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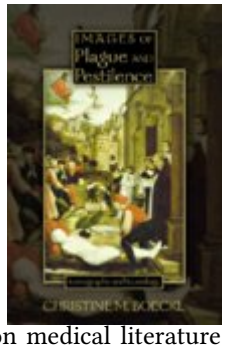
**Christine M. Boeckl**. *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology.* Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies. Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2000. xiv + 210 pp. $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-943549-85-9.

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*Images of Plague and Pestilence*, if left in public view, is guaranteed to elicit comments about the morbid tastes of its unwary reader. Yet the title accurately describes this survey of plague images from the mid fourteenth century to the present. According to Boeckl, her project has "three goals: one, to present for the first time an overview of various sources of plague iconography; two, to select a few significant paintings dating from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries and investigate their iconology (meaning of the image); and three, to highlight the most important innovative artistic works that originated during the Renaissance and the Catholic Reformation" (p. 2). She has expanded a dissertation (University of Maryland, 1990) by making more direct use of the collection of plague images assembled over the last generation by Henri Mollaret and Jacqueline Brossollet (the latter of whom has added to this volume's preface a four page description of her own work). Boeckl surveys plague iconography clearly: an opening chapter examines medical aspects of the plague; the two subsequent chapters introduce the literary and visual antecedents of plague images; four chronological chapters systematically treat plague's late medieval, Renaissance, "Tridentine", and Romantic/modern depictions; a conclusion speculates on the past and future of such art. The narrative is supplemented by forty-five black and white illustrations, of varying quality. Although the resulting presentation is neither comprehensive nor groundbreaking, it does introduce an interdisciplinary subject of interest not only to devotees of "momento mori" but also to professional medievalists and medical scholars.

The initial chapter on "Medical Aspects of Bubonic Plague and 'Yersinia pestis' Infections" accomplishes more than its title suggests. It does review the symptoms of bubonic plague, drawing on medical literature not always known to the average historian. It adopts the World Health Organization model of three historic bubonic plague pandemics; the Justinian Plague (6th-8th centuries); the Black Death (14th-18th centuries); and the current pandemic (1860-), which, beginning in East Asia, has made bubonic plague endemic in animal populations in Africa and both of the Americas. Photographic images of human victims of the current infestation make the symptoms all too clear. Yet this chapter also serves to establish one of the major justifications for the book itself, since, by juxtaposing modern medical photographs with pre-modern and modern artistic representations of plague victims, Boeckl shows that, at least to some extent, the iconographic tradition was anchored in medical realities. Buboes, contortions, even scars from flea bites appear to indicate that, despite stereotyping, some artistic images were based upon real disease victims. (This evidence renders even more unlikely the minority historical claim that the Black Death was not bubonic plague.)

Boeckl describes her subsequent chapters on "Literary Sources of Plague Iconography" and on "Visual Sources of Plague Iconography" as "reference material, presenting facts and defining terms that are referred to in later chapters" (p. 3). It might seem digressive, in an iconographical study, to analyze literary treatments of plague in Greek writers, in the bible, in the *Aeniad*, and in saints' lives and sermons. But the relevance is demonstrated in later chapters, which continually explain the iconographic evidence by reference to literary texts, a process facilitated by an appendix of "Plague Texts That Influence Visual Art" (pp. 160-71). Likewise, her study of visual antecedents, examines motifs, attributes, gestures, and details–ranging from the plague arrows of Apollo to

odd images in Raphael's "Plague of Phrygia" (illustrating an incident in the Aeniad)–that will continually recur in plague iconography. She demonstrates that literary sources and visual presentations frequently overlap.

The chronological chapters are impressionistic, based on a total corpus of images which is never defined, emphasizing the images deemed most typical. The tendencies she identifies are thought provoking. The earliest images, those from the later middle ages, establish some basic themes and invoke special patrons (Brossolet claims to have found 110 saints whose protection against plague was sought). Medically, some of the most accurate depictions of plague symptoms are from the late medieval period. Renaissance images, extraordinarily influential for later centuries, tended to be more aesthetic and less clinical. The counter-reformation produced a huge corpus of images, including many ex votos: these are often propagandistic, focusing on the heroic ministrations of the clergy (often visiting the sick while ahistorically arrayed in their grandest clerical vestments), especially in regard to delivery of the sacraments (with the Eucharist carried in the most ornate ecclesiastical vessels rather than in the simple pyxes that would have been more practical in times of pestilence). "Tridentine" images are overwhelmingly from Italy and from regions directly bordering Protestant lands. This art often associates images of plague and heresy. Romantic and modern depictions, on the other hand, have a large French component, associated to some extent with the post-revolutionary rebuilding and redecorating of churches. The conclusion suggests that the present day aids epidemic may inspire its survivors to attempt to find clarity and hope in art.

*Images of Plague and Pestilence* has two major inherent flaws. The first is its failure to describe the underlying iconographic corpus, leaving readers uncertain about whether generalizations about frequencies and tendencies are based upon dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of examples. The second is the assumption that "plague art" and "plague paintings" constitute a coherent genre, membership within which is established by any depiction of a plague sufferer or of a symbol associated with plague. For example, confronted with Peter Paul Rubens "Miracles of St. Francis Xavier" (1617), Boeckl is able to identify one of the more than two dozen figures involved–a declining figure in the foreground whose raised arm enables his armpit to be examined by an attendant–as a plague victim and then is able to interpret this whole panorama of Xavier's thaumaturgical gifts as a Jesuit allegorical image using pestilence as a synonym for heresy and thus proclaiming that Roman Catholic faith and Jesuit saints "can guide the way to everlasting life" (pp. 125-29). Such resonances may well be included, but, even assuming that the identification of the plague victim is correct, how exactly does such a picture differ programmatically from panoramas of miracles which do not include plague sufferers? Boeckl does not attempt to raise such larger contextual questions. Her study of themes within "plague art" cannot answer larger questions about the themes that also fall outside of its boundaries. Nonetheless, within these limitations, Boeckl accessibly introduces a wide ranging interdisciplinary topic.

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