradoxically they remain forever in this state. A final, parodic, element is the fact that, according to the *Libellus de Alchimia*, attributable to Albertus Magnus (p. 19), leprosy can only be cured with natural gold. So even if Dante's alchemists had been successful in their endeavours, their product could not have healed their eternal punishment (Mayer 1969, 196).

Surprisingly, the commentaries and essays do not mention the biblical antecedents in connection with this episode of Dante's. The Old Testament narrates an archaic view of leprosy as an individual divine punishment: it is set as an example in the case of Miriam, Moses' sister, who is punished by God with leprosy for criticizing Moses for having married an Ethiopian. Owing to the intercession of Moses, the punishment lasts only for seven days: for this time Miriam must leave the camp. (Expulsion from society also explains why the disease was treated as one the most serious disasters.)

In the Second Book of Kings (5,1-27), the prophet Elisha heals the leprosy of Naaman, the commander-in-chief of the Aramean army, and accepts no compensation for the miracle. However, the servant of the prophet, Gehazi, hurries after the healed commander with the lie that his lord has changed his mind and demanding a talent of silver from him. Naaman offers two talents to the servant. But when Gehazi returns, the prophet reproaches him for his sin: “«Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever». Then Gehazij went from Elisha's presence and his skin was leprous – it had become as white as snow.”⁷ Like Gehazi, metal counterfeiters were moved by greed, and their punishment follows the biblical *exemplum*. It is no coincidence that Job's disease, an infection of the skin with intense itching, which is not identified in the biblical text, in the Middle Ages was represented as leprosy, with Job portrayed as a leper (see the images entitled *Job's portrayals* compared with *Christ healing the*

⁶ See Thomas Aquinas's comment on Aristotle's *Meteorology*, *Lectio IX ad finem*; see: Read 1947, 9; Mayer 1969, 195.

⁷ In this paper, the biblical quotes in English are taken from the New International Version.

lepers and also with the Dantean *Portrayals of lepers in the forgers' bolgia*). Medieval preaching addressing lepers also made use of the biblical *exemplum* of Job.⁸

In contrast to the Old Testament examples, leprosy never appears as punishment in the New Testament, but becomes a disease cured by divine miracle. The synoptics narrate how Christ can heal a leper immediately and, in Luke's account, Christ once heals no less than ten lepers at the same time.

The only other mention in the *Comedy* in connection with leprosy is found in Canto XXVII of the *Inferno*, quite close to the Canti of the counterfeiters: "... Constantine asked Sylvester in Soracte to / cure his leprosy..."⁹. According to legend, Emperor Constantine displayed symptoms of leprosy, from which he was healed at the moment of his baptism. Hence, the miracles of the New Testament and healing are present in the *Comedy's* punishment as antithetical patterns. In fact, we notice the true gravity of the immutable fate of these souls if we bear in mind these accounts of immediate healing. Similarly, an antithetical function is given to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lc. 16,22), where the beggar, probably a leper, suffers and dies in front of the door of a rich man, who refuses to give him as much as a piece of bread. Lazarus, for his sufferings endured with patience and his trust in God, after his death is granted eternal life in Abraham's bosom. The rich man, however, when he too dies, suffers in hell instead and, seeing Lazarus in heaven, cries out: "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." The rich man's sorrowful cry is reflected in the lament of the Master Adam in Canto 30: "alive, I had / much of whatever I wished, and now, alas, I crave a / drop of water" (vv. 61–63).¹⁰

III. DISEASES IN THE VERNACULAR LITERATURE BEFORE DANTE: THE EXAMPLES OF BONVESIN DE LA RIVA AND JACOPONE DA TODI

The seriousness of the illnesses represented in cantos XXIX–XXX is supported by the fact that most of the diseases described by Dante are already listed in Jacopone da Todi's *Signor, per cortesia* where he requests the most repugnant and painful diseases for himself in order to suffer and thus to atone for the sins of humanity. In Jacopone's first exclamation ("O Signor, per cortesia, / manname la malsania!") many commentators interpret *malsania* as leprosy (considered at the time the disease par excellence). Two afflictions of the following strophe

⁸ Jacques de Vitry: *Sermo ad leprosos et alios infirmos, thema sumptum ex epistula Iacobi, capitulo V*: „Sufferentiam Iob audistis et finem Domini uidistis,” Bériou-Touati 1991. 101. Even more evident is Humbert De Romans's sermon (around 1270) who treats the story of Job as an exemplum to follow (*Materia Sermonis* II. 1, 93) *Ad leprosos*. (Bériou-Touati 1991. 160–162).

⁹ *Inf.* XXVII. 94–95, transl. by Robert M. Durling.

¹⁰ Transl. by Robert M. Durling.

("A mme la freve *quartana*, /... / co la granne *ydropsia*") will return in the lower Inferno (*quartana*: XVII. 85–88; *idropesi*: XXX. 52; *idropico*: XXX. 112). The *tiseco* (v. 13) is recalled in Dante's *etico* (XXX. 56) and the same word, *parlasia*, is found in v. 18 as well as in *Inf.* XX. 16. Two further parallels appear between Dante's *canti* on the forgers and Jacopone da Todi's poetry: *rasmo* (v. 29) is a precedent of Dante's rage afflicting Mirra and Gianni Schicchi (XXX. 46: two rabid persons); moreover, Jacopone's madness (v. 54) will be the disease of the Ovidian mythical figures Atamanthus and Hecuba, whose fate is narrated in the initial twenty-one lines of Canto XXX of the *Inferno*.

However, whereas in Jacopone's case the illnesses requested to be inflicted on the poet himself are a restless and tormented form of a desired asceticism towards God (conveying a *negative theology* that makes divinity a source of conflicting feelings: suffering and joy, certainty and a sense of bewilderment);¹¹ in the Infernos of Bonvesin de la Riva and Dante, accumulated illnesses are punishments in the afterlife.

Bonvesin de la Riva's *Book of Three Writings* was composed in 1274, a few decades before Dante's Comedy, and like the Comedy, it is divided into three parts: *Black Writing* (*De scriptura nigra*) describing Hell; *Red Writing* (*De scriptura rubra*) describing the Passion of Christ; and *Golden Writing* (*De scriptura aurea*) describing Paradise.

The twelve infernal punishments of *Black Writing* correspond symmetrically to the twelve glories found in *Golden Writing*. Thus, for example, the stench of hell¹² is contrasted with the sweet odours of heaven;¹³ the terrible sight of the damned and the devils¹⁴ is contrasted with the admiration of the angels, the faces of Mary, Christ and the Father;¹⁵ the noise of hell¹⁶ is contrasted with the songs of heaven.¹⁷ The gluttonous and those who did not care for the hungry are afflicted with the torments of Tantalus (hunger and thirst amidst gushing water and fragrant fruit),¹⁸ and their contrast is the banquet in heaven, served by God himself.¹⁹ The tenth punishment is the accumulation of various diseases:²⁰

¹¹ Ferroni 1995. 127.

¹² Second punishment, SN 329–372.

¹³ Second glory, SA 185–224.

¹⁴ Fifth punishment, SN 433–492.

¹⁵ Fifth glory, SA 325–409.

¹⁶ Sixth punishment, SN 493–536.

¹⁷ Sixth glory, SA 410–464.

¹⁸ Eighth punishment, SN 653–704.

¹⁹ Eighth glory, SA 497–560.

²⁰ Tenth punishment, SN 745–788. The tenth glory will be the antithesis of this: the beauty and health of the blessed ones.

The unfortunate is plagued by all sorts of diseases;
 his whole body is full of festering; he is sickly and frantic,
 feverish and lame, with scabies from head to foot,
 chilled and bruised, bloated and pellagra-ridden.²¹

Squinting and lame, hunchbacked and wormy;
 his ugly and hideous head aching all over,
 both his eyes are rotten, with scrofulous on his neck,²²
 his teeth are throbbing, and he yells as if he had rabies.

His arms hang down in front, his face is sunken,
 His tongue is swollen, and the flesh is gone from his face.
 He's got cancer, he is half-blind, his shoulders are hunched,
 His ears are foul-smelling.

His limbs are all swollen and gangrenous,
 rotten and stinking inside,
 his chest a constant sore, festering boil.
 His suffering never eases.
 (SN 749–764.)

Bonvesin's damned soul, following the scheme found in *Black Writing*, reveals the logic of counter-punishment:

While I lived in the world, I took good care of my body,
 I kept it as fat and healthy as a pig's,
 safe and sound! Oh, how mad and blind I was:
 for I have cared so little for the health of my soul!
 (SN 781–784.)²³

Although in cantos XXIX–XXX of Dante's *Inferno* the accumulated illnesses are – as in Bonvesin's afterlife – divine punishments, the logic of the *contrappasso* in the two cases is different. According to the general interpretation of the

²¹ *Pellagra*: a disease caused by inadequate nutrition, which provokes the inflammation of the skin, diarrhoea, and dizziness. In Europe, it was particularly common in Italy and Spain until the twentieth century.

²² *Scrophulosis*: a disease of children living in poor social conditions, characterised by persistent swelling of the neck glands and the infection of the upper respiratory tract.

²³ Perfin k'eo stig al mondo, curava pur del corpo;
 Teniva druò e grasso, bastass k'el foss un porco,
 E san e confortoso: com fu eo mat e orco;
 Dra sanitae de l'anima eo curava molt poco.

meaning of *contrapasso* in Dante, illness alters and corrupts the forgers' appearance, just as they altered the nature of what they falsified.

Moreover, there is a poetic difference between the two texts: while Bonvesin's work is characterised by an unrealistic accumulation of punishments, Dante – although the reality he describes is superior to the earthly plane – always aims to be believable and realistic. There is also a marked difference in their poetic intent: Bonvesin's writing is permeated by a didactic intention, the principle of "imagine and learn;" Dante, in contrast, produces a recitable text that requires stylistic-hermeneutic analysis. These two aspects exercise different effects on the reader: Bonvesin's poem is over-stretched, unrealistic and therefore fails to arouse fear; whereas Dante is realistic, yet the impact of what he writes is also dampened by his recurring warnings (for example, in his rivalries with other poets) that his work is a poem, instead of being the narration of reality, a testimony.

IV. A THEOLOGY OF DISEASE

Medieval theologians left us with varied and ambiguous remarks on disease, which were definitely accounted for by Dante when writing the Canti of the counterfeiters, even if the main concept, which the author expressly reiterates, is the idea of disease as divine punishment. This concept, which is rooted in various archaic cultures, appears in the Old Testament examples and was widespread during the Middle Ages. An example to leprosy as individual punishment in the Middle Ages, which faithfully follows the structure of the above mentioned Old Testament accounts, is found in a story narrated by S. Pier Damiano (which took place in Bologna, around 1014) in Ulisse Aldovrandi's *Ornithologiae tomus alter*:²⁴

Two men who were staying in the Bologna area, either because of friendship or, if I think about it, because of the bond resulting from the fact that they had a father in common, were reclining at a banquet, when a cock was brought onto their table. One of them, of course, took a small knife and, as is the custom, cut the dish into pieces and poured some ground pepper and gravy over it. When he had done this, the other immediately said: Brother, you have undoubtedly quartered a cock in such a way that even if St. Peter himself would be unable put it back together again. The other immediately replied: Certainly, not only Saint Peter, but even if Christ himself commanded it, it would not rise again. At these words, the rooster suddenly sprang up alive and covered with feathers, flapped his wings and crowed, and sprayed all the

²⁴ *Liber Decimusquartus qui est de Pulveratricibus Domesticis*, Italian translation by Fernando Civardi, 247; Italian translation by Elio Corti. <http://www.summagallicana.it/Aldrogallus/italiano/247%20it.htm>.

gravy over the diners. Immediately, an appropriate punishment followed the sacrilege of blasphemous treachery: *for while pepper was being scattered on them, they were stricken with leprosy, and of course not only they themselves had to endure this calamity until death, but they even passed it on to their posterity for all generations as if it were some heirloom.*

Infirmity, as per this concept, becomes the external sign of sin: it is for this reason that Gregory the Great²⁵ prohibits the admission of priests with physical defects. Various sources testify to the belief that certain diseases (e.g., deformity, or even leprosy) are consequences of parental sin, or conjugal transgressions of the Church's prohibitions. For Jerome, lepers embody the vices and corruption of the flesh: "in hac lepra, quam quasi albam et florentem designat, diversa crimina varieprehendit: qua cum mundialis vitae voluptas, quasi candida et florens existimatur, tum grave vitiorum contagium grassatur in corpore. Nam aut avaritiae, aut libidinis maculae perpatescunt."²⁶ The ill person, therefore, is a sinner who is symbolically revealed, being forced to show, with his disfigured body, the crookedness of his soul (Iannella 1999. 195).

On the other hand, several theologians are aware that the misery of the human condition harks back to original sin: "Dio... quando fece l'omo, per la sua grazia lo fece impassibile et immortale. [...] Ma per lo peccato del primo homo... unde venne che l'omo potesse avere febbre, ferite et altre pene"²⁷ – contends Giordano da Pisa.²⁸ This means that *infirmitas*, after original sin, became the *status* of mankind.²⁹

The loss of physical health can also lead to the salvation of the soul since infirmity functions as a warning, an image of death,³⁰ thus bringing the sufferer closer to God. The concept of the usefulness of disease is also expressed by Alain de Lille,³¹ for whom a man "*in infermitate carnis invenit sanitatem mentis;*" and by Domenico Cavalca.³² Considering the disease as a possibility to getting

²⁵ *Regulae pastoralis liber*, cap. X, PL 77, 24^o–26D. Cf. also Umberto da Romans (*Expositio super Regulam D. Augustini*, Comi, 1602. 85-86), Ugo di Cluny (*Statuta*, cap. IV, PL 209, 883 D). See: Agrimi–Crisциани 1978. 56.

²⁶ *Sancti Hieronymi Opera Suppositia*, Epistolae XX–XXIV, „De diversibus generibus leprorum” PL, 30, cols. 246.)

²⁷ Giordano da Pisa, *Prediche inedite*, 1997, 225, 6 ss. See Iannella 1995. 181. This concept is already present in Augustine (*Contra Maximinum Haereticorum Arianorum Episcopum libri II*, II, XII) e Tommaso d'Aquino (*Summa theologiae*, I, q. 50, a. 5).

²⁸ A Dominican from the convent of Santa Maria Novella (c. 1260–1311).

²⁹ Umberto da Romans, *Expositio*. 99. See Agrimi–Crisциани 1978.74.

³⁰ On the infirmitas as a prefiguration of death, see Giordano da Pisa, 20 marzo 1306: *Quaresimale Fiorentino* 1305–1306, a cura di C. Delcorno, Firenze, Sansoni, 1974. 303: "lo 'nfermo che guerisce non provò la morte, ma assaggiolla." Cf.: "Unde tutte le pene del mondo sono assaggio di morte, però ànno in sé della pena della morte ..." *Sul Terzo Capitolo della Genesi*, a cura di C. Marchioni, Firenze, Olschki. 1992. p. 231. See: Iannella 1995. 182.

³¹ *Summa de arte predicatoria*, PL. 210, 142 See: Agrimi–Crisциани 1978. 75.

³² *Medicina del cuore ovvero Trattato della pazienza* (a cura di G. Bottari, Milano, Silvestri, 1838), II, XII. See: Iannella, *Giordano da Pisa*, 193.

closer to God and as an important tool for the *salus animae*, the sick should be grateful and take advantage of their illness and consider their troubles as divine gifts, as claimed by Giordano da Pisa.³³ Aware of his spiritual destiny, the sick person must be *tacitus*, just as Christ was in every stage of his passion (Agrimi-Crisciani 1978. 9).

Alongside the concept of *Christus medicus*, Scripture also portrays that of *Christus patiens*: this is how typological exegesis interprets Isa. 53.4 with reference to Christ: “*Vere languores nostros ipse tulit, et dolores nostros ipse portavit; et nos putavimus eum quasi leprosum, et percussum a Deo, et humiliatum;*” as well as Mt. 25,36 (“*nudus et operuistis me infirmus et visitastis me in carcere eram et venistis ad me*”). One particular example to the iconography of *Christus patiens* is found in the Isenheim altar piece (1506–1515), created by Matthias Grünewald for the Antonian Order, where Christ is represented with the signs of pestilence, alongside the usual physical torment of the Crucifixion and the Deposition.³⁴ For the Antonians, the Franciscans and the saints, the attitude of *Christus Medicus*, the care for the sick – including, in the case of an extreme vocation, the lepers – becomes a way of the *imitatio Christi*. Domenico Cavalca, in his *Volgarizzamento delle vite de' SS. Padri* (pp. 280–283), writes about *Sant'Eulogio Alessandrino*, who welcomed a leper in a terrible state into his home and assisted him. Angela da Foligno, with one of her female companions, went to cure the wounds of the lepers and, once they washed the wounds in a basin, drank the water. (A similar story has come down to us about Saint Catherine of Siena.) Saint Francis shared his food with a leper, whose body was entirely plague-stricken, and whose blood was dripping into the bowl every time he took from it.

Dante, from among the various concepts of disease in the Middle Ages, chooses the most archaic one; namely, individual punishment, and uses it as the logical backbone for the Canto of the counterfeiters. The ideological background of this choice is given by the circumstance that these sinners cannot even hope for the healing of their bodies, let alone for the salvation of their souls: for them, the Old Testament punishment can never be mitigated with the balm of theology, which grants a positive interpretation to believers.

³³ *Prediche del B. Giordano da Rivalto recitate in Firenze dal MCCCII al MCCCIV*, a cura di D. Moreni, Firenze, Magheri, 183, I, 266–267. See: Iannella 1999. 193.

³⁴ On the representation of Christ on the Grünewald altar piece, see Újvári 2005. 93–109.

IMAGES



1–2. The representations of the lepers in the pit of the counterfeiters (after Brieger–Meiss–Singleton) (1) London, B. M. Yates Thompson 36, 53r. (Primo della Quercia, 1442–1450); (2) Holkham Hall MS. 514, Dante, *Divine Comedy*, in Italian. North Italy, Genoa (?); 14th cent., third quarter, p. 45; the two lepers: Capocchio and Griffolino d'Arezzo (the illustrator, mistakenly, wrote the name of Alberto da Siena above the figure of Griffolino).







3–6. Job's portrayals: (3) 1140–1150, Romanesque relief. Museum of Navarre, Pamplona; (4) *Histoire de l'Ancien et Nouveau Testament*, 1724. Mary Evans Picture Library, London; (5) Rome, Vat. gr. 749, 9th century; (6) Job on the dunghill is afflicted with leprosy...; Jean Fouquet; miniature in the breviary of Étienne Chevalier; 1452–60; Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.



7–8. Christ heals the lepers: (7) Christ with the leper, Bamberg Gospel, 9th century; (8) Christ heals ten lepers. Codex Aureus Epternacensis, 1035–1040.



9–11. Christ with signs of the plague: Matthias Grünewald, Altar of Isenheim, 1506–1515, details.

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