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Source: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (Dec., 2004), pp. 659-689

Published by: CAA

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4134458>

Accessed: 26-08-2019 02:10 UTC

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# Poussin, Plague, and Early Modern Medicine

Sheila Barker

... every year we have cured a number of the sick, who regained their health by no other means than the movement of their souls.—Galen, *De sanitate tuenda*, 1576

When we endure the smartest sores our *crying* turns the cure.—William Austin, *The Anatomy of the Pestilence*, 1666<sup>1</sup>

Seeking to launder the spoils of a diamond heist, Fabrizio Valguarnera visited the studio of Nicolas Poussin in early 1631 and purchased two paintings.<sup>2</sup> One of these, begun in late 1630, depicts an unusual Old Testament history based on these passages from the first Book of Samuel (4–6):

And when they [the people of Ashdod] rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. . . . But the hand of the Lord was heavy upon the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors in secret places. . . . He brought mice upon them, they swarmed in their ships. The mice went into their land, and there was mortal panic in the city.<sup>3</sup>

Later known as *The Plague of Ashdod*, this painting portrays the scourge that God sent to punish the Philistines for stealing the Israelites' ark and the supernatural heralding of that event by the destruction of a temple statue (Fig. 1). It would become the most imitated and celebrated plague painting of the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Though *The Plague of Ashdod* remains one of Poussin's most frequently studied works, it has never been analyzed through the prism of scientific medicine current in Poussin's time. There has been some interest in defining the contours of Poussin's knowledge of plague, but these previous assessments of his painting's scientific value have suffered from a myopic, piecemeal, and ultimately anachronistic approach. Often they have focused only on those selected aspects of the composition that pertain to modern-day medical discourse, such as the detail of the rats; in other cases they have taken as their premise the post-Enlightenment prejudice that matters of science and faith are naturally opposed.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, this investigation seeks to situate itself within the discourse of seventeenth-century scientific medicine. It will attempt to build a holistic, even phenomenological, understanding of Poussin's work—one that goes beyond specific iconographic readings in order to evaluate the act of painting such an image and its consequences. Only once we suspend our contemporary conceptions of plague and human biology can we begin to reconstruct the range of medical issues that framed Poussin's enterprise during his own age.

This perspective is critical to the comprehension of *The Plague of Ashdod*—not only because of its subject but also

because in 1630, the year Poussin undertook work on this painting, Italy was afflicted with the century's worst outbreak of bubonic plague.<sup>6</sup> That same year was also beset by war, famine, witchcraft, assassination plots, and volcanic eruptions—truly it was an *annus horribilis*. The Roman orator Agostino Mascardi, in a letter to Claudio Achillini, spoke of the contemporary horrors at length:

Perhaps the lamenting of private misfortunes amid the deluge of public calamities is a sign of a faulty soul; however I, amid these miseries affecting Italy universally, mourn the loss of many friends and for this reason hope to be pitied as well as forgiven. The spectacle of this desolate Province strikes every chord of pain in anyone with a human heart, for in addition to the turmoils of war . . . there are those that bring tears to the eye that witnesses so many noble cities tormented by hunger, violated by foreigners, exterminated by plague, emptied of inhabitants, filled with cadavers and fright. . . . solitude is terrifying, commerce is poisoned, those who see it firsthand are stunned, fear suffers not from this destruction, sickness awaits no cure, and sleep is interrupted by death.

Mascardi's threnetic description proceeds, referring to the hardest-hit regions in the north. He portrays the funeral processions for the vast number of dead as if they spanned the length of the peninsula:

Nothing is seen except images of horror, nothing is heard except the screams of the tormented; we wait only for the assaults of death, longing only for a quick death, and meanwhile the long, unbroken file of cadavers being carried to their resting place is seen stretching all the way to the grave; with tears and pain we gather round that unhappy place, where the sound of our quarreling voices reverberates across the open urns, and a woeful echo stings our ears and hearts, declaring us fragile, transient, miserable, and more moribund than mortal.<sup>7</sup>

It might come as a surprise that Mascardi did not witness any of the horrors he recounts. His vivid letter was written from one of the few places in Italy unscathed by these disasters: Rome, the same city that harbored Poussin. But the bleak fantasies of his fraught imagination are nevertheless integral to the medical history of the plague of 1630. They demonstrate that a plague's ramifications could extend far beyond the range of its etiological agents and subject otherwise healthy individuals to anguish, fear, and despair. The impact of fear on Rome's social fabric in these years was most dramatic, sparking a terror-driven exodus for the sparsely populated villages and isolated villas in the nearby mountains. This flight caused a decline in the urban population almost equal to the ten thousand deaths that resulted when plague



1 Nicolas Poussin, *The Plague of Ashdod*, 1630–31. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY)

broke out in Rome in 1656 and 1657. Among those who remained, fears of satanic agents and murderous plague spreaders called *anointers* (*untori*) fostered a deep mistrust of indigents, non-Christians, and strangers; those suspected of sickness were whisked away to pesthouses outside the city walls, and enforced quarantines kept large segments of the population locked up.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Dangerous Times, Dangerous Thoughts**

Mascardi's letter to Achillini frames our discussion of Poussin's *Plague of Ashdod* because both were made in the midst of a century whose medical community regarded psychological turmoil, including that which resulted from merely thinking of plague, to be a cause of physiological disease. Schooled in psychosomatic models of medicine, physicians of Poussin's time would have associated Mascardi's morbid ruminations with a range of health problems, even plague and sudden death. In an age when human physiology and the mechanisms of propagation were still largely mysterious, the horrible image of plague, once it took hold of the imagination and the emotions, was regarded as a major factor in the pathology of the disease itself.

This credence in the imagination's role in disease had

ancient roots; we need only recall Thucydides' observation that during the plague of Athens, "what was most terrible in the whole affliction was the despair when someone realized he was sick, for immediately forming the judgment that there was no hope, they tended much more to give themselves up instead of holding out."<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the Renaissance, physicians, surgeons, philosophers, literati, and priests throughout Europe formulated theories that linked imagination and disease, and by the seventeenth century this field of inquiry had taken on a modern, empirical cast.<sup>10</sup> One important impulse came from Daniel Sennert (1572–1637), who documented numerous cases in which plague was contracted not through contact, but either as the result of experiencing fright at the sights and sounds of the disease's effects (such as when a wagon carrying cadavers to the graveyard passed by) or after a terrifying dream. These cases proved to Sennert that "the passion of the soul affectively accelerates the plague and alters the body."<sup>11</sup> Robert Burton argued similarly in his 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy* that the agitated imagination can kill, citing the case of a man who died instantly of fear on coming to the mistaken conclusion that he had been in the presence of a person stricken with plague. The lesson drawn by Burton was that "the mind most effectively works upon the

body, producing by its passions and perturbations miraculous effects, cruel diseases, and sometimes death itself."<sup>12</sup>

The power of a distraught imagination to generate plague in the absence of other, extrinsic causes received confirmation from successive generations of physicians, including those who treated victims of the plague that struck Rome in 1656 (when Poussin would paint another plague picture, *The Vision of Saint Francesca Romana*).<sup>13</sup> Written during this outbreak, physician Gregorio Rossi's plague treatise advised, "Avoid altogether sadness and lust: The mind should be happy, and it should not fall into contemplation."<sup>14</sup> From the same years, a plague treatise by papal physician Matteo Naldi linked emotional trauma to the body's susceptibility to plague:

... the onset of [plague] occurs when the victims experience ... new perturbations of the soul and of the blood, either because of their affection for those who die first, or because of the fear of having received the contagion from the latter, or because of some other trauma; these perturbations usually give rise to the progression of the disease, as a kind of final trigger, like a little spark from a stone landing in kindling that is all ready to catch fire.<sup>15</sup>

Even members of the clergy by this time were convinced that sadness and psychological pain could lead to plague and death. Geronimo Gastaldi, a prelate who had served as general commissioner of pesthouses during Rome's plague of 1656, took up this position in a treatise he wrote after that outbreak. He concluded from his experiences that "the imagination merely frightened by the plague is enough to bring on the disease."<sup>16</sup>

While the medical community of the seventeenth century concurred that emotional agitation—including that caused by dreams or false ideas—greatly increased the danger of contracting plague, it was divided over the reasons why this should be the case. A conservative faction offered explanations based on the ancient notion that strong emotions impair the body's health by disturbing the balance of the four constituent humors.<sup>17</sup> One proponent of this principle was Thomas Feyens of Antwerp, whose 1608 *De viribus imaginationis* studied the role of the mind in diseases of the body. Pointing out that sad thoughts provoke tears while frightful ones provoke chills and pallor, Feyens postulated that such somatic alterations in temperature and circulation accompanying the emotions are sufficient cause of pestilential fevers. Feyens maintained that the imagination could not per se engender disease or its cure; however, he believed that by kindling the emotions that in turn stimulate the body's spirit and humors—including the "latent putrid and pestilential humor"—the imagination initiates a chain reaction resulting in the onset of disease.<sup>18</sup>

Opponents of traditional humoral medicine frequently assigned the imagination an even greater role in bodily disease.<sup>19</sup> Many in this category believed that dreadful thoughts, especially thoughts of the plague, could act directly on the body, with effects indistinguishable from those of plague itself. For example, Étienne Binet, a Jesuit priest, wrote a spiritual guide to surviving the plague (*Supreme and Effective Remedies for Plague and Sudden Death . . . for the Consolation of*

*Souls Distraught by the Fear of Death*, first published during the French epidemic of 1628) that exhorted his readers to

destroy and eradicate fear, because there is nothing that renders you more vulnerable to plague than the fear of it. The imagination has the power to alter the blood completely, [and] when the imagination takes fright at some scare, there is a danger that it will transfer this impression to the blood, which often results in the plague itself.<sup>20</sup>

Binet's medical explanation presents in diluted fashion the ideas formulated in the first half of the seventeenth century by Jean Baptiste van Helmont (1577–1664), whose thought was in turn informed by an occult philosophy reaching back to Theophrastus Paracelsus (1494–1541) and Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499). Van Helmont's widely read works assert that the symptoms of plague are pathologically indistinguishable from those symptoms produced by its mere *idea* or "seminal image."<sup>21</sup> According to van Helmont, when fear plants the seminal image of plague in the intellect, it becomes an *idea terrifica* capable of exercising deleterious effects on the body's *archeus*, or vital essence; since these effects are the symptoms of the disease, they can lead to death just as if the individual had contracted plague through contagion. Van Helmont also claimed that plague and other diseases could be averted by imagining oneself to be invulnerable; in these cases, the seminal image of health acts as a prophylactic against the seminal image of disease—advice reminiscent of the modern expression "mind over matter," except that in van Helmont's model the boundaries between mind and matter are fluid.<sup>22</sup>

These theories were carefully scrutinized in Rome.<sup>23</sup> For example, Giuseppe Balestra, a surgeon posted at the Roman pesthouse of Santo Spirito in 1656, invoked the words of van Helmont's predecessor, Paracelsus, to describe imagination's role in the generation of plague: "[in the case of] someone who fixates his thoughts on the plague, fear and strong imagination can cause the plague to imprint itself [on the victim's vital spirit]."<sup>24</sup> Around the same time, the Jesuit scientist Athanasius Kircher devoted a chapter of his 1658 plague treatise to the Helmontian question of whether plague can be contracted through the imagination alone.<sup>25</sup> Van Helmont's *idea terrifica* was finally reconciled with traditional humoral medicine in Lodovico Antonio Muratori's important eighteenth-century plague treatise. Blaming emotional turmoil for physiological effects that include diminution of the body's resistance to disease, Muratori gave this account of the relation between mind and health:

With the imagination thus injured and the humors and spirits thrown into a disorderly movement by some frightful spectacle, the pestilential venom takes effect all too easily, and even without the presence of the plague some people die occasionally of pure consternation and black humor . . . probably because a [disrupted] passion causes the dwindling [*depressionem*] of the blood's spiritual aspects, in which state the blood is more likely to submit with minimal resistance to the venomous imprints [*impressionem*] of contagious vapors.<sup>26</sup>

Believing emotional serenity and a positive outlook to be essential defenses against pestilence, Muratori called on gov-





2 The so-called Rosenkreuzer portrait of Paracelsus, from Paracelsus, *Astronomica et astrologica*, Cologne: Brickmann, 1567 (photo: courtesy of the Biblioteca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam)

ernments to hush the frightening rumors of plague spreaders; likewise, he urged preachers to avoid sermons that might agitate listeners' "perilous emotions [*micidiali passioni*]" and cause them to "die, even without contracting plague, but from pure apprehension and fright."<sup>27</sup> Muratori recognized that a disturbing verbal representation of plague could spark a citywide epidemic with the same disastrous consequences as a physical pathogen.<sup>28</sup>

Though Muratori discussed only verbal stimuli of the perilous emotions, the seventeenth-century medical discourse surveyed here assures us that—*ut pictura poesis*—visual or pictorial agents of fear would have been regarded in the same negative light. Thus, when we consider the violent, terrifying subject of *The Plague of Ashdod*, there is good reason to wonder at Poussin's decision to paint this work in the midst of an epidemic: as we have shown, both the emotional distress ensuing from its real or imagined effects, as well as the mere mental image of plague, or *idea terrifica*, were thought to trigger the onset of the disease in an individual, who might then spread it to others.

### A Dangerous Painting?

If *The Plague of Ashdod*'s impact on the health of both the spectator and the artist has never been questioned, it is mostly due to our unfamiliarity with this long-obsolete body of medical knowledge. We should not presume the same ignorance of Poussin. While it could be argued that such ideas were simply in the air, the probability that he was familiar with these matters is especially strong because of his

association with doctors as well as with learned men profoundly engaged in the study of plague.

Two of Poussin's most important patrons in this period, Cassiano dal Pozzo and Cardinal Francesco Barberini, numbered among Rome's best-informed experts on epidemic disease. Throughout the months that Poussin worked on *The Plague of Ashdod*, both of these men served on the Congregazione della Sanità, the papal commission created explicitly for the purpose of protecting the public from plague. Instituted at the earliest alarm of contagion in the Italian peninsula in 1629 and headed by Cardinal Barberini, the Health Congregation convened twice a week for the duration of the danger to exchange medical expertise and implement strategies to impede the spread of the epidemic in the Papal States. Ultimately, it succeeded in keeping the plague out of Rome, and it finally disbanded in 1634.<sup>29</sup> Without question, this was one of the most important institutions for epidemiological study in the early modern period, and Poussin's relationships with two of its members provided him abundant opportunity for gleaning medical knowledge about the plague.

An additional point of contact with the medical community arose when Cassiano sought expert medical care for Poussin, who had contracted a venereal disease perhaps as early as 1626. In the years leading up to *The Plague of Ashdod*, Cassiano corresponded with the physician and chemist Pierre Potier (also known as Pierre de la Poterie or Petrus Poterius, 1581?–1643?) to obtain a remedy for Poussin's ailment, finally insisting on the mercury treatment that was widely prescribed in those years for syphilis (*morbo gallicus*).<sup>30</sup> Under Potier's care, Poussin had an opportunity to deepen his knowledge of medicine—and not just any medicine: Potier was a follower of Paracelsus, the great proponent of psychosomatic medicine who claimed, "[Just as] imagination can cause sickness, fear can cause sickness; and so, too, joy can cause health; and just as imagination can be good or evil, so, too, it can make healthy or sick."<sup>31</sup> As a Paracelsan, Potier would have devised therapies predicated on links between diseases and his patients' psychological states; furthermore, the success of such therapies would naturally have depended on his patients' confidence in the basis of his medicine, so it is conceivable that he (or Cassiano, serving as their intermediary) instructed Poussin in the fundamentals of psychosomatic cure.

Given Poussin's contact with a Paracelsan adherent in the years preceding *The Plague of Ashdod*, it should also be mentioned that in certain learned circles, Azoth, French for Ashdod, signified more than just the city of the Philistines.<sup>32</sup> Azoth was the name of the kabbalistic sign for the mercury principle in alchemical operations; it was a name for the mercury (*argento vivo*, quicksilver) cautiously recommended by both Paracelsus and Potier as an effective but dangerous remedy for syphilis; and it was the secret name of Paracelsus's famous panacea ("Azoth of the Red Lion"), extracted from cinnabar and associated with the alchemistic philosopher's stone.<sup>33</sup> This last significance is laid out in medical writings including Potier's *Pharmacopoea spagirica* and his *De febribus*, as well as in esoteric writings such as Jacques Nuysement's "Philosophical Poem on the Philosophers' Azoth" and a late-sixteenth-century pseudo-Paracelsan treatise that identifies this substance, "AZOT," as the "arcanum sanctum" (the secret

of secrets) and associates it etymologically with the kabbalistic theme of the Ark of the Israelites—the same as that seen in Poussin's picture.<sup>34</sup> So closely was Azoth bound up with the essence of Paracelsus's thought that in certain portraits he is shown holding a sword pommel (supposedly a secret repository for his panacea) inscribed "AZOTH" (Fig. 2).

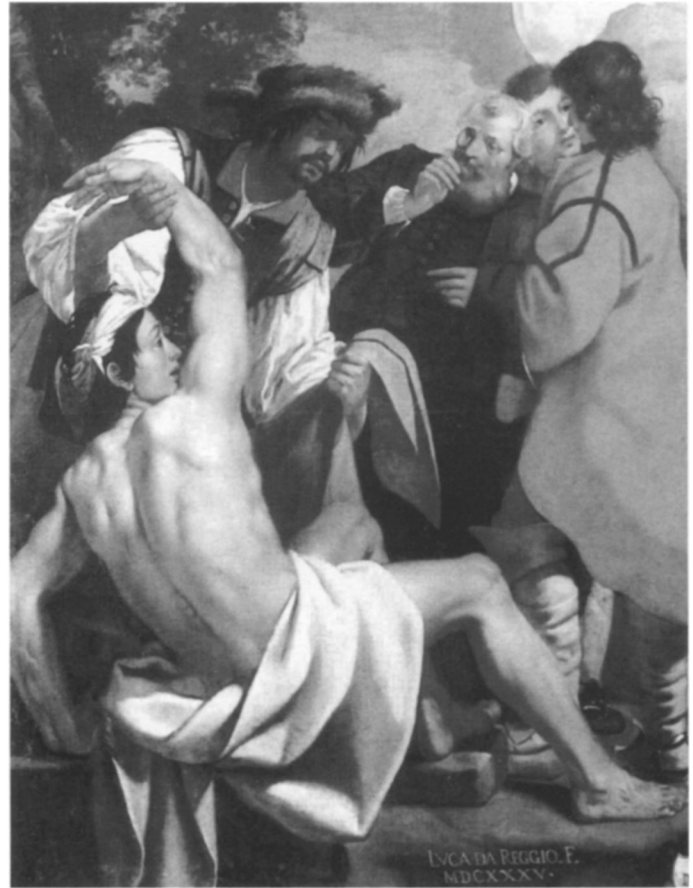
Poussin's contacts in the medical world additionally included Nicolas Larché (1602–1665). This surgeon, born in the diocese of Reims, worked in Rome at the hospital of S. Giacomo degli Incurabili.<sup>35</sup> Because this hospital specialized in the treatment of syphilitics, it is possible that Larché treated Poussin's venereal disease. Though this hypothesis cannot be confirmed, we know from the early biographers that Larché served as Poussin's instructor in anatomy. Giovanni Pietro Bellori, for instance, explains that "Having attended anatomy lessons in a hospital, [Poussin] again took up this study with [the book by] Vesalius; later, practicing with Larché, the noble surgeon, [and] conducting exercises on cadavers and skeletons, he became supremely knowledgeable."<sup>36</sup> Such testimonies demonstrate that Poussin possessed more than a pedestrian ken of medicine, and that he had ample opportunity to learn of the prevalent theories linking the imagination and the emotions to the incidence of epidemic disease.

Having established several channels through which Poussin might have gained medical knowledge of the plague, our analysis of the problem of a potentially harmful image begins with the picture's subject—or, more precisely, its name. At Valguarnera's trial for the theft of the diamonds, Poussin gave a testimony in which he referred to the painting as "the miracle of the Ark in the temple of Dagon."<sup>37</sup> His title reminds us that the visitation of the plague on the enemies of the Jews was understood as an act of divine Providence that benefited God's Chosen People. Curiously, however, Poussin's picture has rarely in its history been referred to as a "miracle," and even during his lifetime it was known instead by the more somber title of "the plague."<sup>38</sup> This discrepancy in nomenclature is a telling one, for it demonstrates that viewers have tended to qualify the scene in terms of suffering rather than triumph, suggesting their implicit identification with the Philistines.<sup>39</sup> This is in fact the response that Poussin intended: as we shall see in the discussion that follows, he composed the imagery with the goal of inciting the spectator's empathy with the victims—an enterprise that, from a medical perspective, is all the more dangerous because of the explicit allusions to a terrifying disease.

### Epidemiology in *The Plague of Ashdod*

Of the many channels through which Poussin's picture elicits viewer response, one draws directly on medical science: the strategic assimilation of Ashdod's scourge to the bubonic plague. By including recognizable signs in his picture of the disease that was at that time a grave concern for all of Italy, Poussin coaxed his contemporary audience to identify their own friends' and relatives' suffering with the plight of the ancient Philistines.<sup>40</sup>

Ostensibly, Poussin's depiction accords with the biblical reference to a plague of "tumors in secret parts," since no tumors can be seen on the victims' bodies. In other respects, however, he took great liberty with his laconic source, sup-



3 Ludovico Ferrari, *Saint Dominic Interceding before the Virgin for the Liberation from the Plague*, detail, 1635. Padua, Cassa di Risparmio di Padova e Rovigo

plementing the one "secret" attribute with a veritable catalogue of the bubonic plague's recognized symptoms. One of these, the telltale darkening of the victim's skin, is detectable in the old woman collapsed against a fallen column, the deceased mother and infant in the foreground, and the male cadaver being carried away by two men in the middle ground at right. The young man in the right foreground who feebly slumps over his knees and the aforementioned old woman slung over the toppled column exhibit the symptom of exhaustion, often said to be accompanied by fever and unquenchable thirst. This old woman's face, described by Bellori as "affixed in a pained look," indicates yet another plague symptom, the so-called *facies pestica*, or plague face, distinguished by eyes that are wide open yet unseeing and features that are hardened by terror.<sup>41</sup> Though the bubonic plague's namesake buboes are not visible in the picture, their painful presence can be intuited from the victims' postures. Both the dead mother in the central foreground and the male victim to the far left have raised the right arm away from the body, as if to avoid contact with the inflamed, tumescent, and pus-filled lymph glands in the armpit area. Artists had been using this gesture in religious plague imagery since the Renaissance as a means of discreetly alluding to the presence of buboes. A votive altarpiece by Ludovico Ferrari depicting doctors inspecting a plague victim's armpit is a contemporary example that confirms the association between the raised-arm posture and the disease's clinical symptoms (Fig. 3).<sup>42</sup>



4 Marcantonio Raimondi, engraving after Raphael, *The Plague in Crete (Il Morbetto)*, ca. 1514–15. Middletown, Connecticut, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University

Among Poussin's more sophisticated viewers, the raised-arm posture of the dead mother may have also brought to mind Polycleitus's sculpture of a dying Amazon, a Roman copy of which seems to have served as the painter's source.<sup>43</sup> Recent scholarship has revealed that the allusion to the dying Amazon serves as an affective device, an *exemplum doloris* that renders the tragic history of *The Plague of Ashdod* more vivid.<sup>44</sup> The allusion may have had a second function as well: because all known sculptures of dying Amazons are wounded beside the right breast in the area exposed by their lifted arms, precisely where plague buboes appear, the invocation of the dying-Amazon type simultaneously reinforces the association of the Philistines' malady with the bubonic plague.

Beyond the symptoms of bubonic plague, Poussin provides another identifying feature of the disease: its much-disputed means of propagation. Several figures in the painting pinch their noses or cover their faces in proximity to Ashdod's dead and dying. They are protecting themselves from one of the many mechanisms of contagion recognized by seventeenth-century physicians: the breath of the plague victims (rightly so, as today it is recognized that *Yersinia pestis* occasionally develops into a pulmonary plague transmitted through human sputum).<sup>45</sup> More widely recognized by laymen and physicians alike, however, was the danger of breathing in the vicinity of putrefying corpses, since the foul odors they released were assumed to be the essence of the disease's poison, and of death itself. As Giovanni Baldinucci explained during the Florentine plague of 1630, "the stench of the dead kills the living."<sup>46</sup> Poussin's use of the gesture indicating the presence of dangerous air might have been prompted by any one of a number of plague etiologies, from van Helmont's association of bad smells with an active fermentation that generates disease in the *archeus* to a theory dating back to Lucretius that plague is spread by invisible airborne "seeds" carried in

miasmas expelled by suppurating buboes or stagnant water.<sup>47</sup> This latter theory, it is worth adding parenthetically, propelled Athanasius Kircher to dissect plague victims in 1656 and examine their tissues under a microscope in search of "plague seeds."<sup>48</sup>

Although Poussin's rationale for the gesture may have been based in a recent scientific theory, the gesture itself was a century-old motif borrowed from Raphael's *Morbetto*, a drawing engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi (Fig. 4) depicting the plague recounted in the third book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>49</sup> Raphael's use of the pinched-nose motif likewise suggests the danger of airborne infection, but similarities between the two artists' etiologies end here.<sup>50</sup> In *Il Morbetto*, the coincidence of other adverse signs, including dead livestock, patches of barren earth, a desolate town, and buildings seemingly crumbled by earthquakes, all corroborate the Aristotelian idea of pestilence as but one symptom of nature's universal degeneration and corruption, a cycle initiated in the heavens and permeating all the lower spheres.<sup>51</sup>

It is no cause for marvel that *Il Morbetto's* vision of plague should be so grounded in Aristotle's philosophy since Virgil's *Aeneid*, Raphael's textual source, presents a concept of the disease that is also a legacy of the Lyceum. In the *Aeneid*, the pestilential "wasting of our bodies" (3.137) comes "from a tainted quarter of the sky" (3.138), indicating the epidemic's origin in a decay of the heavens. The plague is accompanied by a plethora of calamities with the same cause ("the piteous ruin of trees and crops. . . . Sirius, too, scorched up the fields with drought; the grass withered, and the sickly crop" [3.139, 141–42])—all indications that the world had entered "the season of death" (3.138).<sup>52</sup> Shared by both Virgil and Raphael, this notion of plague as one of infinite calamities spawned by a great, all-encompassing decay of the cosmos was oppressive and discouraging. No doubt it conditioned the

disillusionment with human remedies that intensified as a result of Counter-Reformational zeal and the dispensation of inefficacious—and sometimes poisonous—medicines by even the most illustrious physicians. The recognition of man's powerlessness is thus an important component of *Il Morbetto's* meaning.

The depiction of terrorized citizens running from their stricken countrymen underlines this theme. It reminds us that in Raphael's era, the governing classes frequently abandoned the plague-ridden cities, relinquishing their public duties to seek refuge at their country estates. All those who could followed the dictum that urges, "[Flee] fast, far, and long!" (in Latin, [*Fuge*] cito, [*vade*] longe, [*rede*] sero), and some justified this choice of self-preservation over charity in light of the prophecy in Ezekial 7: "Those in the city will be killed by plague and famine, but those who flee the city will be saved." Raphael's *Morbetto* made the abandonment of the city (and thus society) acceptable, even heroic, through reference to Aeneas's divinely guided departure from plague-ridden Crete, a departure that led to the foundation of Rome. But if Raphael condoned the responses of fear and flight to epidemic disease, it was not without a conflicting tension: inscribed with Virgil's line about those who "parted from their sweet souls or dragged about sick bodies" (3.140) and pairing the figure of the dead mother and hungry infant with a pile of slaughtered lambs, *Il Morbetto* beckons Renaissance viewers trained to meditate on images of the dead Christ to linger in the poisoned air and look with pity on Crete's plague victims.

Without diminishing Poussin's debt to *Il Morbetto*, it should be noted that *The Plague of Ashdod* omits many of those signs of universal corruption found in Raphael's print.<sup>53</sup> Their absence, I would argue, can be ascribed to a new understanding of plague as a contagious disease caused by a distinct, transmissible pathogen. This theory, which had been slowly gaining credence among physicians, was propounded in a medical treatise presented to Francesco Barberini the year Poussin completed *The Plague of Ashdod*.<sup>54</sup>

Poussin did not cling to the conventional notion of plague as a universal affliction with origins in the stars—and even though he depicts here an instance of plague instigated by heavenly fiat, he resists the notion that all Ashdod's citizens might suffer an identical fate directly at the hands of God.<sup>55</sup> His painting abounds with references to the mechanics of transmission, as noted above. Moreover, the composition itself reads as a visual metaphor of contagion.<sup>56</sup> Extending from one end to the other is a great concatenation of human bodies linked by their reaching, touching, grasping, and leaning, each creating a dangerous possibility of human-to-human contagion. Poussin draws special attention to this physical contact between individuals by designating in several cases the precise instant when that contact occurs. The man in the blue toga is barely touched on his left arm by the man behind him; the turbaned man in the center foreground delicately touches the head of the dead mother's infant; and the man in the yellow tunic entering the scene from the right reaches back to touch his son's shoulder. These instances of two forms meeting across space suggest how the spark of disease jumps from one victim to another, in the most inadvertent and accidental situations and with the most delicate

of touches. They are striking antitheses of the depiction of touch in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, where the spark of divinity travels across the synapse separating the outstretched fingers of God and Adam to transmit a life-giving force. Poussin's image morbidly recasts the meaning of touching flesh from creation to destruction, and his brutal depiction of the disease's pathology reasserts the etymological kinship of "contagion" and "contact" by displaying the violence that can be hidden in the gentlest caress.

Even the implied movements of these touching bodies contribute to the visual metaphor of contagion. At first unaware of the disease's presence, a group of citizens has gathered at the temple to discuss the omen, but as fear sets in, the assembly dissolves into a centrifugal disorder that scatters the men. As the disease's delayed symptoms begin to appear on bodies in the foreground of the picture, the unseen danger takes on the shape of its victims and the growing fear is accompanied by the growing distance between bodies. At this point, Ashdod's citizens are torn between helping their loved ones and fleeing for safety. This internal conflict is reflected in their chaotic and sharply contrasted movements and in the confusing fragmentation of the forms of their bodies by the dappling light. Finally, in the far distance, the plague's desolating effects are full-blown: the city has been abandoned by the able-bodied, and civilized communication is no longer possible. People suffer and die in isolation, joining together only to carry the dead to the graveyard.

Poussin's picture accommodates advanced plague etiologies in other ways as well—particularly in its depiction of the rats scurrying about the city of Ashdod, a detail that has intrigued modern viewers who recognize them as vectors of the plague-causing bacillus *Yersinia pestis*, discovered in 1894.<sup>57</sup> For several decades now, art historians have dismissed the etiological import of this detail by pointing out that the murine plague is mentioned in Vulgate editions of the Bible.<sup>58</sup> However, this fact alone does not prove Poussin's inclusion of the rats was merely an indiscriminate submission to the authority of his textual and pictorial sources.

I would suggest instead that Poussin chose to feature these vermin based on a commonly held association between rats and plague rooted in empirical observation and science. As early as the fourteenth century Europeans had suspected that rats spread the plague from quarantined merchant ships to the port cities.<sup>59</sup> Natural philosophy also furnished a basis for the association, for there had long existed a scientific belief that rats—as well as snakes and similarly loathsome vermin—were born of the miasmas produced by putrefying refuse, stagnant water, or swampy earth, all considered "local causes" of pestilence. This theory, rooted in classical authorities such as Varro and Columella, gained credence in the early modern period through writers as diverse as Andrea Palladio and Saint Camillo de Lellis.<sup>60</sup> A scientific explanation linking rats and pestilence can even be found in Vincenzo Cartari's 1556 *Le imagini de i dei de gli antichi*. The myth that Apollo Smintheus punished the impious with scourges of mice and plague is, according to Cartari, an allegory that represents how

rats and other small animals that come out of the earth are generated by foul airs, since the earth cannot produce



anything beneficial to mankind, unless the rays of the Sun, nullifying every toxic substance, should kill (all the rats) and give the earth the power to produce things favorable to human life.<sup>61</sup>

Poussin did not necessarily adhere to a single etiological theory (certainly few of his learned contemporaries did). Nonetheless, his intelligent investigation of the nature of plague can at the very least be recognized as a modern rejoinder to hoary Aristotelian nosology and a penetrating critique of the representation of disease in Raphael's *Morbetto*. Before questioning the wisdom of these authorities, Poussin must have studied the matter with great care; yet as we have seen in the survey of medical literature above, even a summary exposure to the scientific thought of the age would have sufficed to familiarize Poussin with the hazards of imagining plague and capitulating to strong passions. Thus, it was not ignorance that led Poussin to design a medically accurate image of plague. Nor was it ignorance that spurred him to fashion numerous additional devices that ensured his plague picture would kindle its audience's most painful passions.

#### More Affective Devices

While *The Plague of Ashdod's* nosological allusions held significance for audiences who had faced the danger of bubonic plague, an array of other devices enable it to move audiences transhistorically. The painting's capacity to excite the *affetti* among viewers largely untouched by bubonic plague was demonstrated at the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in the 1670s, for example. Though the alarms of epidemic disease were then in abeyance, Charles Le Brun acclaimed the painting's power to "inspire sadness in the spectator's soul." Le Brun observed that "in representing the contagious disease and the desolation of the Philistines, [Poussin] established the lugubrious character by means of a weak light, a somber palette, and a languor that can be seen in each figure's movement."<sup>62</sup> In other words, he attributed the painting's emotive force to a calibration of sensible qualities such as form and color, a "well-reasoned method" presumed to engender similar psychological responses in any audience. Le Brun's analysis of these pictorial strategies will not be pursued here; instead, attention will be devoted to a third means by which Poussin inspired emotional response: *The Plague of Ashdod's* poetic and narrative elements.

Foremost among this category of impassioning devices is the startling motif in the central foreground, consisting of a hungry infant being torn from the breast of his dead mother by a man who, at the same time, pinches his nose to avoid breathing the pestilential vapors produced by her corpse. Poussin borrowed the motif from Raphael's *Morbetto*. Raphael, in turn, had adapted it from Pliny the Elder's description (*Natural History* 35.98) of a lost painting by Aristeides that depicted a mother who, having been fatally wounded during the siege of her city, pushes her hungry infant away from her breast, fearing that her milk is tainted with blood that will poison the child.<sup>63</sup> In reviving this ancient motif and adapting it from the context of war to that of plague, both Raphael and Poussin must have wished to tap into the renowned poignancy of the image that earned Aristeides the title of "the first among all painters to paint the soul, and

[give] expression to the affections of man . . . and also the emotions."<sup>64</sup>

Surely both artists also recognized that Aristeides' motif accrued even greater emotive force through its resemblance to an iconic focus of Christian devotion, the Madonna Lactans. For centuries, images of the Madonna with her suckling infant had assured Christians not only of Mary's humble and loving disposition but also of her essential bond with Christ, guaranteeing the suasion of her intercessional prayers at the Final Judgment. This popular cultic type of the Madonna Lactans was the primary referent for early modern Catholic audiences confronted with a scene of breast-feeding. This is true even when breast-feeding occurs in the context of plague, since Italian communities sometimes banded under images of the Madonna Lactans to seek protection from pestilence.<sup>65</sup> But in the same instant that the viewer would have assimilated the horrific motif in Raphael's and Poussin's plague pictures with this iconic wellspring of pious sentiment, the chiasmic oppositions between them would have elicited a charged response. For example, if the Madonna Lactans invites thoughts about the vital nourishment provided by Mary's milk and her role as co-Redemptrix in man's salvation, such comforting concepts only intensify the ghastriness of a similar motif involving a dead woman whose toxic milk kills her own children and whose corpse spreads plague throughout a city.

Examples of religious art demonstrate that even when the specific theme of lactation is not present, the dead mother and child motif still triggers comparisons with its Christian antipode. The dramatic tension of this antithesis takes center stage in Giovanni Battista Gaulli's *Madonna and Child with Saints Roch and Anthony*, an altarpiece made for the Roman church of S. Rocco shortly after the plague of 1656 (Fig. 5).<sup>66</sup> Here, Gaulli adapted the motif of the dead mother with her infant from Poussin's and Raphael's plague images and incorporated it into a devotional image of the Madonna and Child hearing the prayers of two plague saints. One of these saints, Roch, gestures toward the dead boy below as he pleads with the Christ Child above—as if to designate the two mortals as blameless images of their divine counterparts and to give greater rhetorical force to his prayers for compassion.<sup>67</sup> The motif's emotive power, in this case, is addressed not to the human spectator but to Heaven, in the hope that pathetic images of plague's carnage will move God to have mercy on the victims (many of whom died without the benefit of the sacraments). It performs the same rhetorical function as the plea pronounced by the doge in a vow to the Virgin Mary during the plague of 1630: "Look at this afflicted people lying prostrate at your feet, the target of the scourge of Divine Justice. . . . See how our faces contorted by discomfort, livid from the disease, consumed by afflictions, reveal the bones underneath the emaciated flesh."<sup>68</sup>

In *Il Morbetto*, where the mother and child motif is applied to a purely secular subject, Raphael discovered other ways to heighten the emotional charge of Aristeides' combination of such primordial signifiers as mother, child, nourishment, and death. His strategy was to add a purely anecdotal element, the figure of a man who intervenes to save the child's life, jeopardizing his own health by coming so close to the pestilential corpse of the mother. This additional figure—which Poussin chose to retain—amplifies the range and density of emo-



5 Giovanni Battista Gaulli, called il Baciccio, *Madonna and Child with Saints Roch and Anthony*, 1663–66. Rome, church of S. Rocco, sacristy (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

tional response to the motif, especially if the viewer identifies the man as the child's father. Poussin's contribution to the motif was to position on the mother's other side the stone-cold, grayish corpse of an infant that could be the living child's twin brother; this piteous victim, along with a host of other plague victims littering the foreground, gives shape to the fears of the living who must negotiate this minefield of contagion.

For such poetic and narrative innovations, Poussin may have drawn inspiration—as well as endorsement—from Aris-

totle's theory of tragic poetry. Evidence of Poussin's familiarity with this theory is found in his "Observations on Painting," notes that he compiled sometime after 1627 for a never-completed book. These notes include citations from two popular commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics*: Torquato Tasso's *Discorsi dell'arte poetica ed in particolare sopra il poema eroico* (1567–70) and Lodovico Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* (1570), which Poussin invokes by name.<sup>69</sup> Having consulted these commentaries, Poussin would have found that Raphael's addition of the paternal figure to Aris-

teides' ancient motif accords with Aristotle's teaching that the incidents most likely to inspire dread or compassion are those that pervert a normally intimate and benevolent relationship. By this Aristotle meant those situations when fate sets a "brother . . . to slay his brother, a son . . . to slay his father, a mother . . . to slay her son."<sup>70</sup> Raphael and Poussin created similar situations with their handling of the expanded motif: a mother's milk poisons her child, a child's love for his mother imperils his life, a father snatches his child and abandons its mother, and his rescue of that child may be his own deathblow. As Aristotle explained, the motif's violence or pain is all the more shocking because it counters conventional associations of loyalty, safety, and love with the concept of family; as Castelvetro notes, "injuries done by one friend to another are the most fear-inspiring of all . . . more piteous than [an injury] inflicted by an enemy or stranger."<sup>71</sup>

In representing the dead mother with attributes of feminine beauty, Poussin exploited another device for magnifying an image's affective power: the admixture of horror and beauty that provokes simultaneous sensations of pain and delight.<sup>72</sup> Recent scholarship has shown how Poussin used this rhetorical trope to enhance the impact of his painting of *The Massacre of the Innocents* (now in Chantilly).<sup>73</sup> Poussin again combined horror and beauty in *The Plague of Ashdod*, where the most riveting effects are achieved in the depiction of a young mother's breasts, exposed in the middle of the town square amid the chaos of a terrified city and situated in the central foreground of the viewer's perspective.

Protruding from the dead woman's supine silhouette, these swelling mounds are still turgid with milk, but the pestilential venom welling within them has given the flesh a repulsive, gangrenous tinge. Though they are full of the plague's poison, their bountiful feminine form nevertheless remains enticing to her infant—and perhaps as well to the viewer, whose gaze is funneled here by the compositional structure. Whatever echo of erotic charge they retain is not only in defiance of death, it is also in the service of death, since the plague-ridden corpse of this daughter of Eve can kill from a distance with its miasmatic stench: the dead mother's breasts are thus simultaneous emblems of pleasure and disgust, nourishment and disease, *eros* and *thanatos*. As noted by Elizabeth Cropper, Poussin "went beyond Raphael" in his sensationalistic portrayal of this detail; she suggests he may even have gone too far, challenging the "limits of expression" as he trespassed decorum.<sup>74</sup>

Occasionally, viewers have objected to this mingling of horror and beauty in *The Plague of Ashdod*. However, Poussin must have employed the device to produce the delight (*hēdonē*) that Aristotle said that audiences find "in looking at the most proficient images of things which in themselves we see with pain."<sup>75</sup> As Castelvetro explained, "When actually seen, animals like snakes and toads and things like carrion excite in us [only feelings of] displeasure and abhorrence; yet a likeness of them will give us the more pleasure the more skillfully it is executed and consequently the more faithfully it reproduces the original."<sup>76</sup> It can even be deduced from Castelvetro's statement that repellent and painful subjects are the ultimate test of a painter's skill, since the pleasure they produce increases according to the verisimilitude of the representation.

### Tragic Theater and Its Spectator

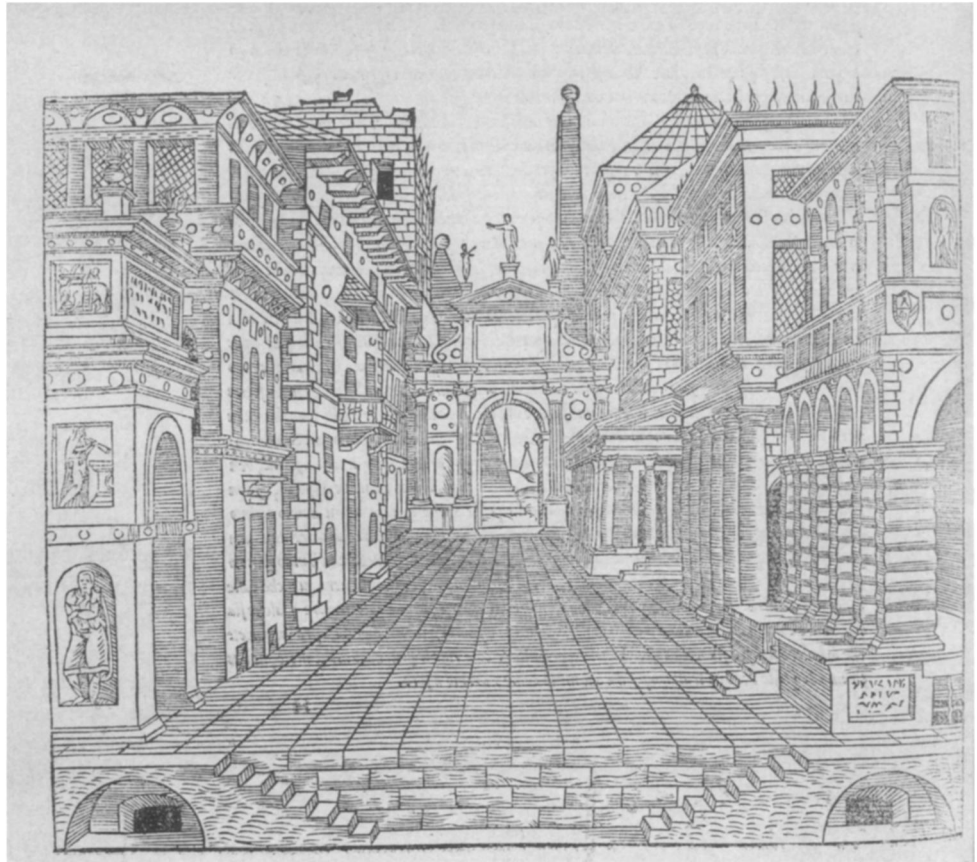
If mimetic pleasure was his goal, Poussin needed to remind the viewer that he is looking at an image of painful things, and not the painful things themselves. Having explored the imagery that brings the spectator into close rapport with the plague victims and their pain, we shall now consider how Poussin—who is known to have used a "toy theater" as part of his working process—established fictive distance between the spectator and the image to make the spectator pleasurable aware that all this suffering is staged.<sup>77</sup>

In both tragic theater and *The Plague of Ashdod*, fictive distance is achieved through artful spectacle, which entails the elaboration of certain visual aspects. Because it converts mere seeing into pleasurable sensation, artful spectacle enables the spectator to distinguish his own ontological experience from that of the tragic characters, who feel only pain. Even Aristotle, who thought perfect tragedy resided in plot alone, begrudgingly acknowledged that the *mise-en-scène* provides the spectator with a pleasurable experience of amazement while enhancing reactions of terror and sorrowful compassion to the events onstage.<sup>78</sup> Castelvetro, in contrast, encourages the use of artful spectacle; in his view, staging, scenery, and costumes are necessary for the realization of the tragedy's full effect. Since Poussin was working in a purely visual medium, he must have welcomed Castelvetro's assertions that "spectacle exerts very great powers of attraction on the soul" and that "the more horrible the suffering represented by the spectacle the stronger the pity and fear it will inspire. . . . And so the spectacle is not to be spurned [just] because it is the work of an art other than that of poetry."<sup>79</sup>

One direct link between *The Plague of Ashdod*'s artful spectacle and the *mise-en-scène* of tragic theater is the perspectival cityscape setting. Almost entirely composed of man-made elements rigorously controlled by one-point perspective, the setting creates a palpable impression of artifice. Contributing to this impression is the setting's resemblance to a design for a tragic stage that Sebastiano Serlio illustrated in his 1551 *Architettura* and explained in terms of Aristotle's principles of tragedy (Fig. 6).<sup>80</sup> By taking Serlio's design as the conceptual model for his cityscape, Poussin not only adapted *The Plague of Ashdod* to the standardized visual language of the stage, he also declared its special kinship with the genre of tragedy. Differences between the Serlian design and Poussin's backdrop can perhaps be accounted for by the influence of a popular sixteenth-century woodcut, *The Massacre under the Triumvirate* (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris). Here, too, the model is not a real city but an artificial urban environment—one whose perfect perspectival order contrasts with the chaos of cadavers littering the grand thoroughfare.<sup>81</sup>

Though scholars recognize Poussin's familiarity with Aristotelian poetics as well as the relation of Serlio's tragic stage to *The Plague of Ashdod*, no attempt has been made to read the painting in terms of the tragic theater it so plainly invokes. Yet I would argue that the model of tragic plot underlies the order of the pictorial composition, and that tragic plot's characteristic structure reinforces the effect of fictive distance.<sup>82</sup>

Visual equivalents to each of the three states of human action that comprise Aristotle's perfect tragic plot can be



6 Sebastiano Serlio, setting for the tragic scene, from Serlio, *Regole generali di Architettura*, Venice, 1551, bk. 2, fol. 29v. London, Courtauld Institute of Art

discerned in the painting. The first state, reversal (*rivolgimento* in Castelvetro), is defined by Aristotle as “a change of actions to their opposite” and clarified by Castelvetro as “a transition from happiness to misery or from misery to happiness.”<sup>83</sup> In the painting, this first state can be associated with the evocation of a rich, well-governed city of architectural marvels, whose military prowess has culminated in the deposit of the spoliated ark in their temple. The turn of fortune that lies ahead for the inhabitants is heralded by the shattered icon in the temple and the toppled column in the foreground: these details forecast the violent cataclysm that will shatter their pride and topple them from the heights of civilization to the depths of misery. The successive state of recognition (*riconoscenza* in Castelvetro), which Aristotle describes as the “change from ignorance to knowledge,” corresponds with the action depicted in the middle ground of Poussin’s painting. Here, citizens and priests assemble near a temple; they seem to question what superior force has destroyed their idol and then realize that their desecration of the Ark has subjected them to the wrath of the Jews’ God.<sup>84</sup> The final state in Aristotle’s formula is suffering (*passione* in Castelvetro), which is “destructive or painful action, e.g. deaths in full view, agonies, woundings, etc.”<sup>85</sup> No explanation is required here: Poussin’s work conveys tragic suffering with imagery of the dead and the dying and their terrified families.

Aristotle emphasized the structure of tragic plot because he believed that its dramatic perfection heightened the audience’s reactions of pity and terror—the two emotions he designated as most proper to tragedy. Poussin may have pursued the pictorial equivalent of a tragic plot for the same

reason. Indeed, critics have always recognized that pity and terror are essential to *The Plague of Ashdod*’s artistic achievement, and the painting’s numerous affective devices demonstrate how ardently Poussin cultivated these responses.<sup>86</sup> This is patent, for example, in the motif of the infant trying to nurse at his dead mother’s breast, or the old woman collapsed against the column, abandoned to her fate because of her visible plague symptoms. Other figures in the painting evince rather than provoke these emotions: the man in the blue toga in the left foreground turns from a fallen companion as his face blanches with fear, while in the center an alarmed mother pulls her crying child out of harm’s way.

Pity and fear, both aroused by and depicted in Poussin’s *Plague of Ashdod*, are among the elements that attest to the painting’s debt to Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. I have devoted much attention to this connection because here lies the answer to the initial problem of why Poussin designed his painting to excite in the spectator emotional states that the medical community considered hazardous, especially in times of plague.

#### Tragedy as Medicine

The passions of pity and fear are spoken of frequently in the *Poetics*, yet nowhere more famously than in the passage where Aristotle offers something of a definition of tragedy, for which Castelvetro proposes this paraphrase:

Tragedy is the imitation of a magnificent and complete action having magnitude, [which imitation is produced] by each of the species of performers who imitate [the action] separately in the separate parts [of the tragedy] by



means of language that has been made pleasurable, and not by reciting a narrative. In addition to that, through pity and fear it effects the purgation of such emotions.<sup>87</sup>

In this passage, the utility of these painful sentiments, and of tragedy itself, hinges on their role in the purging (or catharsis, as Aristotle calls it) of those same emotions from the viewer's soul.<sup>88</sup> Castelvetro referred to the theory of tragic catharsis throughout his commentary and pointed out to the reader that the doctrine of purgation was of such supreme importance that for its sake Aristotle ventured to contradict Plato, his master.<sup>89</sup>

Poussin's familiarity with Castelvetro's commentary on the *Poetics* makes the Aristotelian notion of tragic catharsis especially pertinent, since this commentary is distinguished by its lengthy excursus on the purgation of the viewer's soul by means of the pity and fear aroused by a tragic performance.<sup>90</sup> Castelvetro's commentary may even have inspired Poussin's decision to make the plague the subject of his tragedy. In one passage, Castelvetro uses an analogy with the plague to explain how catharsis functions as a kind of homeopathic cure for excessive passions:

... tragedy, which . . . allows for us to see and hear [pitiful and terrifying events] far more frequently than we otherwise might see and hear them, is the means by which our compassion and fear are diminished, and thus it is to our benefit that we experience these passions in so many diverse situations [as theater makes possible]. The most striking proof of this is in [periods of] pestilential epidemics, at the beginning of which, when three or four people have died, we are greatly moved by compassion and fear, but then once we have witnessed hundreds and then thousands die, these reactions of compassion and fear cease.<sup>91</sup>

Though Castelvetro was primarily concerned with the moral benefits of tragic catharsis, his use of medical terms like "purgation" and "expulsion" to describe its effects, his analogy with plague, and his reference to catharsis as "very bitter medicine" leading to the soul's health all acknowledge the psychosomatic aspects of tragic catharsis.<sup>92</sup> Reinforcing this therapeutic, medicinal interpretation is Castelvetro's use of metaphors of disease and cure in recounting Aristotle's reversal of the Platonic position on tragedy. In Castelvetro's words, Plato named tragedy among the arts that "corrupt good customs" since "tragic characters might harm citizens and cause their good habits to deteriorate by making them vile, cowardly, and compassionate." Castelvetro uses a similar vocabulary of medical terms to express Aristotle's counterargument: "By frequently exposing men to scenes of a kind to excite their pity, fear, and pusillanimity, [tragedy] will fortify them against these weaknesses. . . . with the emotions of pity and fear as a means, tragedy purges and expels those very emotions from the hearts of men."<sup>93</sup> The medical interpretation Castelvetro gave to the doctrine of catharsis was, I believe, Poussin's primary motive for emulating the tragic form in his plague painting: Poussin wished to forge with his paints a visual prophylactic against the harmful effects of the emo-

tions, particularly the terror and pity his contemporaries were experiencing as a result of the plague in Italy.<sup>94</sup>

Castelvetro's commentary on the *Poetics* is not the only source that could have informed Poussin's medical understanding of catharsis. In Aristotle's other writings and in seventeenth-century medicine, catharsis was understood as a therapeutic means of ridding both mind and body of dangerous substances. Poussin probably acquired a firsthand understanding of the cathartic therapies used by physicians to treat plague fever and a host of other maladies when Potier prescribed purgative treatments for his syphilis in 1629; if Poussin did not actually undergo this therapy, Cassiano, acting as an intermediary, must have at least recommended them to Poussin.<sup>95</sup>

Familiar with catharsis in terms of both medicine and poetry, Poussin would likely have understood tragic catharsis as a homeopathic cleansing in which artificial emotions excited by the tragedy are expelled because their quantity, intensity, and unassimilable quality exceed the body's tolerance. With this discharge—which occurs either as a humoral emission (tears) or a thermal one (horripilation, shivering)—preexisting accruals of emotions are also eliminated. As a result of tragic catharsis the soul and the bodily humors return to a state of equilibrium and the altered individual is reconstituted. Poussin must have wondered whether similar cathartic effects could result from the "artificial" terror and pity generated by a painted tragedy, and he may have even hoped *The Plague of Ashdod* would have practical applications for learned medicine—including protection from plague. As long as his contemporaries were combating pestilence with such various means as astrological magic, amulets of snake venom and toad skins, holy water, cedar incense, printed prayers worn on the body, rose vinegar, sexual abstinence, and gemstones carved with pictures, there was certainly room for another novel form of cure.

Among the more traditional remedies for plague fever were the various organic purgatives, including phlebotomy (Fig. 7), diaphoretics, diuretics, emetics, and laxatives.<sup>96</sup> However, in this century, as physicians began to value experience more than theory, they recognized that the more violent purgatives such as phlebotomy and emetics had the undesirable effect of weakening the patient and sealing his demise, either through physical trauma or through depletion of nutritive substances and "vital spirits."<sup>97</sup> Health boards in many Italian cities intervened to protect people from these perilous remedies during the plague of 1630, posting advertisements that warned patients, doctors, and barbers that phlebotomy accompanied by purgation of the stomach caused certain death.<sup>98</sup>

Tragic catharsis presented an attractive alternative to more traumatic purgative therapies, since it was mild as well as pleasurable.<sup>99</sup> Doubly pleasurable, we might say, since according to Aristotle pleasure proceeds both from the viewing of a mimetic representation and from the cessation of discomfort following the purgation of painful thermohumoral excesses (*Politics* 8.7, 1341b32).<sup>100</sup> Moreover, many physicians regarded pleasurable sensations themselves as salutary experiences: Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.15, 1154b11) had classified mimetic pleasure as a medicament given its capacity to comfort those suffering from chronic or excessive pain,

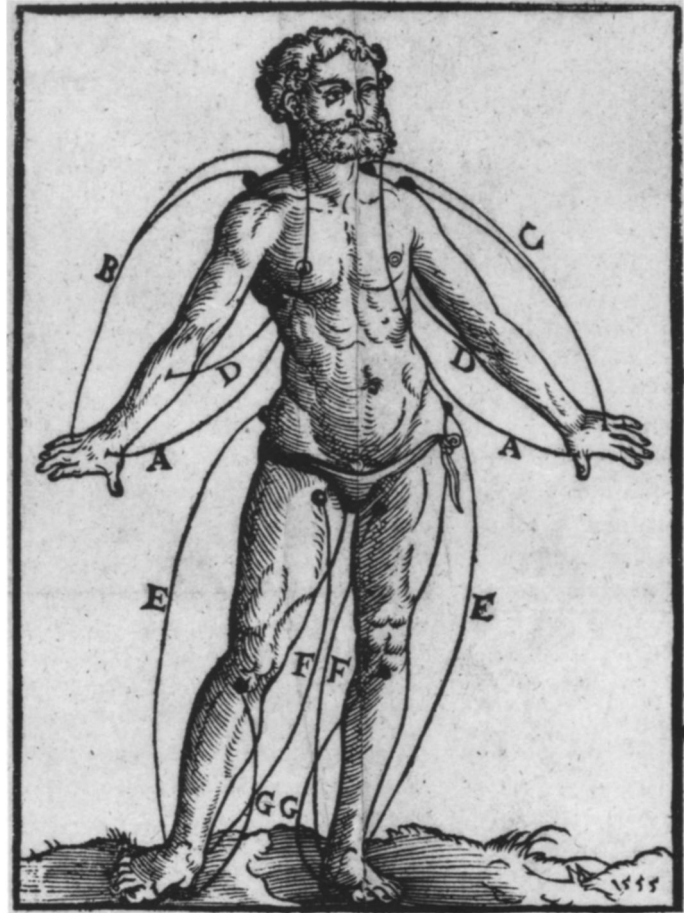
and Thomas Wright in the early seventeenth century declared moderate pleasure good for body and mind.<sup>101</sup>

In light of the assignment of salutary benefits to moderate pleasure, the suggestion made earlier that Poussin designed *The Plague of Ashdod* to provide pleasure amid the painful responses of empathy takes on new significance. From a medical perspective, the goal of pleasure, instead of being opposed to the utility of catharsis, is assimilated to it.<sup>102</sup> Likewise, the hedonistic purpose sometimes attributed to Poussin's painted tragedy only reinforces the more radical proposition that *The Plague of Ashdod* was created as a cathartic medicine; both means of enjoying the painting theoretically entailed healthful effects.<sup>103</sup>

In evaluating the arguments presented so far, we ought first to remember that Rome in these years was wracked by fear. Giacinto Gigli's diary records that Romans in 1630 were bombarded with news of the "miserable events and the devastation of cities by the plague, with infinite hundreds or thousands of people dying every day."<sup>104</sup> The Romans' preoccupation with that calamity is reflected by a curious detail in Poussin's painting, where three men standing in the upper portico of a palace witness the spectacle of horror below. Though their distance from the mayhem suggests that they are safe from the contagion, they are not protected from the plague's psychological effects. The bald man who leans forward transfixed by the sight, the man dressed in white who lets his head fall in a sign of compassion, and the man dressed in green who recoils, covering his face in horror—all of them show signs of emotional distress and fixation on the plague's *idea terrifica*, and according to seventeenth-century medical science, this places them in grave danger. The situation of these men in the palace parallels the predicament of the Romans during the plague of 1630. With this audience in mind, Poussin's painting redirects their feelings of fear and pity onto a work of art structured according to the poetics of tragedy, so that ensuing tragic catharsis can provide an artificial—and therefore harmless—outlet for these emotions. The purgation of the passions, which are a source of physiological disorders, would have thus provided the viewer with wholesome pleasure, as well as a medically sound remedy for psychosomatic disease.

#### A Precedent in Artful Words

There do not appear to be any clear precedents for Poussin's use of visual art as a curative therapy according to a medico-scientific rationale.<sup>105</sup> An important tradition of using artful words in this sense, however, one that recalls Lucretius's description of poetry as the honey that sweetens the physician's cup of bitter medicine, was well established.<sup>106</sup> Certainly, the tradition was vivid in the late sixteenth century, when Antonio Minturno declared that "a physician will not have greater capacity to expel with poisonous medicine the fiery poison of an illness which afflicts the body, than the tragic poet will to purge the mind of mighty perturbations with the force of the passions charmingly expressed in verse," when George Puttenham observed that the poet ought to "play also the Physician and not only by applying a medicine to the ordinary sickness of mankind, but by making the very grief of itself cure of the disease," and when Florentine poets and playwrights convened as the *Accademia degli Alterati* to



7 Michael Ostendorfer, phlebotomy chart for the treatment of plague, 1555. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum

celebrate the healing power of the medically "alterative" and morally cleansing arts.<sup>107</sup>

This tradition of healing words is found in a literary masterpiece at the very root of the idea of plague in the European imagination: Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, whose stories are presented as a fortification against disease. In the book's introduction, Boccaccio recounts the conditions under which the stories were first told, namely, the devastation wreaked by the plague of 1348. One of the book's protagonists, Pampinea, complains during the plague of her growing melancholy, the symptoms of which, we might note, are both psychological and somatic:

[W]e hear [no]thing but "So-and-so is dead," and "So-and-so is dying"; and if there were anyone left to mourn, we should hear nothing but piteous laments everywhere. I do not know if what happens to me also happens to you in your homes, but when I go home I find no one there except my maid, and I become so afraid that my hair stands on end, and whenever I go or sit in my house, I seem to see the shadows of those who have passed away, not with the faces that I remember, but with horrible expressions that terrify me.<sup>108</sup>

With this speech, Pampinea motivated some noblewomen and their male chaperones to leave Florence and seek diversion in the countryside in order "to protect our health"—if

not from the plague itself, then at least from the melancholy that predisposes the body to plague. After a fortnight of storytelling in the country, the brigade of friends returns to Florence disburdened of their melancholy. The lack of any reference to plague in the account of their reentry may be taken as demonstration of their acquired immunity, as well as the reader's, to painful thoughts and images.<sup>109</sup> The reader has in fact already been instructed on the relation between health and such healthful diversions of the imagination. In the preface, the author warns of the "serious pain" of melancholy that strikes women who do not have "ways of alleviating or forgetting" heavy thoughts, and even testifies to his own salvation from premature death and "more pain than was necessary" thanks to the "pleasing conversation and consolation of a friend," as if to impress the reader with the salutary benefits to be reaped from the pleasant distraction of artful discourse.<sup>110</sup>

It may be debated whether Boccaccio was earnest in presenting his idle tales as a remedy for maladies like plague and melancholy, but the fact remains that in proposing this usage, he stood on a solid medical tradition. Though Hippocratic physicians later fashioned the medical profession as a "mute art," Plato himself had given testimony of the efficacy of verbal therapies, first in *Phaedrus*, where both rhetoric and medicine are called curative arts (the first correcting imbalances in the soul, the second in the body), and more fully in *Charmides*. In this dialogue, Socrates poses as a physician with a powerful herb that will cure any headache, but which he refuses to administer unless his patient first submits to a psychological cure consisting of beautiful speeches or "fair words [*logoi kaloi*]." Despite his specious pretext, Socrates (and Plato, too) becomes quite serious when he explains how this initial verbal charm (*epōidas*) restores the soul's temperance (*sōphrosynē*), which is the beginning point of any medicinal therapy, whether directed toward the mind or the body.<sup>111</sup> Plato attributes words' healing power to their effects on the soul, and he laments that "it is the great error of our day that in the treatment of the human body, physicians separate the soul from the body."<sup>112</sup> This ancient tenet that doctors ought to begin every medical regimen by winning the patient over with pleasing, reassuring words survived well into the seventeenth century, and we miss the point of Boccaccio's prolegomenon to the *novelle* if we do not situate his references to disease and health within this tradition of verbal medicine.<sup>113</sup>

The *novelle* themselves are thus individual instances of the healing words. To demonstrate that they would have been seen in this light even centuries later, we might compare the activities of Boccaccio's brigade to the advice given in the late sixteenth century by the French physician Ambroise Paré for avoiding the plague: "It is important to remain in good spirits, in the good company of just a few friends, and to listen sometimes to songs and musical instruments, and occasionally to read or listen to some pleasant reading."<sup>114</sup> Certainly the jocular stories of *The Decameron* can be reconciled with Paré's advice, but even those "piteous stor[ies] of tragic events" told on the fourth day assist in attaining the soul's healthy tranquillity, as Fiammetta explains to the rest of the brigade:

Today our king has given us a sad topic for discussion, thinking that since we have come here to enjoy ourselves, we might as well tell stories about the sorrows of others which cannot be told without arousing the pity of those who tell them as well as those who listen to them. Perhaps he did this in order to temper somewhat the happiness we have enjoyed during the past few days.<sup>115</sup>

Not only did these sad tales distract the brigade from their own sadness, but they also had a tempering effect on the soul, salubriously moderating the excessive glibness produced by the other stories to achieve a psychological well-being akin to Platonic *sōphrosynē*.

Boccaccio offers a different explanation for his introductory relation of "the unhappy memory of the plague," but it, too, plays a part in a program of verbal therapy:

This horrible beginning will be like the ascent of a steep and rough mountainside, beyond which there lies a most beautiful and delightful plain, which seems more pleasurable to the climbers in proportion to the difficulty of their climb and their descent. And just as pain is the extreme limit of pleasure, so misery ends by unanticipated happiness.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage, the author's gently encouraging tone recalls the "bedside manner" of a doctor who must convince his patient to submit to an initially painful cure. Indeed, even the diversity of *The Decameron's* narrative styles and tones provokes comparison with an apothecary's assortment of medicinals, to be used alone or in admixtures to obtain a variety of effects.

The comparison is not so fantastic as it might at first seem, since doctors elaborated their remedies from a variety of both drugs and words, as determined by the patient's condition. In the case of melancholy, for instance, Robert Burton prescribed a surprising assortment of verbal cures, including the "feigned lie, strange news, witty device, and artificial news."<sup>117</sup> While kind and soothing words (Plutarch's *sermo benignus*) were thought to suffice for milder cases of grief or pain, it was recognized that serious cases often required an equally potent verbal cure.<sup>118</sup> In these more desperate situations, according to Burton, "it will not be amiss . . . *clavum clavo peltare* [1 Cor. 10:11], 'to drive out one passion with another, or by some contrary passion', as they do bleeding at nose by letting blood in the arm, to expel one fear with another, one grief with another."<sup>119</sup>

This array of verbal treatments in current use by physicians suggests that while *The Decameron* and *The Plague of Ashdod* may both have had medical applications, they represent different types of cures. The painful imagery by which Poussin's *Plague of Ashdod* incites tragic catharsis associates it with the strong verbal remedies and homeopathic medicines that force a discharge. Boccaccio's *Decameron* parallels the mild verbal cures that protect against pathogenic ideas by entertaining the imagination. This gentle therapy of *The Decameron*, closer to the Platonic verbal charm than to Aristotle's tragic catharsis, has a parallel in another work of Poussin, *The Empire of Flora* (Fig. 8).





8 Poussin, *The Empire of Flora*, 1631. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen (photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

### ***The Empire of Flora*—Gentle Visual Medicine**

Also purchased by Valguarnera during his visit to Poussin's studio in 1631, *The Empire of Flora* was completed just a few months after Poussin's *Plague of Ashdod*, with Rome's gates still closed against the spreading plague.<sup>120</sup> These two paintings, linked by an overlapping chronology, similar measurements, and compositional analogies, may in fact have been intended as pendants.<sup>121</sup> Given these circumstances, it is worth considering whether both paintings were experiments in visual medicine.

Another reason for questioning *The Empire of Flora's* relevance to epidemic disease stems from a possible allusion to plague within the painting. On the sculpted altar front just behind the garden herm, a female figure on the far right flees while raising her arm. This figure's stance is similar to the antique sculpture of a female Niobid fatally wounded by Apollo's arrow that formed part of a monumental sculpture group at the Villa Medici depicting the Slaughter of the Niobids. Surely Poussin had seen these statues himself. They are the source of figural postures in his other paintings, and they were a popular artistic subject in Rome at that time, having inspired Andrea Camassei's treatment of the theme, as well as François Perrier's imaginative reconstruction of the sculpture group (Fig. 9).<sup>122</sup>

Humanist culture had long regarded the subject of the Slaughter of the Niobids as an allegory of epidemic disease, perhaps because Apollo's arrows, the instrument by which the god's vengeance was wreaked on Niobe's children, carried plague to earth in Homer's *Iliad* (1.49–52). In the sixteenth century, Cartari linked this allegorical interpretation given to the arrows with the natural cause of plague.<sup>123</sup> Girolamo Fracastoro, in his poem "Syphilis, sive morbus gallicus," associates the Slaughter of the Niobids with Europe's newest plague: syphilis.<sup>124</sup> But the subject could have positive connotations as well, recalling the Romans' success in warding off Apollo's plagues: a celebrated sculpture group of the Slaughter of the Niobids decorated the temple built in fulfillment of a vow made to Apollo Medicus during the Roman plague of 433 BCE and it was thought that offerings made at this temple preserved the city from danger.<sup>125</sup>

Except for this subtle detail, however, *The Empire of Flora* avoids references to contemporary troubles. Instead, it offers an escape into fiction, arraying amorous and pining youths of classical mythology who were transformed into flowers at the moment of their death. Though removed from their proper narrative context, these protagonists retain attributes that identify each figure with a myth; in this sense, they evoke a constellation of love stories, like a table of contents for Ovid's





9 François Perrier, imaginary reconstruction of the slaughter of the Niobids at the Villa Medici, Rome, from Perrier, *Segmenta*, Rome, 1638, fol. 99. London, the Warburg Institute

*Metamorphoses* come to life. For the viewer who takes the cue to recount the fables, the assembly in Flora's garden serves as a mnemonic device for enacting a retreat into the literary imagination similar to the kind staged in Boccaccio's *Decameron*—particularly on that fourth day when the brigade in Pampinea's garden recounted tales of lovers torn apart by violent deaths.

We have already considered the parallel between the function of imaginary stories in *The Decameron* and the physician's gentle remedy of tempering "fair words." With this in mind, I suggest that Poussin designed *The Empire of Flora* to instigate a metamorphosis from sickness to health in the viewer, who attains in this mythic realm the healthful peace of mind that rendered Boccaccio's brigade impervious to the world's troubles on their return to Florence. A similar purpose may have underlain a number of Poussin's works. On learning that Paul Fréart de Chantelou was suffering because of a friend's death, Poussin evinced his disappointment that his art had failed to protect Chantelou from this trauma: "I would be assured that [my paintings] touched you more deeply if you . . . could see the loss of your friends without such great emotion."<sup>126</sup> This comment indicates Poussin's desire to move people with his art in order to immunize them against the pain experienced in life.

The garden settings common to both Boccaccio's and Poussin's works reinforce the healthful effects of the fictive tales that unfold within their confines. They delight and vivify visitors with salutary fragrances of flowers and trees and with fresh air untainted by plague miasmas; they also calm visitors' souls with a peace established by Pampinea's command that the servants "bring us back nothing but pleasant news" and by Flora's insulating hedges, grove, and pergola.<sup>127</sup> In a broader sense, both gardens provide refuge from worry, disease, and the *ideae terrificae* of a plague-ridden world.

A significantly placed detail supports the theory that Poussin's garden of fables served as a place for psychosomatic healing: the figure of Phoebus Apollo reigning above Flora's realm as the life-giving sun. Myth makes Apollo preside over

the arts of poetry and medicine as well as plague, but the garden setting of *The Empire of Flora* neutralizes this last, terrible power of the god. The poetic and medical arts—not disease—flourish in gardens: their cool shade and sacred laurel trees give shelter to Apollo's inspirational Muses, and their plants furnish powerful pharmaceutical simples to combat disease.<sup>128</sup>

Most modern viewers overlook the medicinal plants in Poussin's painting though they are in plain sight. The fragrant flowers (including roses, violets, hyacinths, and narcissus) served antipestilential functions, since their scent was thought to purify the air of deadly miasmas.<sup>129</sup> Thus, in a plague treatise from 1630, the physician Marcantonio Ciappi urged readers to fill their houses with the fragrance of roses, myrtle, and violets, thereby repelling airborne causes of pestilence.<sup>130</sup> This use of floral perfumes to protect against plague explains why, for example, the motif of strewing roses in the air was used to symbolize the extinction of pestilence in seventeenth-century religious imagery.<sup>131</sup> In Poussin's painting, Flora's gesture with the roses recalls this antipestilential motif involving an herbal prophylactic. Even the putto in the right foreground pulls to his nose would have been recognized as plague medicine: violets and roses were among the crops grown by the pharmacy of Rome's Hospital of Santo Spirito to provide ingredients for many important drugs.<sup>132</sup>

Giovanni Battista Ferrari's horticultural treatise *Flora seu de florum*, 1633, may have had the same therapeutic application as Poussin's *Empire of Flora*, which it follows by only a few years. The book, dedicated to Francesco Barberini and illustrating many of the species grown in the Barberini gardens, hardly mentions the medicinal properties of the plants it features—patently rejecting the model of the traditional herbal.<sup>133</sup> It might seem counterintuitive to argue for a salutary purpose in Ferrari's horticultural manual, since instead of serving the pharmacist, this exploration of the flower garden's delights appeals to the virtuoso. Among these delights is storytelling, of which Ferrari provides examples by

recounting tales of fantastic metamorphoses of humans into flora and fauna. As we have seen already with regard to *The Empire of Flora*, these myths complement medical practice by furnishing the “fair words” without which the pharmaceutical power of “the leaf would be of no avail” (Plato, *Charmides* 157a).<sup>134</sup> In other words, though Ferrari’s horticultural focus shifted from the simpler’s field to the pleasure garden, the medicinal application of flowers remains relevant. Ferrari’s tales of metamorphosis sublimate this curing power into a verbal medicine that improves the soul in preparation for the pharmaceutical medicine that will be given to the body. In a time when disease was thought to affect the life of the mind as much as the body, Poussin and Ferrari married the power of the physician’s pharmaceutical simples with the delight provided by the beauty of flowers and the imaginary tales they inspired.

### Self-Medication for the Melancholic Artist

Thus far, we have proposed that two of Poussin’s paintings, both made in the course of a plague, were intended to render their viewers calmer, healthier, and less vulnerable to the dangerous effects of their own passions. But some of the medical issues broached here suggest that the paintings had consequences for their maker’s health, too. As is well known from such classic studies as Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl’s *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964), artists as a group were long considered highly susceptible to emotional disturbances and their pathogenic effects, including pestilential fever. The precept can be traced back to the Peripatetic “Problem XXX.i” once attributed to Aristotle, which seeks to answer the question, “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?”<sup>135</sup>

Poussin himself complained of the physiological symptoms of melancholy in a letter of March 1, 1665, to his friend Roland Fréart de Chantelou, explaining that he would have liked to expatiate on his theories of paintings “but nowadays when I overheat the front of my head by great concentration, it makes me ill.”<sup>136</sup> It seems that Poussin attributes this malady to his congenital artistic and speculative genius, for almost in the next breath he writes that “the star of Saturn is above our head,” in reference to the notion of the stellar origin of the melancholic temperament. As early as 1629, Poussin had been diagnosed with this chronic condition when Potier, treating the artist’s syphilis, determined him to be “of a melancholic and bilious nature [*di natura melancholica et biliosa*]” and recommended a therapy of purgation.<sup>137</sup>

The atrabilious maladies to which artists were supposedly vulnerable included lovesickness and plague. This notion underlies Giovanni Battista Passeri’s account of the demise of Guido Ubaldo Abatini (1600–1656), a painter in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s studio enamored of two girls in a neighboring house.<sup>138</sup> One night, during the plague of 1656, he went to their house and was surprised to see a plague carriage; then he saw that one sister was helping to load the corpse of the other onto the cart, but she had the plague as well, and died two days later.

Terrified by this spectacle . . . he was overcome by such great sorrow and fear that he returned home and went directly to bed, beleaguered by his emotions. Thus he succumbed to melancholy, and as a result of the affliction arising from the . . . trauma, he developed a vigorous fever. Slipping into a restless delirium as the disequilibrium [of the passions] worsened, he, too, was dead within a few days, so strong was the impact of that strange passion [*strana passione*, that is, melancholy].<sup>139</sup>

Artists were not always doomed to such wretched ends by their temperament. As a corollary to the theory that an artist’s melancholic disposition feeds his sickness as well as his imaginative power, it was also believed that the process of artistic creation engendered a cathartic effect that self-corrected the inherent humoral imbalance.<sup>140</sup>

The notion of artistic creation as a means of restoring the balance of the humors is an ancient one. As Galen noted (*De sanitate tuenda* 1.8), even Esculapius had advised the sick to compose odes, comedies, and songs to cure the emotional *ametria*, or discord, of their souls. In the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino advocated the curative effects of making music, advice that he himself lived by: in a letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti, Ficino complained of his “melancholy temperament . . . a very bitter thing, and one that I can only ease and sweeten a little by much lute-playing.”<sup>141</sup> In Poussin’s time, this medical teaching had permeated the layman’s culture and given rise to the pan-European notion that making art, like music, was a salubrious practice for all men, regardless of their station in life.<sup>142</sup> For example, in Henry Peacham’s 1622 manual *The Compleat Gentleman*, amateurs are advised to practice drawing regularly for its therapeutic effects, including the warding off of melancholy and related infirmities of the body, since the arts are “a curer of many diseases our minds are subject unto.”<sup>143</sup> Spanish gentlemen were also dabbling in the arts for the sake of their health. In Calderón de la Barca’s play *El pintor de su deshonra* (1650), the nobleman Don Juan Roca takes up painting to alleviate the melancholy he suffers as a result of too much reading.<sup>144</sup>

Artistic creation, a healthful therapy for the gentleman amateur, is a necessity for the melancholic artist born under Saturn’s star, who must externalize his excessive passions to protect himself from their negative influence on his own health.<sup>145</sup> Based on what I have said so far about medicinal and tragic catharsis, it would seem that the subjects deemed most apt for purging the passions would be either painful and gruesome subjects—such as the plague images by Angelo Caroselli, Giovanni Battista Castiglione, Mattia Preti, Michael Sweerts, Pierre Mignard, Sebastian Bourdon, and Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (all in the wake of Poussin’s *Plague of Ashdod*) and violent themes such as the Massacre of the Innocents—or gloomy and cerebral subjects like allegories of melancholy and *vanitas* themes. The phenomenon no doubt had its literary parallel; it is conceivable, for example, that Mascardi described the horrors of the plague in the letter quoted at the beginning of this essay in order to expel these troubling images from his imagination. Later in the century, the cathartic rationale was made explicit by François de La Mothe le Vayer in *La prose chagrine* (1661), where the author declares that he is seeking to cure himself



10 Poussin, *Self-Portrait*, red chalk drawing, ca. 1630. London, The British Museum (photo: © Copyright The British Museum)

of madness by writing all his demented, melancholic thoughts down in his book; he also asserts that the reader does not risk lapsing into the same madness but in fact derives certain benefits, since the vicarious experience of melancholy's effects will temper the reader's own melancholic excesses while permitting him to derive aesthetic pleasure with impunity.<sup>146</sup>

If genuinely a work by Poussin, the *Self-Portrait* in the British Museum (Fig. 10) carries fascinating implications in light of such practices.<sup>147</sup> According to the later inscription, this red chalk drawing was made "with a mirror by his own hand around the year 1630, during his convalescence from a

serious illness." A furrowed brow, contracted cheeks, and scowling mouth contort the artist's features and suggest his great discomfort. If he was indeed suffering from syphilitic symptoms such as burning joint pain and oozing ulcerations, then this portrait could represent a sort of purgative catharsis. Perhaps he was attempting to expel the Helmontian *idea terrifica* of his ailment, or to externalize its effects as La Mothe de Vayer had attempted to do with his madness.<sup>148</sup> While many of Poussin's paintings represent the painful passions, here pain itself has been recorded as if it were one of the *affetti*, making this self-portrait a true *exemplum doloris*.<sup>149</sup>



11 Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648. London, The National Gallery (photo: The National Gallery Picture Library, © Copyright The National Gallery, London)

### Disease and Death in Poussin's Later Paintings

In later years, Poussin's scientific concerns found poetic expression in a number of landscapes and mythologies. A case in point is the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, completed for Jean Pointel on August 31, 1648, depicting a giant snake atop its human prey in a swamp and two terrified figures looking on from a short distance (Fig. 11).<sup>150</sup> Sheila McTighe has broken important ground in the study of this work by recognizing in it several allegorical allusions to seventeenth-century natural philosophy; here we shall consider how this landscape pertains to the epidemiology of that century.<sup>151</sup>

Snakes had been poetically associated with epidemic disease in classical civilization long before Ovid recorded the myth of the huge, plague-engendering Python slain by Apollo (*Metamorphoses* 1.459–60).<sup>152</sup> The persistence of this association into the fifteenth century is confirmed by Filippino Lippi's *Allegory*, a work that perhaps ought to be called *Allegory of the Plague* (Fig. 12).<sup>153</sup> It shows two men—one dead, the other in a state of utter panic—who have been attacked by snakes in the countryside; beside them is this prominent inscription: “Nulla deterior pestis [est] q[ua] familiaris inimicus [est]” (There is nothing more dangerous than the plague, which is the enemy of friends), a reference, most certainly, to the contagious transmissibility of the deadly disease. Half a century later, Cartari examined the association between serpents and disease in his learned exploration of the scientific truth behind the myth of Apollo and Python:

Poets . . . pretend that Apollo's arrows killed the great serpent Python that was born from the earth after the flood . . . because Python signifies putrescence, which often arises from the earth due to too much humidity unless it is destroyed by the hot rays of the sun, which are Apollo's arrows.<sup>154</sup>

In 1648, the same year that Poussin finished *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, Domenico Panarolo published *Apollo Pythius seu putredo debellata*, an important study in epidemiology and public medicine that clinched the association of snakes with plague in the same allegorical language of myth used by Cartari.<sup>155</sup> Panarolo explains the Python as a symbol of “this year's putrescence from the Orient,” and putrescence, in turn, is defined as “corruption and destruction, the diametrical opposite of life,” which by means of “unprotected human beings can easily result in citywide diseases and epidemic outbreaks.”<sup>156</sup> After referring to the myth of Python's birth from the earth after a great flood, Panarolo notes that Rome's flood the previous fall and its wet winter meant that a plague was foreseeable in the city's future unless the countermeasures he recommended were taken.<sup>157</sup>

Though the conceptual link between serpents and plague in Baroque Rome was mostly poetic and religious in origin (it hardly needs to be mentioned that a satanic serpent brought the “plague” of original sin upon man and that Moses fashioned a bronze serpent to end a plague of snakes), here our concern is with the etiological basis. Dating back to antiquity,





12 Filippino Lippi, *Allegory*, ca. 1497. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

this scientific tradition held that swamps, bogs, and marshes were dangerous sources of putrescence (nearly synonymous with pestilence), and because snakes dwelled in such places, these animals were thought to be spontaneously generated by the process of corruption and to contain within themselves that same putrescent poison of which they were born. Columella, for example, observed that the mud and “fermented dirt” of marshes breed “envenomed pests of water snakes and serpents, deprived of moisture they enjoyed in the winter; whereby hidden diseases are often contracted, the causes of which even the physicians themselves cannot thoroughly understand.”<sup>158</sup>

Poussin’s characterization of the snake’s aquatic lair as an insalubrious *locus horribilus* is an underappreciated aspect of the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. In contrast to the large, azure lake that supports fishing activities and a whole town on its distant shore, the swamp’s brackish water is painted in very dark hues, even taking into account the possible sinking of some of the green and blue pigments. The

contraction of the swamp in the heat of the summer, averted to by Columella as a dangerous situation, can be verified in the foreground, where the former height of the water is recorded by an engirding shelf of earth, and the muddy basin here emerges to the right along the edge of the swamp.

The marshland’s pestilential vapors and its warm, humid climate are also represented in the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, where the view of a distant light-filled sky with auspicious clouds is obscured by an intervening veil of vaporous gray gases. Apparently, these gases are generated by the marsh in the foreground, and perhaps even by the human corpse, whose flesh is discolored by decay. According to Matteo Naldi’s 1656 plague treatise, air near small swamps is more pernicious than air near big lakes, and as the smaller lakes dry up and turn into swamps in arid seasons, they produce pestilential vapors.<sup>159</sup> Poussin’s depiction of the area near the snake’s lair as shrouded in darkness whereas the surrounding landscape is illuminated by patchy sunlight corresponds to Giovanni Battista Doni’s description of sickly air



13 *The Plague Procession of Pope Gregory the Great*, ca. 1633–42. Rome, church of S. Gregorio in Celio, courtyard (photo: author)

in his *De restituenda salubritate agri romani*, written for Pope Urban VIII in 1630. Believing plague to be spread by swamp-land air, Doni described the most dangerous air as “heavy, humid, dense, vaporous, and never illuminated by the sun.”<sup>160</sup> It is known that Poussin studied the climatic conditions of Egypt when painting *Rebecca at the Well*; according to André Félibien, he “was not unaware that in hot and dry lands the sun does not produce the thick vapors and miasmas that it does in other places.”<sup>161</sup> Surely Poussin had also studied the dangerous climate of a swamp, for he has clearly shown how vegetation and decaying animals cook in the mud and heat, generating deadly miasmas. Perhaps he had even consulted Panarolo’s medical treatise on air quality, in which all the characteristics of Poussin’s swamp—exhalations, vapors, fumes, fog, the stench of stagnant water, poisonous serpents, and cadavers—are said to “frequently cause death, especially sudden death, in human populations.”<sup>162</sup>

Frequently, then, epidemic disease was presumed to originate in the swamp, and its spread toward civilization was blamed on snakes and other swamp creatures, thought to have the ability to kill from afar with their poisonous breath. It is thus fully understandable why the running man and the washerwoman in Poussin’s picture should exhibit such terror even though they are well out of the snake’s reach. Philosophers supposed that these bog creatures carried miasmas with them when they traveled to healthy places, where they spread the pestilential miasmas with their breath. Vitruvius (*On Architecture* I.4) is among the ancients who believed good air could be corrupted by the breath of marshland animals. Following the teachings of such classical authorities, the naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi verified in his 1640 *De serpentem et draconem* that a water snake could render entire lakes unpotable and poison the surrounding air.<sup>163</sup>

Athanasius Kircher must have known Aldrovandi’s research when he proposed that the Palestrina mosaic (in the possession of the Barberini since the early 1630s) contained

an image of an Ethiopian lake whose waters and shores had been polluted by water snakes.<sup>164</sup> However, pestilential snakes were a local problem as well. Infestations in the Pomptine Marshes between Rome and Naples had caused individual deaths as well as malarial outbreaks for centuries, in the opinion of Poussin’s contemporaries. It is interesting to note that, as discovered by F. J. B. Watson, a sale catalogue of 1773 associates Poussin’s *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* with a “catastrophe” that occurred in the year 1641 in “the morass of Pontius.” Intrigued by this notice, Anthony Blunt attempted to identify this “catastrophe” with a specific historical event: the desolation of the town of Fondi after a plague of snakes—and perhaps malaria—killed many inhabitants in the seventeenth century.<sup>165</sup> Though Sheila McTighe disproves Blunt’s theory by showing that Poussin’s is not a topographical rendition of Fondi or anywhere else in snake-infested Terracina, it is still possible that Poussin’s picture alludes to the noxious environment of the Pomptine Marshes, if only in a generic sense. Poussin may have preferred topographical specificity, but given his delicate health, he would have been ill-advised to visit any such insalubrious clime.<sup>166</sup>

Not long before Poussin must have begun working on the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* plague broke out in Rome, as Panarolo had predicted, slowly wasting the population from 1648 through 1650.<sup>167</sup> Did Poussin mean to suggest with his painting that Rome’s plague was caused by the encroachment of some foul vermin into the city precinct, or that their breeding grounds in the malarial marshes outside the city had poisoned the air, carried to Rome by winds? After all, these dreaded animals had been terrorizing Rome for centuries and would continue to do so even as the Age of Enlightenment was dawning: a late-seventeenth-century scientific publication, for example, carries the report of a dragon “living in the swamps outside of Rome, December 1, 1691.”<sup>168</sup> In the years leading up to Poussin’s painting, artists working in Rome depicted two different historical assaults on



14 Antonio Tempesta, *Draco Martius Cadmi Socios depascit*, from Tempesta, *Metamorphoseon Ovidianarum*, Amsterdam: Wilhelm Janson, 1606, fol. 22 (photo: courtesy Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City)

the city by such creatures, both of which were associated with epidemic outbreaks. Giovanni Lanfranco's 1628 *Saint Sylvester Subduing the Dragon* shows the basilisk that killed three hundred Romans each day with his pestilential breath until vanquished by Pope Sylvester in the fourth century. A seventeenth-century fresco in the courtyard of the church of S. Gregorio in Celio in Rome represents the swarm of vipers that emerged from the Tiber during the plague of 590 (Fig. 13). This unusual serpentine addition to the account of the Gregorian plague may represent a conflation with Gregory of Tours's history of the Roman plague of 561, when "a multitude of snakes, among them a great serpent like a big log, passed down into the sea by the channel of this river [Tiber]," followed immediately by "the plague which they call *inguinaria*."<sup>169</sup> More important for our purposes is the fact that this iconographic aberration occurs in a religious history painting of the seventeenth century, indicating that even outside the traditional realms of scientific discourse, epidemics were linked to environmental causes.

Aware of dangers presented by the marshes in the *agro romano* and the foul creatures that bred there, governments throughout the centuries had attempted to improve the land and drain the swamps just outside Rome. Among the instigators of these campaigns are Emperor Trajan, Pope Sixtus V, and the Napoleonic prefect of Rome, Camille de Tournon.<sup>170</sup> Urban VIII, whose papacy ended only four years before Poussin made his *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, had allocated great resources, both economic and intellectual, to the problem of the Pomptine Marshes.<sup>171</sup> In 1642, the mathematician and Galilean student Benedetto Castelli supplied

the pope with his "Discourse on the Drainage of the Pomptine Marshes," which declares that land-reclamation campaigns could be carried out with success and at little cost.<sup>172</sup> Such plans were not left on the drawing board. In the spring of 1633, Urban VIII enlisted five hundred Dutch Catholic families to settle the Pomptine Marshes and drain them for agriculture, undertaking various "improvements to render the air more salubrious."<sup>173</sup>

Rome's perpetual problems with pestilence, reptiles, and an insalubrious environment linked it with the ancient city of Thebes, which suffered from "thick airs" carried by the winds from the stagnant waters of Lake Copais, as well as a predatory dragon, according to a foundational legend.<sup>174</sup> Indeed, this myth of the Theban dragon may even have suggested Poussin's subject, a theory first proposed by F. J. B. Watson and developed by Guy de Tervarent.<sup>175</sup> According to Ovid's version of the fable, Cadmus, like Aeneas in later times, received Apollo's command to found a city. He sent his companions to fetch water for the inaugural libation from a nearby spring, but here a dragon killed them all. Though Blunt and others have dismissed the relevance of the Cadmus myth to the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* on the basis of fruitless comparisons with illustrations showing scores of the dragon's victims, there are compelling similarities between Poussin's composition and a depiction of the Cadmus myth never before mentioned in this context: Antonio Tempesta's illustration for his 1606 *Metamorphoseon Ovidianarum* (Fig. 14).<sup>176</sup> Besides showing only a few victims at the dragon's feet, Tempesta's image also presents similarities with the general compositional structure of Poussin's painting, as well

as striking correspondences between the fleeing figures; it should thus be counted among the sources that inform the meaning of Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*.<sup>177</sup>

The particular species of basilisk in Tempesta's illustration bears no resemblance to the writhing python in Poussin's painting. For this detail Poussin may have looked to a source brought to light by Charles Dempsey, a pair of antique funerary urns then in the Barberini collection, each of which depicts a man tightly encoiled by a giant snake and two fleeing figures.<sup>178</sup> What would Poussin and his contemporaries have made of these ancient images? Some art historians have proposed that the snake would have been seen as a Mithraic symbol of the sun's course through the heavens, a proposal supported by Cartari's exegesis of an ancient image of a snake entwined around three thriving women who signify the earth and its natural processes: "The serpent that encircles them stands for the curved path taken by the sun."<sup>179</sup> Yet if the funerary urns in fact served as the painter's inspiration for his snake imagery, Poussin eliminated the element of solar symbolism when he did away with the reptile's corkscrew coiling motif that signifies the sun's circling path. Since the snake in Poussin's picture slithers over its victim in a random pattern with no astrological correlation, it is more likely that Poussin interpreted the snake on these funerary urns as a symbol of death's insidious and irresistible force, a reading shown by Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey to have been standard in Poussin's age.<sup>180</sup>

It has been argued thus far that in 1648—the same year that Michael Sweerts reflected on plague's supernatural causes in the painting *Plague in an Ancient City*—Poussin pondered the natural causes of epidemic disease in his *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*.<sup>181</sup> No assessment of this painting can be complete, however, without a consideration of its affective properties, which Félibien rightly described as the effects of horror and fear.<sup>182</sup> We therefore return to issues raised earlier regarding the links between the health of the body and the health of the mind.

In *The Plague of Ashdod*, Poussin suggests that all the humans in the infected city are at risk no matter what their proximity to the plague victims by showing that plague can reach a body through contact, through the air, and through the imagination. This is also true of the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. The dead man was killed by direct contact, while the two bystanders are endangered by their environment, as we have seen. These bystanders are additionally imperiled by their own frightened imaginations. In the case of the fleeing man, it is an image—the sight of the corpse in the swamp—that fills him with terror. In the case of the washerwoman, it is a sound—the shouts of the fleeing man—that throws her into a panic. Having capitulated to fear, these rural folk suffer that emotion's disruptive and unhealthy consequences; at the same time, they have become vectors for its contagious spread to others.

The viewer who encounters the same *idea terrifica* in this mimetic landscape may experience fear as a result, but in this case it is an artificial fear with cathartic benefits that lead to a healthy sensation of pleasure. To reverse the order of a statement by Gabriel Zinano (one that Anthony Blunt applied to Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne*), a fable that contains a

"deeper meaning bearing on natural philosophy" also has an exterior aspect that "delights the tired emotions of men."<sup>183</sup> Like *The Plague of Ashdod*, the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* is remarkable for its investigation of the plague's natural etiology and for therapeutically pursuing the dangerous emotions its imagery engenders. As an artist-doctor, Poussin fashioned remedies for the very diseases he depicted; the viewer-patient who takes this visual medicine is rewarded with the moderate pleasure accompanying the salutary release of painful emotions.

Jean Delumeau has observed that in the art of Western Europe, the number of plague subjects increases following outbreaks of epidemic disease. He developed an intriguing explanation for this pattern: "These iconographic 'projections,' a sort of exorcism of the plague, constituted—together with flight from the cities and social aggression—habitual reactions in the face of a fear that grew into anguish."<sup>184</sup> Though Poussin's plague pictures are far too self-conscious and ambitiously scientific to be reduced to a "habitual reaction," Delumeau's anthropological framing of their function in his study of the history of fear provokes consideration of another work completed by Poussin in the midst of the plague of 1648–50: the 1649 Berlin self-portrait for Jean Pointel (Fig. 15).<sup>185</sup>

Serving as the backdrop for the portrait is a carved stone that resembles a funerary urn, similar in structure to the Barberini urns mentioned above in relation to the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Urns of this type often have carved placards inscribed with an epigraphic reference to the dead souls to be joined by the deceased; in the Barberini examples this epigraph begins with the traditional words "to the shades of the departed [*dis manibus*]." In his self-portrait, Poussin leaves this illusionary surface uncarved, allotting the space instead to a painted inscription that attests to his name and age. Sheila McTighe reads this background image as "a sculpted tomb inscribed with a text commemorating his own dead self."<sup>186</sup> Directly below this emblem of mortality, Poussin painted himself with a slight smile—as if to demonstrate that he is fully at ease with the prospect of relinquishing his body to the tomb, his soul to heaven, and his memory to his art.

With this image, Poussin has collapsed the act of self-portraiture with the act of autobiography—asserting his authorial presence in the shadow of his own looming absence. Though the provocative idea deserves a fuller exploration, we limit our discussion here to the salutary benefits to be gained from anticipating one's own death, for surely this funereal iconography originated in the artist's meditations on death—meditations that would have been sustained during the execution of the work. In this sense, Poussin's self-portrait could be compared to the Christian practice of the *bona mors*. Because Poussin worked on this portrait during a period of plague, it should be noted that the *bona mors* practice had special applications during plague time, as shown by Étienne Binet in his above-mentioned treatise, *Supreme and Effective Remedies for Plague and Sudden Death . . . for the Consolation of Souls Distraught by the Fear of Death*. Binet taught that in order to find consolation from the fear of death that is so great in plague time, one must "live dying," that is to say, through mortification and the frequent meditation on death, the potentially deadly fears of death can be overcome.<sup>187</sup> As an





15 Poussin, *Self-Portrait*, 1649. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY)

initial mental concept, Poussin's "portrait at the grave" must have been chilling. Yet the tedious manual production of that image, like the quiet meditations of the *bona mors*, must have helped over time to deaden its impact, until at last the idea of his own death became tolerable through familiarity.

In works such as *The Plague of Ashdod*, the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, and the Berlin self-portrait, the fear of death and its exorcism emerge as a kind of leitmotif in Poussin's oeuvre. This is true even in the case of a religious image of a traditional type, *The Vision of Saint Francesca Romana*, made quite late in Poussin's career (Fig. 16). Recently, Charles Dempsey observed that this work, an ex-voto painted in response to Rome's plague of 1656, incites fear and pity. His theory of the purpose these emotions serve in this religious image accords remarkably with all that has been said here regarding Poussin's earlier plague pictures:

As an ex voto [*The Vision of Saint Francesca Romana*] explicitly provokes a true catharsis in the viewer, arousing and dispelling emotions of terror and pity. For terror and pity are what the painting is all about, the former all concen-

trated in the inhumanly frightful image of the plague, and the latter embodied in the vision of the woman descending to earth in a cloud and the woman who prays to her.<sup>188</sup>

Dempsey's conclusions suggest that, over a quarter of a century after *The Plague of Ashdod* was painted, Poussin continued to practice a healing art aimed at the psychological and physiological ailments brought on by emotional disturbances. Periodic outbreaks of epidemic disease, and the fear they provoked, seem to have strengthened his conviction in the mysterious relations linking emotions, the imagination, and health, as well as his fascination with the capacity of art to interpolate itself into that relation.

Throughout this essay, medical and scientific discourse of the seventeenth century has opened a window of understanding onto Poussin's use of paintings to counteract disease and its imaginary causes. But this argument should not veil the fact that for Poussin and his contemporaries, the source of an image's capacity to reconstitute the emotional and physiological state of the viewer remained an occult and mysterious power. Still circulating in Poussin's age were occult philoso-



16 Poussin, *The Vision of Saint Francesca Romana*, 1656. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY)

phies describing the use of images and music to channel stellar harmonies and *spiritus mundi* into the viewer for a curative effect. Not even Urban VIII could resist the allure of using images in white magic rituals to extend his life. To protect his health from the same stellar influences that brought plague to Italy, the pope would sequester himself in a chamber of the Quirinal Palace with his magus Tommaso Campanella and create multimedia astral images.<sup>189</sup>

In these same years when the pope was studying the occult sciences to stave off death, Poussin developed two varieties of healing images: *The Plague of Ashdod* and *The Empire of Flora*—works that have also been identified as his earliest applications of the theory of the affective modes in music to painting.<sup>190</sup> To what degree did Poussin’s interest in the modes, apparently concurrent with his initial interest in healing images, partake of the wide fascination with occult powers? Félibien, at least, perceived a connection. He claimed the modes in Poussin’s art exerted “a secret power to excite the soul to different passions,” and he described this power with the story of a rational king who was transformed into a frenzied, murderous lunatic by music.<sup>191</sup> From the sixteenth century, when the ancient modes were utilized to achieve

incantatory effects in the Academy of Poetry and Music in France, to the late seventeenth century, when Félibien wrote about Poussin, the modes were perceived as occult forces with magical effects.<sup>192</sup>

Some scholars would downplay the similarities between early modern magic and Poussin’s theory of the modes.<sup>193</sup> Sheila McTighe, for instance, points to René Descartes’s 1648 *Traité des passions de l’âme* as an index of “a shifting attitude toward causality” in the seventeenth century, arguing that Poussin’s application of the modes “is tinged with a modern, mechanistic aura.”<sup>194</sup> However, one could just as readily point to another scientific work—such as van Helmont’s *Ternary of Paradoxes* (published posthumously in 1650), with its explanation of how wounds are cured “magnetically” by operations performed on the weapons that caused them—to show that very different standards of rational explanation and empiricism were in place at this time. In other words, though scientists may have begun to explain the mysterious links between objects and bodies through recourse to a mechanistic model, the dynamic forces powering this model still seemed fantastic and sublime.

Audiences today may be uncomfortable with the notion

that magic played a role in Poussin's art, since Poussin's works are so often regarded as paradigms of intellectual and rational expression. Clearly, as the present study has demonstrated, Poussin nurtured an active interest in scientific ideas and was eager to place his art in their service. But the *scienza* that Poussin knew enthusiastically accommodated such fantastic notions as animal magnetism, dragons, gaseous spirits, living stars, and a whole host of other marvels, and it had not yet adapted the antagonism to magic that characterizes post-Enlightenment science. In the most profound way, Poussin's interest in paintings that cure reflects his scientific fascination with the "magic power" of images to produce in living beings their truly wondrous effects.

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## Notes

This article is based on a lecture given at the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Boston College in March 2003 and was written with the support of a Clowes Fellowship from the Indianapolis Museum of Art. I am indebted to Natasha Staller for generous help with the writing and insightful ideas that dramatically improved the final draft. For their assistance and expertise, I also thank Lory Frankel, Franco Mormando, David Freedberg, Sheila McTighe, Ronda Kasl, Alessio Assonitis, and the two anonymous readers for *The Art Bulletin*. Elisabeth Hipp kindly shared with me a chapter of her forthcoming book, *Nicolas Poussin, die Pest von Asdod*. Dr. Hipp and I had independently studied the problem of catharsis in relation to Poussin's painting before learning of each other's work. Publication schedules impede us

from responding to each other's arguments at this point, but we encourage our readers to compare our complementary perspectives.

Except when indicated, translations are mine.

1. Galen, *De sanitate tuenda*, in *Galenii librorum*, 6 vols. (Venice, 1576), vol. 2, 66: "Et nos ob animi mores aegros quotannis non paucos persanavimus, solis animi motibus ad debitum modum revocatis." William Austin, *The Anatomy of the Pestilence* (London, 1666), 3.

2. See Jane Costello, "The Twelve Pictures 'Ordered by Velasquez' and the Trial of Valguarnera," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 (1950): 237–84; and Blunt, 1966, 24.

3. This passage includes a supplementary line in verse 6 describing the plague of rats that is found only in certain vernacular translations of the Vulgate, as shown by Otto Neustatter, "Mice in Plague Pictures," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 4 (1941): 109; cf. Christine Boeckl, "A New Reading of Nicolas Poussin's *Miracle of the Ark in the Temple of Dagon*," *Artibus et Historiae* 12, no. 24 (1991): 119. Other sources for this biblical history are discussed in Neustatter, 105–13; Henri Mollaret and Jacqueline Brossolet, "Nicolas Poussin et 'Les Philistins frappés de la peste.'" *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 73 (1969): 173–78; Henry Keazor, "À propos des sources littéraires et picturales de *La peste d'Asdod* (1630–1631) par Nicolas Poussin," *Revue du Louvre* 45, no. 1 (1996): 62–69; Ebert-Schiffere, 331; and Malcolm Bull, "Poussin and Josephus," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 139 (2002): 331–37.

4. See Bellori, 416; and Rosenberg and Prat, 200. Priced at 1,000 écus at the middle of the century and coveted by Cardinal Mazarin of France, the painting was eventually acquired by Cardinal Richelieu before passing to the king of France in 1665. For replicas, see Otto Grautoff, *Nicolas Poussin, sein Werk und sein Leben* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1914) vol. 1, 92ff., vol. 2, 38; Blunt, 1966, 25; Mollaret and Brossolet (as in n. 3), 171–77; Sotheby's New York, sale cat., Jan. 30, 1977, lot 34; and Olivier Bonfait, ed., *Roma 1630: Il trionfo del pennello* (Milan: Electa, 1994), 170–71.

5. Studies focusing on the meaning of the rats are cited in nn. 57–59 below. Bonfait (as in n. 4), 166–70, who considered ties between *The Plague of Ashdod* and the "small world of physicians," interpreted the painting as a "universe without God" and linked the work to Roman orator Agostino Mascardi's historiographic theory. Bonfait's conclusion cannot be reconciled with Mascardi's papalist agenda, much less with the overwhelming evidence of elision, not opposition, between "supernatural" and "clinical" etiologies of plague in the 1630s. Clerics of this period frequently acknowledged the dangers of contagion, and physicians almost universally designated divine anger as the "first cause" of plague. Carlo Cipolla, in *Faith, Reason, and the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Tuscany* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), i–ii, insists that Tuscans during the plague of 1630 "did not think in terms of an abstract conflict between Reason and Faith. Faith was for them above discussion." Another study of this intellectual climate is Walter Pagel's "Religious Motives in the Medical Biology of the XVIIth Century," reprinted in Pagel, *Religion and Neoplatonism in Renaissance Medicine*, ed. Marianne Winder (London: Variorum, 1985), 97–312. Secular and religious attitudes specific to Rome in 1630 are discussed in Sheila Barker, "Art in a Time of Danger: Urban VIII's Rome and the Plague of 1629–1634," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2002, 173–310.

6. The best history of plague in Italy is Alfonso Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie occorse in Italia dalle prime memorie fino al 1850* (Bologna: Gamberini e Parmegiani, 1865). See also n. 29 below.

7. Agostino Mascardi to Claudio Achillini, 1630, in Achillini, *Rime e prose di Claudio Achillini* (Venice: Zaccaria Conzatti, 1662), 243–47. Bonfait (as in n. 4), 164–65, was the first to cite Mascardi in relation to *The Plague of Ashdod*. On the epistolary exchange between Achillini and Mascardi, first published in late 1630 as *Sopra le presenti calamità*, see Angelo Colombo, *I "Riposi di Pindo," studi su Claudio Achillini (1574–1640)* (Florence: Olschki, 1988), 88–97.

8. For the decline in population, see Eugenio Sonnino, "The Population in Baroque Rome," in *Rome, Amsterdam: Two Growing Cities in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Peter van Kessel and Elisa Schulte (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 1997), 59. For the effects of fear on the remaining population, see Barker (as in n. 5), 192–201, 215–16.

9. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. and trans. Steven Lattimore (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 2.51.

10. This idea was revived with studies such as Luigi Luigini's *De compescendis animi affectibus per moralem philosophiam et medendi artem* (Basel: Petrum Pernam, 1562). For other early modern revivals of the theory, see Anselment, 238 n. 49.

11. Daniel Sennert, *Practicae medicinae*, quoted in Lodovico Antonio Muratori, *Governo della peste* (Milan, 1832), 164; and Geronimo Gastaldi, *Tractatus de avertenda et profliganda peste politico-legalis* (Bologna: Camerali Typographia Manolessiana, 1684), 679. Sennert had many opportunities to study the plague: it struck Wittenberg seven times after he moved there in 1593, according to Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), vol. 7, bk. 7, 203.

12. Burton, 168, 359.

13. From the intervening decades, see Antonio Sponta's "Trattato della peste et della cura, et preservation d'essa," ca. 1630–44 (BAV, Barb. lat. 4256), in which immoderate passions—assimilated to the seven deadly sins—are said to dispose the body to pestilence.

14. Gregorio Rossi, *De peste* (Rome, 1656), 33: "Procul omnis tristitia, venus, signities. Mens sit hilaris, contemplationibus non laetetur."

15. Matteo Naldi, *Regole per la cura del contagio* (Rome: Mascardi, 1656), 9: "... siano di sangue congenere, o concorrenti nel vitto; quali ne' casi, che

corron o ricevono ancora nuove perturbationi nell'animo, e nel sangue, ò per l'affetto di chi muore prima, ò nel timore d'haver comunicato con essi, ò per altra occorrenza, che nasca: delle quali perturbationi nasce il più delle volte il progresso del male, e per ultimo impulso, come una scintilla di pietra in esca già dispostissima ad accendersi."

16. Gastaldi (as in n. 11), 679–80. In these passages, Gastaldi paraphrases Jean Baptiste van Helmont, the Belgian chemist and physician whose theories concerning the role of the mind in physical health are discussed below.

17. On the theory of the humors in Western thought, see Klibansky et al., 4ff. Post-Renaissance humoral medicine has been studied by Andrew Wear, "Medicine in Early Modern Europe," in *The Western Medical Tradition, 800 BC to AD 1800*, by Lawrence Conrad et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 251–64.

18. Thomas Feyens, *De viribus imaginationis* (Leiden: Officina Elseviria, 1635), 124–25, 179, 185. Cf. Burton, 170–71, 220.

19. On the learned alternatives to humoral medicine, see Arturo Castiglioni, *A History of Medicine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 442–52, 504–15, 535–45.

20. Stefano Binetti (Étienne Binet), *Sovrani ed efficaci rimedi contro la peste e morte subitanea alli Sig. Governatori della Città di Vienna in Francia e trasportati da un sacerdote nella lingua italiana, per consolazione dell'anime atterite dal timore della morte* (Rome, 1656), 59–60: "Bisogna che la paura uccida, e schiacci la paura stessa, perche non ha cose che vi renda più soggetto alla peste, che la paura di questo male. L'imaginazione ha questa possanza di alterare tutto il sangue, il timor spaventando l'imaginazione le mette nel pericolo di fare quell'impressione nel sangue, che suol fare la stessa Peste." Compare the explanation of Jesuit-trained English priest Thomas Wright: "The Passions which coarct the heart, as feare, sadness, and despair, as they bring more paine to the minde, so they are more dangerous to the body . . . gathering together of much melancholy blood about the heart, which collection extinguisheth the good spirits, or at least dulleth them." Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in General* (1604; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 61.

21. This theory can be traced to Paracelsus's belief that troubling images that reach the imagination imprint themselves internally in the body as disease, as when a pregnant woman's imagination, traumatized by some brutal thought or sensation, causes deformities in the fetus; see Andrew Weeks, *Paracelsus: Speculative Theory and the Crisis of the Early Reformation* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 69–71, 138–40; and Heinz Schott, "Paracelsus and van Helmont on Imagination: Magnetism and Medicine before Mesmer," in *Paracelsan Moments: Science, Medicine, and Astrology in Early Modern Europe*, ed. G. Scholz Williams and Charles Gunnoe Jr. (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2002), 135–47. For a bibliography on related topics, see Thorndike (as in n. 11), vol. 8, 236, 510–14.

22. Jean Baptiste van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae* (Amsterdam: Ludovicus Elzevirius, 1648), reprinted as *Opera omnia* (Frankfurt: H. C. Paullus, 1707). See also Walter Pagel, *Joan Baptista van Helmont: Reformer of Art and Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Schott (as in n. 21).

23. Van Helmont's influence in Italy is surveyed in Alessandro Dini, *Filosofia della natura, medicina, religione: Lucantonio Porzio (1639–1724)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1985).

24. Giuseppe Balestra, *Gli accidente più gravi del male contagioso osservati nel lazzaretto all'isola* (Rome, 1657), 15v: "Paracelso nel lib. De peste trattato 2.o afferma che chi fissa il pensiero nella peste quel timore, e fort'imaginazione può esser causa, che se l'imprima la peste." A similar idea is found in George Thomson, *Loimotomia: or The Pest Anatomized* (London, 1666), 33: "The power of strong imagination, making somewhat of nothing, sowe[s] a pestential Seed in the blood, which fermenting and swelling up, doth forthwith entertain the vital spirit that makes in itself a perfect Idea of that Disease."

25. See Athanasius Kircher, "An sola imaginazione pestis contrahi possit," in *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosae Luis, quae Pestis dicitur* (Rome: Mascardi, 1658), 110–16. According to Kircher, terrifying ideas lead to plague because a disturbed imagination is prone to melancholy, which in turn makes the spirit and humors susceptible to contagion.

26. Muratori (as in n. 11), 164: "Ferita l'immaginazione e messi in disordinato moto gli spiriti e gli umori da qualche spaventoso spettacolo, troppo agevolmente si prende il veleno pestilenziale, ed anche senza peste si muore talvolta di pura costernazione ed umor nero . . . essendo probabile che una tal passione cagioni la depressione delle parti spiritose del sangue, nel quale stato poi si renda esso più atto a ricevere con minor contrasto le velenose impressioni degli effluj contagiosi."

27. *Ibid.*, 127, 343–44. An instance of a terrifying sermon given during Rome's plague of 1648 is discussed in Franco Mormando's forthcoming article on Michael Sweerts's *Plague in an Ancient City*, a manuscript of which the author has kindly shared with me.

28. Compare the modern theory of suggestive psychic infection, correlating mass psychology and epidemic disease; a historical study of the phenomenon is Heinz Schott, "Die 'Suggestion' und ihre medizinhistorische Bedeutung," in *Bausteine zur Medizingeschichte: Heinrich Schipperges zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Eduard Seidler and Schott (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1984), 111–21.

29. Headed by Francesco Barberini, the Congregazione della Sanità was composed of noblemen, bureaucratic officials, scientists, doctors, and public administrators. Ties to Rome's ruling class guaranteed the committee's authority; its efficacy issued from the members' professional diversity and their pooled knowledge of epidemiology. On the Congregazione della Sanità and

the plague of 1630, see Fausto Garofalo, "La difesa di Roma e dello Stato Pontificio contro la peste," *Humana Studia* 1, no. 6, suppl. (1949): 4–10; Laurie Nussdorfer, *City Politics in the Rome of Urban VIII* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 145–61; and James G. Harper, "The Barberini Tapestries of the Life of Urban VIII: Program, Politics and Perfect History for the Post-Exile Era," Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998, 345–47.

30. On Poussin's syphilis and the care Cassiano gave him, see Poussin to Cassiano, in Anthony Blunt, ed., *Lettres et propos sur l'art* (Paris: Hermann, 1964), 25; and Erick Wilberding, "Poussin's Illness in 1629," *Burlington Magazine* 142, no. 1170 (2000): 561. Wilberding does not specify the venereal disease as syphilis. On mercury as a syphilis cure (prescribed for this use since 1501), see Weeks (as in n. 21), 134–35; Henry M. Pachter, *Paracelsus: Magic into Science* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951), 175–85; Girolamo Fracastoro, *Fracastoro's "Syphilis": Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Eatough (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984), 12–22; and idem, *De contagione et contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione, libri III*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), 285–91.

31. Paracelsus, *Volumen Paramirum*, 329, trans. in Weeks (as in n. 21), 140. Potier was frequently a houseguest of Cassiano, who had a portrait of Potier in his library. Gabriel Naudé, who wrote about Cassiano's portrait collection in 1642, recognized Potier for having combined the French use of plants as medicine with the German use of minerals as medicine. On Potier, see François Secret, "Le Commendator Cassiano dal Pozzo et le médecin chymique Pierre Potier d'Angers, fixé à Bologne," *Chrysopoia* 5 (1992–96): 697–701. On Paracelsus, see n. 21 above. The importance placed in the 17th century on convincing a patient of the potency of a cure is discussed in nn. 113, 122 below.

32. Similar to the French Azoth is the Italian Azoto. Bellori, 414, for example, calls Poussin's painting "Il morbo de gli Azotii" and refers to the Philistine city as the "Città d'Azoto."

33. See Paracelsus, *Selected Writings [Lebendiges Erbe]*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, trans. Norbert Guterman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), glossary, s.v. "azoth"; also Martin Ruland, *Lexicon Alchimiae* (Frankfurt: Zacharia Palthenius, 1612), 96–97; and Pierre Potier, *Pharmacopoeia spagirica* (Cologne: Matthaeus Smitz, 1624), 290–91, 303.

34. Paracelsus, 1995 (as in n. 33), 284; Paracelsus, *De febribus*, in *Opera omnia practica et chymica* (Bologna, 1643), 104; Jacques Nuysement, "Poème philosophique sur l'azoth des philosophes," Glasgow University Library, Ferguson Collection Manuscripts, ms 1; and "Azoth, sive de ligno et lignea vitae," in Paracelsus, *Das Volumen primum der Philosophia magna Spuria, in Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Sudhoff and Wilhelm Matthiessen (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1996), pt. 1, vol. 14, 573.

35. Larché, who performed many dissections, owned two paintings by Claude Lorrain; see Marcel Röthlisberger, *Claude Lorrain: The Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), vol. 1, 169–70, with additional biographical information on Larché.

36. Bellori, 412: "Havendo egli in Parigi, atteso all'anatomia in uno spedale, ripigliò di nuovo questo pratica del Larcheo nobile Chirurgo, esercitandosi sopra cadaveri, e scheletri, ne divenne ottimamente istrutto." Confirmation of their friendship is in Félibien, *Entretien VIII*, 16; and Giovanni Battista Passeri, *Vite de pittori scultori et architetti dall'anno 1641 sino all'anno 1673* (*Die Künstlerbiographien*), ed. Jacob Hess (Leipzig: H. Keller, 1934), 326.

37. Costello (as in n. 2), 275: "il miracolo dell'arca nel tempio di Agone." 38. Shortly after 1660, Bellori described Poussin's work as "a plague painting of his [una sua peste]" in the margin of his copy of Baglione's *Vite*; see Passeri (as in n. 36), 326 n. 7. In 1672, Bellori, 414, entitled it "the disease of the people of Ashdod [il morbo de gli azotij]." The German painter and artists' biographer Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688) saw the painting in Rome and referred to it as "the plague" in his 1675 *Teutsche Academie*; see Costello (as in n. 2), 239. After entering the Louvre collection in 1665, it was henceforth identified as a scene of the plague; see Mollaret and Brossolet (as in n. 3), 171–77. Titles given to Angelo Caroselli's copy are in Bonfait (as in n. 4), 171. Passeri, 326, retains the sense of Poussin's title with "the history of the Idol Dagon broken into pieces before the Ark [*l'istoria dell'Idolo Dagone caduto in pezzi all'aspetto dell'Arca*];" likewise, Charles Le Brun referred to it as "l'Arche d'Alliance" (the Ark of the Alliance) during the Académie Royale *conférence* of Mar. 1, 1670. *Les conférences inédites de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture d'après les manuscrits des archives de l'École des Beaux-Arts*, ed. André-Jean-Charles Fontaine (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1903), 116.

39. This issue of different titles is raised by Boeckl (as in n. 3), 119, 121, although she reaches a different conclusion, namely, that the focus on plague was unjustly foisted on a picture that is essentially a religious allegory.

40. See Bonfait (as in n. 4), 168.

41. Bellori, 415: "affissa in un dolente sguardo." For plague symptomatology in the 17th century, see the physician Diomedo Fornese's records from the Roman plague of 1656 in BAV, ms Chigi E III 62, fol. 57; Balestra (as in n. 24), fol. 13r; Rossi (as in n. 14), 31; and Mario Vanti, *Storia dell'Ordine dei Chierici Regolari Ministri degli Infermi* (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1943–44), vol. 2, 226. Ancient descriptions of the disease are also relevant to Poussin's image. Lucretius's account of the plague in Athens in *De rerum natura* 6.1148–68, 1182–88 notes both the *facies pestica* and the languor of the victims.

42. On this gesture in plague imagery, see Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 486.

43. Sofie-Charlotte Emmerling, *Antikenverwendung und Antikenstudien bei*



Nicolas Poussin, Ph.D. diss., Universität Würzburg, 1939, 31, first suggested this statue as Poussin's source.

44. See Elizabeth Cropper, "Marino's 'Strage degli Innocenti,' Poussin, Rubens, and Guido Reni," *Studi secenteschi* 33 (1992): 153; Sebastian Schütze, "La représentation des affetti," in *Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665): Actes du colloque organisé au Musée du Louvre*, ed. Alain Mérot (Paris: Documentation Française, ca. 1996), 578; Cropper and Dempsey, 85, 268-70; and Keazor (as in n. 3), 63.

45. See, for example, "Il ragguaglio della fondazione del Ven. o Monasterio delle Monache Cappuccine ad Monte Cavallo," BAV, ms Vat. lat. 9162, fol. 45: "corrutione nell'aria che gl'huomini con l'alitare e respirare tirano a se quell'aria immalignità, la quale penetrandoli le vene corrompe il sangue, genera febre acute, et pestilentiali" (men with their breathing draw [corrupted] air into their bodies; this pernicious air, penetrating the veins, corrupts the blood [and] generates acute and pestilential fevers). See also Muratori (as in n. 11), 94.

46. Giovanni Balducci, "Memoirs of the Plague in Florence (1613-48)," in *Italy in the Baroque*, ed. and trans. Brendan Dooley (New York: Garland, 1995), 197. This association is also found in Bellori, 415, who calls the gesture in Poussin's painting a sign of "the stench that issues from putrefied body parts." The nose-pinching gesture is seen in diverse subjects, including Andrea Sacchi's *Saint Anthony of Padua Resuscitating a Dead Man* of about 1631 at the Church of the Concezione in Rome, as noted by Ebert-Schiffner, 31. On the origins of the social aversion to bad smells, see Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

47. For contagion theories, see Lester S. King, *The Road to Medical Enlightenment 1650-1695* (New York: American Elsevier, 1970), 48, 59-60.

48. Kircher (as in n. 25), 29-50. Giuseppe Balestra (as in n. 24), 72, also dissected plague victims, as did George Thomson in 1666.

49. Bellori, 416, notes Poussin's appropriation of *Il Morbeto*: "Pussino in questa historia imitò in gran parte il morbo di Rafaelle intagliato da Marco Antonio, seguitando i moti, e gli affetti stessi delle figure" (Poussin in this history painting imitated to a great degree Raphael's [*Il Morbeto*] engraved by Marcantonio, repeating the figures' gestures as well as their emotions). Nearly all modern scholars, beginning with Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 94, comment on the connection.

50. See Stefania Mason Rainaldi, "Le immagini della peste nella cultura figurativa veneziana," in *Venezia e la peste: 1348-1797* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980), 238-39, who proposes that the pinching gesture indicates Raphael's study of ancient medical treatises; however, since the classical authorities cited by Mason Rainaldi were foundational to Renaissance medicine, Raphael could have gleaned these precepts from contemporary sources, too. The portrayal of epidemic disease in *Il Morbeto* is a topic deserving of greater study.

51. An Aristotelian etiology of plague may also be signaled by the comet in Raphael's *Madonna of Foligno*. See Elisabeth Schröter, "Raffaels *Madonna di Foligno*: Ein Passbild?" *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 50 (1987): 47-87.

52. All passages from the *Aeneid* are from *Virgil*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999-2000). The pestilence among livestock is not mentioned in the *Aeneid*. For this detail as well as the image's admixture of bucolic and urban elements, Raphael may have consulted Livy's account of a Roman plague of 464 BCE: "It was an unhealthy season and in both town and country there was a great deal of sickness. Cattle suffered as much as men, and the incidence of disease was increased by overcrowding, as farmers together with their livestock had been taken into the city for fear of raids. The smell of the motley collection of animals and men was distressing to city folk. . . . the farmers and yokels, packed as they were into inadequate quarters, suffered no less from the heat and lack of sleep, while attendance upon the sick, or mere contact of any kind, continually spread the infection." Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin, 1984), 1890 (3.6).

53. I suggest that the columnar fragments in Poussin's painting are not signs of a seismic tremor (Ashdod's other buildings are intact) but rather of the divine hand that toppled the statue of Dagon.

54. Baldo Baldi, *De contagione pestifera praelectio* (Rome, 1631).

55. The Aristotelian explanation of plague still had currency: see the treatise dedicated to Urban VIII by Antonio Sponta (as in n. 13). Similarly, Naldi (as in n. 15), declares, "The plague does not have any symptoms of its own, except for its universality." Though ponderous objections to the theory of contagion had been raised by theologians, the greater snarl in the advancement of epidemiology came from doctors, and in particular from those physicians whose university education had been grounded in the classical authorities. They maintained that plague was caused by celestial alignments and attributed the uneven mortality patterns to two sublunar factors: the environmental dissemination of plague throughout a wider geographic region than the one affected by the stars, and the natural resistance that certain individuals have to plague because of their humoral constitutions.

56. This idea of Poussin's figural composition as a metaphor for contagion and much of the supporting visual evidence were brought to my attention by Natasha Staller.

57. In 1898, P. L. Simond determined the vector of the bacillus to be the flea; the role of rodents in the plague's transmission was realized soon afterward. The first to investigate the etiological significance of rats in Poussin's picture was H. Meige, "La peste dans l'art," *La Nature*, no. 1245 (1897). See also Neustatter (as in n. 3), 105-13; and Mollaret and Brossolet (as in n. 3).

58. Mollaret and Brossolet (as in n. 3), 171-72, were the first to contend that Poussin could not have understood the rats' etiological role before the medical discoveries of 1894; they believed the Scriptures to be his exclusive source for the murine plague. Bellori, 416, was the first to link the rats to the biblical source. See also Boeckl (as in n. 3), 119-25.

59. See Werner Schreiber and Friedrich Karl Mathys, *Infectio: Infectious Diseases in the History of Medicine* (Basel: Roche, 1987), 21; Neustatter (as in n. 3), 105; and George Henry Falkiner Nuttall, "Zur Aufklärung der Rolle, welche die Insekten bei der Verbreitung der Pest spielen," *Centralblatt für Bakteriologie* 1, no. 22 (1897): 93. The association between plague and rats may also have been a natural consequence of the misguided practice of killing dogs and cats (rats' primary predators in cities) as a defensive sanitary measure during plagues, which led to increased numbers of rats.

60. See Thomas Clifford Allbutt, *Greek Medicine in Rome* (London: Macmillan, 1921), 337; Federico Borca, "Towns and Marshes in the Ancient World," in *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*, ed. Valerie Hope and Eireann Marshall (London: Routledge, 2000), 75; Amato Bacchini, *La vita e le opere di Giovanni Maria Lancisi* (Rome: Sansoni, 1920), 56; and Saint Camillo de Lellis to Olimpio Nofri, Jan. 10, 1609, in *Scritti, raccolti e presentati da Mario Vanti* (Milan: Il Pio Samaritano, 1965), 371.

61. Vincenzo Cartari, *Le immagini de i dei de gli antichi*, ed. Ginetta Auzzas (Vicenza: N. Puzzas, 1996), 79. Already appealing for its mixture of pagan arcana and natural philosophy, Cartari's explanation would have garnered special meaning at the papal court, where Urban VIII's graces could be won through clever references to his personal devices of the sun and its ruler, Apollo.

62. Charles Le Brun, *conférence* of Mar. 1, 1670, in *Les conférences inédites* (as in n. 38), 117.

63. The ancient source of the image was known to Félibien; see Félibien, *Entretien VIII*, 24; cf. Blunt, vol. 1, 1967, 94. Before Poussin, Anthony Van Dyck used the motif in the title page of a 1629 pamphlet on the life of a plague saint, Saint Rosalie of Palermo, on which see Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, "Van Dyck's 'Life of St. Rosalie,'" *Burlington Magazine* 131, no. 1039 (1989): 693-98. Other adaptations of this motif are noted in Christine Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology* (Kirkville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000).

64. *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. K. Jex-Blake (Chicago: Area, 1976), 35.98.133-35. On Aristeides' motif as a topos of pathos in Poussin's plague painting, see Schütze (as in n. 44), 576-78.

65. On the meaning of the Madonna Lactans, see Gian Paolo Bonani and Serena Baldassare Bonani, *Maria Lactans* (Rome: Marianum, 1995); and Beth Williamson, "The Virgin Lactans as Second Eve: Image of the Salvatrix," *Studies in Iconography* 19 (1998): 105-38. An example of the Madonna Lactans in a votive plague painting is Domenico Antonio Vaccaro's *Madonna and Child with Saints Roch, Sebastian, and Francis Xavier* at the Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Mass.

66. On the altarpiece, see Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, Dieter Graf, and Francesco Petrucci, eds., *Giovanni Battista Gaulli, Il Baciccio 1639-1709* (Milan: Skira, 1999), 287, cat. no. 62. This is one of the first works Gaulli painted in Rome after moving from Genoa, where his parents and nine siblings died of plague in 1657.

67. Compare the similar use of motifs in Mattia Preti's sketch for the *Ex-Voto of the Plague of 1656* at the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples.

68. *Il tempio della salute eretto per voto de la Repubblica Veneta* (Venice: Libreria Emiliani, 1930), 30: "Vedi ai tuoi piedi prostato un afflitto popolo, fatto bersaglio al flagello della Divina Giustizia. . . . Mira come i nostri aspetti sparuti dal disagio, lividi dalla malattia, consunti dalle affezioni, sporgano sotto la pelle le ossa spogliate. . . ."

69. The "Observations on Painting" were first published in Bellori, 460-62; below I cite from the translation in Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 361-66. Anthony Blunt, "Poussin's Notes on Painting," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1937-38): 344-51, argues that Poussin initiated them by the time of Sandrart's Roman sojourn (1627-35); cf. Anthony Colantuono, "Poussin's *Osservazioni sopra la pittura*: Notes or Aphorisms?" *Studi Secenteschi* 41 (2000): 285-309. The relevance of Aristotle's *Poetics* to Poussin's painted tragedies is confirmed by Charles Dempsey, "Nicolas Poussin between Italy and France: Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* and the Invention of the Tableau," in *L'Europa e l'arte italiana: Per cento anni dalla fondazione del Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz*, ed. Max Seidel (Venice: Marsilio, 2000), 325.

70. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 393; trans. Bongiorno, 176. Cf. Aristotle, 1453b20-21.

71. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 393ff.; trans. Bongiorno, 176-77.

72. On this topic, see Cropper (as in n. 44), 137-65; also Cropper and Dempsey, 253-78.

73. Cropper (as in n. 44), 143ff.

74. *Ibid.*, 153. See also Cropper and Dempsey, 267-68, on the image of a woman's breast in rhetorical contrast with violence and blood.

75. One disapproving viewer was Henry Fuseli in 1801, on whom see Cropper (as in n. 44), 152; also Cropper and Dempsey, 269-70. Aristotle, 1448b10-11.

76. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 98, trans. Bongiorno, 44.

77. On Poussin's method of "staging" his compositions in shadowboxes with clay figures, see Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 242-43. On the notable artifice of Poussin's works, see Félibien, 95, who compares the color of the figures to marble and bronze statues rather than to living flesh.

78. Aristotle, 1460a10, 18, 1453b10.
79. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 183ff., 1.385; trans. Bongiorno, 66, 149. Cf. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 204, 388, vol. 2, 358.
80. The relation of Poussin's architectural setting to Serlio's design was first noted by Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 94. Reflecting Aristotle's belief that tragic plots ought to involve "people with a great reputation and good fortune . . . and distinguished men from similar families" (Aristotle, 1453a12–13), Sebastiano Serlio wrote that "houses made for Tragedies must be made for great personages, for actions of Love, strange adventures, and cruel murders (as you read in ancient and modern tragedies) happen always in the houses of great Lords, Dukes and Princes, and Kings; therefore in such cases you must make none but stately houses as you see it here in this figure." Serlio, *The Five Books of Architecture: An Unabridged Reprint of the English Edition of 1611* (New York: Dover, 1982), n.p. When Paris Bourdon painted his *Bath of Bathsheba* within the setting of grand, princely houses, he was in perfect accord with Serlio, since Bathsheba was seduced by a king and her husband was assassinated as a result.
81. This anonymous woodcut and similar examples are illustrated in Jean Ehrmann, "Massacre and Persecution Pictures in Sixteenth Century France," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945): 195–99, ill. 46b.
82. Ebert-Schiffner, 337, 339–40, notes general correspondences with theater; see also Elisabeth Hipp, *Nicolas Poussin, "Die Pest von Asdod"* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2005). Other works by Poussin have been linked to tragic theater. *The Israelites Gathering Manna* was analyzed in this vein at the Académie Royale, Paris, Nov. 5, 1667; see Jean-François Félibien, *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l'année 1667* (Paris: F. Leonard, 1668), 76–107. *The Death of Germanicus* is studied in terms of ancient theories of tragedy and of Tarquinio Galluzi's 1633 treatise on tragedy in Sebastian Schütze, "Tragedia antica e pittura moderna: Alla ricerca di 'una certa sublime forma di locuzione, la quale penetra, commuove, rapisce gl'animi,'" in *Docere, delectare, movere: Affetti, devozione e retorica nel linguaggio artistico del primo barocco romano* (Rome: Istituto Olandese a Roma and Biblioteca Hertziana, 1998), 140–54. The same work is seen as an example of tragic *peripeteia* in Dempsey (as in n. 69), 331–35. McTighe, 56, notes *peripeteia* with the *Landscape with Orpheus*. The Chantilly Massacre of the Innocents is called a "Senecan tragedy" by Elizabeth Cropper, "Ritorno al crocevia," in *Poussin et Rome: Actes du colloque de l'Académie de France à Rome*, ed. Olivier Bonfait et al. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1996), 260; and Cropper and Dempsey, 277. It might seem fantastic that a temporal structure could be applied to an atemporal medium, but Aristotle (1450b1) and Castelvetro (vol. 1, 385ff.) both implicitly encouraged such experimentation when they used analogies with painting to characterize plot's significance to tragedy.
83. Aristotle, 1452a24. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 322; trans. Bongiorno, 117.
84. Aristotle, 1452a30; cf. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 350. Notably, Castelvetro (vol. 1, 320, 328) agrees with Aristotle that "the best type of recognition is that which occurs at the same time as the reversals"; emphasizing simultaneity, this type best suits the painter's extemporal art.
85. Aristotle, 1452b10; cf. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 336, 350.
86. Aristotle, 1452b38, 1453a2; cf. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 377. On the consistent emphasis on the *affetti* in the early critical reception of the painting and the gestures that signal these emotions, see Ebert-Schiffner, 329–32.
87. Aristotle, 1449b24–29. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 155, trans. Bongiorno, 52.
88. On the meaning of the term *catharsis* both among the ancient Greeks and in Renaissance Italy, see Pedro Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, trans. L. J. Rather and John Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 185–86, 201ff.; and Patrick Dandrey, "Catharsis et mélancholie: L'imaginaire du 'corps écrivain' entre l'automne de la renaissance et le zénith du classicisme," in *Le corps au XVIIe siècle: Actes du premier colloque conjointement organisé par la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature et le Centre International de Rencontres sur le XVIIe Siècle*, ed. Ronald Tobin (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1995), 36–37.
89. Castelvetro, vol. 2, 366; trans. Bongiorno, 321.
90. Although Anthony Blunt, 1937–38 (as in n. 69), 344ff., qualified Castelvetro as an important source for Poussin's notes, he did not recognize the full extent to which this text informs the painter's notes. Castelvetro, vol. 2, 328–29, provides the philological basis for the topic "How the Impossible Constitutes the Perfection of Painting and Poetry," as Blunt noted. In addition, Poussin's "Definition of Painting and of the Imitation Proper to It" recalls Castelvetro, vol. 1, 23, 55, 169, 194; "How Art Surpasses Nature" recalls Castelvetro, vol. 1, 96; and, to some degree, "Of Action" recalls Castelvetro, vol. 1, 28. Cf. Dempsey (as in n. 69), 325. Notably, John Milton developed his theory of tragic catharsis while in Italy, an itinerary that included a visit to the papal court, hosted by Francesco Barberini (Martin Mueller, "Sixteenth-Century Italian Criticism and Milton's Theory of Catharsis," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 4, no. 1 [winter 1966]: 150). To some degree, then, Poussin's and Milton's sources for catharsis may have overlapped.
91. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 161.
92. *Ibid.*, 390; trans. Bongiorno, 150.
93. Castelvetro, vol. 1, 160–61; trans. Bongiorno, 56. Deepening the medical sense of Castelvetro's discussion is his location of these emotions in men's hearts, rather than their souls. Though the soul is the seat of emotions in the opinion of Castelvetro's contemporaries, this organic location allows for physiological consequences.

94. Although this theory has not been considered before with regard to medicinal catharsis, others have asserted a link between the painting and a purely emotional catharsis. Henry Fuseli believed the painting failed to achieve purgative terror (Cropper and Dempsey, 269). Ebert-Schiffner, 342–46, argues that *The Plague of Ashdod* attempts a "sublimated representation of the passions" to achieve the moral reform of society that she sees as a Counter-Reformational priority and a means of "reinforcing the power of the Church State and the Jesuits." Unlike Ebert-Schiffner, I believe that Poussin's interest in catharsis was primarily medicinal, and that its application to the sociopolitical program she describes would have been limited and misplaced.
95. See Wilberding (as in n. 30), 561.
96. See, for example, BAV MS Barb. lat. 4344, fols. 79r, 84r.
97. One of the first to warn against bloodletting in cases of pestilence was the medieval physician Rhasis. Gabriele Falloppio during the plague of 1524–30 and Ambroise Paré during the plague of 1565 witnessed the disastrous results of phlebotomy. Giulio Mancini, the doctor who treated Pope Urban VIII Barberini (1623–44) for malarial fever in 1623, preferred exudation and the cleansing of abscesses to more violent means of purgation. Matteo Naldi (as in n. 15), 66–68, was cautious about bloodletting with feverish patients; his reluctance was shared by the Milanese physician Luigi Settalo (1552–1633), whose *Animadversionum, et cautionum medicarum libri novem* (published in 1650) advocates mild purgations like perspiration and urination or aloë-based medicines. Bernardino Cristini and Geronimo Gastaldi both noted the danger posed by phlebotomy during the plague of 1656. Gregorio Rossi (as in n. 14), 33–35, in a plague treatise dedicated to Francesco Barberini, disapproved of bloodletting since the proportion of poisoned blood to good blood remains the same, and the patient is further weakened. Muratori (as in n. 11), 219–23, disputed the humoral theory that had been the basis for intestinal purgatives and inveighed against phlebotomy as a plague remedy. See Anselment, 101, for other sources on the controversy over purgation.
98. Muratori (as in n. 11), 220.
99. Johannes Schmid (or Schmiedtius), whose medical theory is summed up in Johannes A. van der Linden's *Lindennius renovatus* (Nuremberg, 1686) as "purgation by means of the imagination," may offer insight into this intriguing psychosomatic phenomenon, although I have not been able to consult Schmid's works.
100. Dandrey (as in n. 88), 34, uses the synthetic term "psychopathology of aesthetic pleasure" to comprehend both mechanisms of pleasure (*hēdonē*) in Aristotle's poetics of tragedy. See also Lain Entralgo (as in n. 88), 235.
101. Wright (as in n. 20), 60: "Pleasure and delight, if it be moderate, bringeth health, because purer spirits retire unto the heart, and they help marvelously the digestion of blood, so that thereby the heart engendreth great abundance, and most purified spirits, which after being dispersed through the body, cause a good concoction to be made in all parts, helping them to expel the superfluties; they also clear the brain, and consequently the understanding."
102. Similar is the "complex relationship of imitation, purgation, and pleasure" in Milton's concept of catharsis, which may derive from Lorenzo Giacomini's "Sopra la purgazione della tragedia" in his 1597 *Orazioni e discorsi*; see Mueller (as in n. 90), 143, 148–50.
103. For pleasure as the goal of Poussin's *Death of Germanicus*, see Dempsey (as in n. 69), 325–27.
104. Giacinto Gigli, *Diario di Roma*, ed. Manlio Barberito (Rome: Colombo, 1994), 117: "in questi tempi si sentivano miserabili successi, et grandissima destructione delle Città dove era la peste, morendo ogni giorno popolo infinito a centinaia, e migliara."
105. On the related topic of the use of images in a magical manner against illness, the vast bibliography includes Aby Warburg, "Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1932), vol. 2, 459ff.; Daniel P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958); Francis Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1964); and Carla De Bellis, "Astri, gemme e arti medicomagiche nello 'speculum lapidum' di Camillo Leonardi," in *Il mago, il cosmo, il teatro degli astri*, ed. Gianfranco Formichetti (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985), 67–105.
106. On this phenomenon during the Renaissance, see Anselment, chap. 1. For a general history, see G. S. Rousseau, "Literature and Medicine: Towards a Simultaneity of Theory and Practice," *Literature and Medicine* 5 (1986): 152–81.
107. Antonio Minturno, *L'arte poetica* (Venice, 1564), quoted in Allan Gilbert, ed., *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (New York: American Book Company, ca. 1940), 290; George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 47, quoted in Anselment, 45.
108. Boccaccio, 11. Melancholy is also a theme in Mascardi's ruminations on the plague of 1630 quoted above (see n. 7 above).
109. This silence was interpreted as immoral indifference in Aldo S. Bernardo, "The Plague as Key to Meaning in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague*, ed. Daniel Willman (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1982), 58–59.
110. Boccaccio, 1–2. Though modern critics dismiss this phenomenon as a pretext for the indecorous tales that follow, the author's opening remarks about the problem of melancholy faced by "delicate ladies" and his own

"Human . . . compassion for the unhappy" might be taken at face value if we consider the gravity with which the atrabilious disease was regarded in those days. Daniel Sennert offered a mechanical explanation for women's susceptibility to melancholy in *Institutionum medicinae*, asserting that because women do not exercise and sweat as men do, they are less able to purge the toxic accruals of that humor; see Thorndike (as in n. 11), vol. 8, 510.

111. Plato, *Charmides, or Temperance*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1871), 157a.

112. *Ibid.*, 156d–157d. Because it offered an integrated model of bodily and mental pathologies regulated by the health of the soul, the medical theory put forth in the *Charmides* was influential for the treatment of melancholy, the paradigmatic psychosomatic affliction. Burton, 365, demonstrates the longevity of this teaching, advising the physician to "ease [the sufferer of melancholy] with comfort, cheerful speeches, fair promises, and good words, persuade him, advise him" before administering pharmaceutical medicines. Burton then refers directly to the *Charmides*: "The body cannot be cured till the mind be satisfied. Socrates, in Plato, would prescribe no physic for Charmides's headache, 'till first he had eased his troubled mind; body and soul must be cured together, as head and eyes.'"

113. Laín Entralgo (as in n. 88), *passim*. In Poussin's time, Feyens (as in n. 18), 191–97, studied the imagination's power to cure diseases, reminding the reader that according to Galen, the best doctor is the one that is best able to persuade his patient, and that Albert the Great's doctor cured not with medicines but by inspiring confidence. Feyens concluded that imagination cures disease indirectly, and a patient who has confidence in his doctor will be happier, and this in turn will increase his natural body heat and vivify his spirit, so that his disease can be more easily overcome.

114. Ambroise Paré, *Oeuvres* (1585), cited in Jean Delumeau, *La peur en occident* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), 156.

115. Boccaccio, 79. The emphasis on *sôphrosynê* occurs also in Pampinea's exhortation to "take what enjoyment, what happiness, and what pleasure we can, without going beyond the rules of reason in any way" (*ibid.*, 12).

116. *Ibid.*, 3.

117. Burton, 366. See Anselment, 45–46, on the varieties of poetic therapies used to cure ailments in the 17th century.

118. According to Burton, 365–66, "As imagination, fear, grief cause such passions, so conceits alone, rectified by good hope, counsel, &c. are able again to help." He also notes, after Plutarch's *Consolatione ad Apollonium*, "the pleasant sermon [*sermo benignus*] alleviates pain."

119. *Ibid.*, 366. Cf. Wright (as in n. 20), 84.

120. On the commission, see Rosenberg and Prat, 204; and Matthias Winner, "Flora, Mater Florum," in Bonfait et al. (as in n. 82), 387.

121. Winner (as in n. 120), 393.

122. Most often the relief is identified as a scene of satyrs and nymphs, but no specific source has been found; see Keazor (as in n. 3), 65, 68 n. 38. Poussin based figures in his *Israelites Gathering Manna* and his *Massacre of the Innocents* on the Medici Niobe group, according to Cropper and Dempsey, 33, 277. A Renaissance representation of the subject, Polidoro da Caravaggio's fresco at the Palazzo Milesi, is associated with Poussin's Louvre *Rape of the Sabines* by Henry Keazor, "Zu zwei Zeichnungen Nicolas Poussins," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 57, no. 2 (1994): 274–75.

123. According to Cartari (as in n. 61), 53, "arrows were put in [Apollo's] hand because frequently the excessively vehement heat of the sun does harm to men, engendering plague and other diseases." Written in the 12th century, Eustathius's *Commentary on Homer*, 1.1.41, treats Apollo's plague arrows as a metaphor for how the sun's rays foment the corruption of the land and air of the plains around Mt. Ida, giving rise to plague; see Vivian Nutton, "Medical Thoughts on Urban Pollution," in Hope and Marshall (as in n. 60), 68. For the association of the Slaughter of the Niobids with plague, see Marc Fumaroli, *Nicolas Poussin: Sainte Françoise Romaine* (Paris: Service Culturel du Musée du Louvre, 2001), 51.

124. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Sipylos (whence Girolamo Fracastoro derives his hero's name, Syphilus) is Niobe's eldest son; see Fracastoro, 1984 (as in n. 32), 25.

125. Pliny, *Natural History* 36.28. Livy, *Annals of the Roman People* 4.21.5, 4.25.3.

126. Poussin, quoted in McTighe, 1, from the letter published in *La correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, ed. Charles Jouanny (1911; reprint, Paris: F. de Nobele, 1968), vol. 5, 383.

127. Boccaccio, 16. A source for Poussin's garden imagery that has not been discussed is Antonio Tempesta's *Death of Hyacinth*, illustrated in his 1606 *Metamorphoseon Ovidianarum*; Hyacinth and Apollo both figure in *The Empire of Flora*, which echoes the configuration of pergola, fountains, and fields.

128. On Apollo as patron of medicine and poetry, see Anselment, esp. chap. 1. Apollo was also associated with Urban VIII Barberini (1623–1644); see Marc Fumaroli, *L'Inspiration du poète de Poussin* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1989).

129. Pierre Potier indicated how to prepare various pharmaceuticals from flowers represented in Poussin's painting, including roses, violets, and hyacinths, in his *Opera omnia pratica et chymica* (Frankfurt, 1698), 636–96. All living plants, even plants without perceptible odors, have healthful effects on the ambient air, according to Marsilio Ficino, who discusses the occult effects of odors on health through the mediation of planetary influences. He asserts that breathing air in a garden restores the body and soul by infusing them

with the "spiritu mundi." Ficino, *De vita coelitus comparanda* (Florence, 1489), 3.11.20–32, 129–45). For a general account of the importance of floral perfumes in plague medicine, see Françoise Hildesheimer, *La terreur et la pitié: L'Ancien Régime à l'épreuve de la peste* (Paris: Publisud, 1990), 35–41.

130. Marcantonio Ciappi, *Regola da preservarsi in sanità in tempi di sospetto di peste* (Bracciano, 1630), fols. 431–432r. Similar advice is given by Binet (as in n. 20), 86; and Domenico Panarolo, *Atrologia, cioè, Discorso dell'aria: Trattato utile per la sanità* (Rome: Domenico Marciari, 1642), 86–87.

131. *Venezia e la peste* (as in n. 50), cat. no. a37.

132. Alessandro Canezza, *Gli arcispedali di Roma nella vita cittadina nella storia e nell'arte* (Rome: Stiauti, 1933), 89. See also the Holy See's payments to pharmacists for medicines made from roses and violets during the plague of 1656 in the "Conto della Reverenda Camera Apostolica delle robbe servite per li lazzarette di S. Pancratio e Casaletto di Pio V, 1656," Archivio di Stato, Rome, MS Camerale II Sanità, busta 6 (ress.), 4.

133. On Ferrari's *Flora seu de florum cultura* (Rome, 1633) and its relation to the Barberini and to Poussin's *Empire of Flora*, see David Freedberg, "Poussin, Ferrari, Cortone et l'Aetas Florea," in Merot (as in n. 44), esp. 343, 347. On the Barberini gardens on the Quirinal (for which Cassiano dal Pozzo furnished designs in 1627), see Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues and Flowers: Studies in Italian Gardens of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1994), 219–348. Notably, Poussin refers to *The Empire of Flora* as "a flower garden [*un giardino di fiori*]" at Valguarnera's trial; see Costello (as in n. 2), 275; and Winner (as in n. 120), 387. On conventional herbals, see Charles Singer, "The Herbal in Antiquity and Its Transmission to Later Ages," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 47 (1927): 1ff.

134. Plato (as in n. 111), 157a. Ferrari must have had a profound knowledge of plants' medicinal properties, since he lived at the Jesuit Collegio Romano, whose large garden supplied the medicines distributed to the public at the Jesuits' adjoining pharmacy. By way of comparison, John Parkinson, who also wrote an herbal without reference to medicinal uses—the 1629 *Paradisi in sole paradises Terrestris, or a Garden of all sorts of pleasant flowers*—was well versed in pharmacology, having served as James I's apothecary.

135. Problem XXX.i and an English translation are found in Klibansky et al., 18–29.

136. Poussin to Roland Fréart de Chantelou, Mar. 1, 1665, in Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 371–72.

137. Potier would have taken an interest in Poussin's melancholy, considered a symptom of syphilis, on which see Fracastoro (as in n. 30), 10.

138. Passeri (as in n. 36), 234–40. Abatini is credited with inventing the technique of illusionistically painted stucco, used for the Pio Chapel (1643) in the church of S. Agostino in Rome.

139. *Ibid.*, 239.

140. This cathartic theory is laid out with regard to Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* in Dandrey (as in n. 88), 39. On Poussin's familiarity with Montaigne's work, see Cropper and Dempsey, 182–83, 216.

141. Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1576), vol. 1, 732, quoted in Klibansky et al., 258. Ficino, though he did not refer specifically to catharsis, believed that the melancholic artist could heal himself if he should "apply himself of his own accord to that activity which is the particular domain of the sublime star of speculation, and which the planet promotes just as powerfully as it hinders and harms the ordinary functions of body and soul." Klibansky et al., 271.

142. Music was commonly compared to medicine, even in popular culture: *Musica laetitia comes / medicina dolorum* is the motto written on a virginal in Johannes Vermeer's *Music Lesson* (Royal Collection, London). Since Poussin had studied the Greek musical theory of the modes, he may have known that Aristotle (*Politics* 7.7.1341b32–1342a16) regarded music as a catalyst of the cathartic purification of the soul. The use of music for psychiatric therapy in ancient Greece, where Asclepiades prescribed Dorian for the frivolous and Phrygian for the sad, was noted in the 16th century by Caelius Aurelianus in his *De morbis acutis et chronicis*; see Klibansky et al., 46.

143. Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman: Fashioning Him Absolute in the Most Necessary and Commendable Qualities* (London, 1634), quoted in Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 9.

144. In the play, Don Luis expounds on Don Juan Roca's pastime: "Y si para entretener / tal vez fatigas de leer, / con vuestras melancolias / Treguas tratádes, era / lo prolijo pincel / su alivio" (And to banish the occasional fatigue of reading, as you sought to reach a truce with your melancholy, your remedy was the prolific paintbrush). *El pintor de su deshonra*, ed. Manuel Ruiz Lagos (Madrid: Alcalá, 1969), lines 40–45.

145. See Dandrey (as in n. 88), 31–33, 38.

146. *Ibid.*, 43.

147. One of my anonymous readers for the *Art Bulletin* brought this work to my attention. Long believed authentic, the drawing's authorship has been questioned by Pierre Rosenberg, "Poussin Drawings from British Collections," *Burlington Magazine* 133, no. 1056 (1991): 210–13. In response, Nicholas Turner, "L'Autoportrait dessiné de Poussin au British Museum," in Merot (as in n. 44), vol. 1, 81–97, argues for the traditional attribution to Poussin.

148. Cropper and Dempsey, 228–30, relate the drawing to Poussin's syphilis, which they tie to the sublimation of erotic content in *Venus and Mars* of about 1629–30; their arguments (217ff.) about Poussin's use of art to cope with his venereal disease parallel arguments made here about *The Plague of Ashdod* and pestilence.

149. On the *exemplum doloris* in Poussin's work, see Cropper and Dempsey, 85.

150. For a bibliography on the work, commission details, and a summary of recent interpretations, see Rosenberg and Prat, 406–8.
151. McTighe, 78–84, 121, 126–35.
152. Poussin again associates serpents with plague in his 1656 *Vision of Saint Francesca Romana*, where the disease is represented by means of a death-faced gorgon with snakes in his hair.
153. On Lippi's *Allegory*, see Katharine B. Neilson, *Filippino Lippi: A Critical Study* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), 135–36. In this work the figure of Jove with his thunderbolts indicates the divine origin of the disease in the arrows of divine anger.
154. Cartari (as in n. 61), 53. Cf. Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 347, who cites this passage in relation to the dead snake hanging from a tree in Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne*. Even in England in the 1640s, the Christian "Light of the Living" was identified with Phoebus Apollo, whose warmth and light dispel winter ailments, desiccate malarial vapors, and imbue plants with their curative powers; see Anselment, 24.
155. Panarolo, a professor of medicine and philosophy at the Roman university of the Sapienza, dedicated this work to Pietro Ottoboni. Other works by him are dedicated to members of the Barberini household.
156. Domenico Panarolo, *Apollo Pythius seu putredo debellata* (Rome, 1648), 7–8: "Pythonem, idest putredinem hoc anno Orientem . . . putredo, quae nihil aliud est quam corruptio, & interitus, vitae e diametro opposita sit. . . . obnoxia hominum corpora facile in populares, epidemicosque morbos incidere possunt."
157. *Ibid.*, 9: "Scit Roma, sit Aestate elapsa anni 1647 inundationes Autumnales, & copiosas aquam hyemis, indicavi. . . . Quamobrem totis viribus incumbendum est, ut lues forsan futura in ipso ortu oppugnetur. . . ." On the relation between this flood myth and premodern notions of environmental medicine, see Angelo Celli, *Storia della malaria nell'agro romano: Opera postuma* (Città di Castello: Società Anonima Tipografica Leonardo da Vinci, 1925), 289.
158. Columella, *De re rustica* 1.5, quoted in Allbutt (as in n. 60), 337. Snakeskins and snake venom since ancient times were employed in antipestilential theriacs because of the homeopathic theory that like cures like.
159. Naldi (as in n. 15), 20–21.
160. Giovanni Battista Doni, *De restituenda salubritate agri romani* (Florence, 1667), 19: "crassior, humidior, caliginosior, raroque aut nunquam à sole illustratus." The published book was based on Doni's manuscript, BAV, ms Barb. lat. 301, presented to Urban VIII in 1630. One of Doni's antique sources is Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, in which plague is blamed on atmospheric effluvia that "creep and wind like unto mist and cloud." Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. William Ellery Leonard (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1916), 6.1133.
161. Félibien, *Entretien VIII*, 111–12. This was an ancient precept: Rufus of Ephesus had determined that only the marshes of Egypt are salubrious places, since their waters do not become hot enough to putrefy, and the annual flood of the Nile exchanges old water for new; see Nutton (as in n. 123), 67.
162. Panarolo (as in n. 130), 75: "si debba eleggere quell'aria, che è lontana dall'esalationi, vapori, fumi, caligini, fetri d'aque morte, serpi infraciditi, cadaveri: improvi cose come già si vedrà, apportano molte volte la morte, e spesso provisiva, à gl'huomini." Cf. Paracelsus, "De pestilitate," in Paracelsus (as in n. 34), pt. 1, vol. 14, 607, for the hypothesis that plague-causing frogs are generated when the "imagination" of stagnant water is "sealed" by the sun and the moon.
163. Ulisse Aldrovandi, *De serpente et draconem* (Bologna, 1640), 7, quoted in McTighe, 122; cf. *ibid.*, 196 n. 92. Compare the assertion in Paracelsus, *Volumen Paramirum*, 384, that mere eye contact with serpents can kill.
164. McTighe, 121–22. Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 314, noted Kircher's interpretation of the Palestrina mosaic in relation to Poussin's later *Landscape with Two Nymphs*.
165. F. J. B. Watson, "A New Poussin for the National Gallery," *Burlington Magazine* 91, no. 550 (1949): 17; and Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 286–88. The ancient history of malaria and snake infestation in this area is studied in Federico Borca (as in n. 60), 80; see also Celli (as in n. 157).
166. McTighe, 82.
167. For Panarolo's "prediction," see n. 156 above. Giacinto Gigli, *Diario romano*, ed. Giuseppe Ricciotti (Rome: Tumminelli, 1958), 307–68. For other hardships afflicting Rome in these years, see Lynn Fedele Orr, "The Roman Environment during the Reign of Innocent X (1644–55)," in *Michael Sweets: 1618–1664*, ed. Guido Jansen and Peter Sutton, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2002, 49.
168. Cornelis Meijer, *Novi ritrovamenti dati in luce dall'ingegniero Cornelio Meyer; per eccitare l'ingegno de' virtuosi ad aumentarli, ò aggiungerli maggior perfezione* (Rome: Giovanni Giacomo Komarek, 1689–91). Other European cities were similarly tormented. In 1633, doctors concurred that eye contact with a basilisk inhabiting the sewers of Paris had killed five workmen; see René Sand, *The Advance to Social Medicine* (London: Staples, 1952), 120.
169. Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1974), 10.1. "Inguinaria," referring to the groin, may have been understood by Poussin's contemporaries either as bubonic plague (since buboes frequently appear on the upper thighs) or as a venereal disease such as syphilis.
170. See Giovanni Maria Lancisi, *De noxiis paludem effluvis* (Rome, 1717); and Celli (as in n. 157).
171. Urban VIII had himself served as a public engineer under Clement VIII, draining marshes and altering the courses of rivers to improve papal lands in Emilia Romagna.
172. Benedetto Castelli, "Discorso sopra la bonificazione delle Paludi Pontine," in "Libro secondo: Della misura dell'acque correnti" (1642), BAV, ms Barb. lat. 4267, fols. 58v–59r.
173. *Avviso* of Mar. 5, 1633, BAV, ms Otto. 3339: "bonificamenti, che renderanno l'aria più salutaria." Cf. Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, trans. Ernest Graf (London: J. Hodges, 1891–1953), vol. 29, 379.
174. Both the ancient myth of Cadmus and the effect of the Theban environment on the health of its citizens are discussed in Jennifer Clarke Kosak, "Polis Nosousa, Greek Ideas about the City and Disease in the Fifth Century BC," in Hope and Marshall (as in n. 60), 40.
175. Watson (as in n. 165), 17 n. 17; Guy de Tervarent, "Le véritable sujet du 'Paysage au Serpent' de Poussin à la National Gallery de Londres," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 2 (1952): 349ff.
176. Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 286. Cf. McTighe, 82.
177. It is perhaps worth noting that a large sheet covering the washerwoman's laundry, placed near the center of the composition, appears to be painted in cadmium yellow, a pigment whose name echoes the name "Cadmus."
178. Dempsey, "Poussin and the Natural Order," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1963, 69ff. See also Cropper and Dempsey, 291, where it is noted that the urn's image of a snake wrapped around a man actually depicts the myth of Archemorus.
179. Cartari (as in n. 61), 68. Dempsey (as in n. 178), 95. Cf. McTighe, 127–29, who develops Dempsey's solar interpretation of the snake on the urn with regard to Poussin's landscape.
180. Cropper and Dempsey, 291–93. This interpretation is supported by the surrounding imagery of animals seized by predators (rabbits by eagles and roosters by weasels). If a solar symbolism must be attached to the snake, in this case it would refer to the heat that exacerbates the processes of corruption, and the irregular meanders of the snake's body would correspond to a perversion of the sun's generative power.
181. See n. 27 above.
182. Félibien, *Entretien VIII*, 63, 150–51; cf. McTighe, 81; and Cropper and Dempsey, 293.
183. Gabriel Zinano, *Il sogno ovvero della poesia* (Reggio Emilia, 1590), cited in Blunt, 1967, vol. 1, 376.
184. Delumeau (as in n. 114), 162.
185. For details on the work's commission, see Rosenberg and Prat, 425–26.
186. McTighe, 147.
187. Binet (as in n. 20), 63: "Per consolazione dell'anime atterite dal timore della morte . . . si vive morendo. . . . morendosi vivo, vive."
188. Charles Dempsey, "Nicolas Poussin: Sainte Françoise Romaine," *Burlington Magazine* 144, no. 1186 (2002): 32. Dempsey's remark seems to speak to many of the ideas presented here, even if the author meant only the psychological relief produced by this catharsis and not the somatic as well.
189. On Urban VIII's practice of magic, see, for example, the *avviso* of May 4, 1630, in Luigi Amabile, *Fra Tommaso Campanella ne' castelli di Napoli in Rome ed in Parigi* (Naples: Cav. Antonio Morano, 1887), vol. 2, 149, doc. 203; also Gianfranco Formichetti, "Il 'De siderali fato vitando' di Tommaso Campanella," in *I testi e la scrittura: Studi di letteratura italiana* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1990), 69–91; and idem, *Tommaso Campanella: Eretico e mago alla corte dei papi* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1999).
190. The theory of the modes in relation to these two works is discussed in Winner (as in n. 120), 394; and Ebert-Schiffner, 344. I have noted that a single module of measure determines nearly all distances in *The Plague of Ashdod*, perhaps an attempt to "harmonize" the composition with a particular mode. Studies of Poussin's theory of the modes include Rudolph Zeidler, "Il problema dei modi e la consapevolezza di Poussin," *Critica d'Arte* 12 (1965): 26–35; and Jennifer Montagu, "Theory of the Musical Modes in the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 55 (1992): 233–48, with a bibliography on the topic at 234 n. 5; and Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 127–43.
191. Félibien, *Entretien VIII*, 57–58.
192. Frances Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 1947). Denis Mahon, "Poussiniana: Afterthoughts Arising from the Exhibition," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 104 (1962): 125; and T. Puttfarcken, "Poussin's Thoughts on Painting," in *Commemorating Poussin: Reception and Interpretation of the Artist*, ed. K. Scott and G. Warwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 65–66, both caution against reading Poussin's intentions through Félibien's "posthumous systematization."
193. See Joseph C. Allard, "Mechanism, Music, and Painting in Seventeenth-Century France," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1982): 269–79. Allard relates Poussin's modes to the occult, but he sees the modes primarily as a means of achieving stylistic decorum, or likeness, among the things represented in a composition. I would argue that this assimilation of a picture's disparate parts is itself tinged with Ficino's and Paracelsus's magic, in which the operating principle of *similia similibus* requires the magus to recognize the occult likenesses between different things according to "secret seals" imprinted on them by spiritual influences.
194. McTighe, 143.