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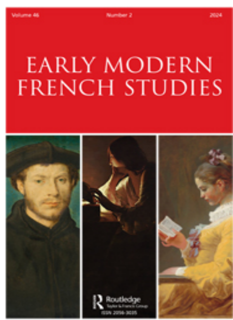

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'Tout frémit au seul nom de cette maladie': on strategies for (not) naming the plague, Marseille 1720

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The last major plague epidemic in France hit Marseille in 1720 and ultimately took the lives of over 120,000 people across the city and Provence. Yet to what degree did the act of naming the plague impact on its deadly dissemination in the city and beyond? This article seeks to answer that question. In the process, it contends that equivocations in designating the disease as 'la peste' revived fraught relations between the cosmopolitan sea port and central government in Versailles and Paris; and, more locally, they exposed how power was unevenly exercised economically, socially, and medically in the city. Such discursive choices cost thousands of lives. Naming the plague had a performative power beyond simple diagnosis; and medical and religious responses in particular to the Marseille epidemic suggest how the name of the plague was deployed (or withheld) to gain control over the narrative of the catastrophe.

KEYWORDS naming, plague, Marseille, discourse, disease, eighteenth century

In *Encyclopédie* entry 'Peste (Médecine)', chevalier Louis de Jaucourt states:

> [...] c'est de tous les maux le plus cruel. Tout frémit au seul nom de cette maladie ; cet effroi n'est que très-bien fondé ; plus funeste mille fois que la guerre, elle fait périr plus de monde que le feu & le fer. [...] la *peste* détruit le commerce entre les citoyens, la communication entre les parens ; elle rompt les liens les plus forts de la parenté & de la

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société ; parmi tant de calamités, les hommes sont continuellement prêts à tomber dans le desespoir.[1]

Jaucourt's article then ranges in confusing and contradictory detail over the plague's putative causes, numerous symptoms, and suggested remedies. It ends on its own note of despair: 'cette maladie nous est totalement inconnue quant à ses causes & son traitement'.[2] The article thus informs Marie-Hélène Huet's claim that it was not the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 but the threat of a renewed plague epidemic that stood as the gravest figure of 'Enlightenment disaster' for the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century France. The plague remained for them, in Huet's words, 'an elusive affliction that bore traces of a primitive chaos, a direct threat to the power of reason'.[3] Jaucourt's text on the plague was published in 1765 and makes no direct reference to recent experiences of the disease in continental Europe. However, his connected article, entitled 'Peste (Histoire ancienne & moderne)', points to the devastating Marseille plague of 1720 as an experience that still haunted the contemporary collective imagination in France and beyond.[4]

The Marseille plague of 1720–22 (also known as the plague of Provence) is usually dated from the docking of the large merchant vessel the *Grand Saint-Antoine*, returning in May 1720 from the Near East with an infected crew and contaminated cargo of cotton bales, fabrics, and other wares. From the quarantine stations in the port, the disease spread first through the old town in July, then through the rest of the city in August. It swept through large parts of Provence from September onwards. In the city of Marseille, the epidemic killed between forty and fifty thousand inhabitants (out of an estimated population of almost one hundred thousand) and took the lives of a further seventy thousand people across Provence. At its peak in late August 1720, one thousand people a day were dying in Marseille. Civic infrastructure was strained and intermittently collapsed, the port was closed, the city isolated; and by early September up to eight thousand rotting corpses were piled in the streets, often grouped near hospitals and churches. The disease subsided over the autumn of 1720 and into early 1721, even if further less severe outbreaks occurred, notably in May–July 1722. The city nonetheless recovered strongly from 1723 when the port reopened and full communication was restored with the rest of France and foreign ports.[5] In terms of

[1] Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, 'Peste (Médecine),' in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (Neuchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), vol. 12, pp. 452–56 (p. 454).

[2] Ibid., p. 456.

[3] Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), ch. 1 'Enlightenment and the Plague', pp. 17–38 (p. 38).

[4] Jaucourt, 'Peste (Histoire ancienne & moderne),' in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné*, vol. 12, pp. 456–57.

[5] The classic reference here is Charles Carrière, Marcel Courdurié and Ferréol Rebuffat, *Marseille ville morte. La peste de 1720* (Marseille: M. Garçon, 1968; repr. Éditions Jeanne Laffitte, 2016). This work draws on many first-hand testimonies to the plague of 1720. It is usefully supplemented by reference to two collections of further primary sources: Louis-François Jauffret, *Pièces historiques sur la peste de Marseille et d'une partie de la Provence, en 1720, 1721, et 1722*, 2 vols (Marseille: Chez les principaux libraires, 1820) and Paul Gaffarel and the Marquis de Duranty, *La peste de 1720 à Marseille et en France d'après des documents inédits* (Paris: Perrin, 1911). Among the more recent studies on the subject, see Françoise Hildesheimer, *Des épidémies en France sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2021).

the epidemiology of the epidemic, the principal vector of infection appears to have been not rat fleas but human fleas, as well as body lice, often transmitted via clothes, tissues, and fabrics. As for the primary reservoir of the plague bacterium, it has usually been situated in the local rat population of the Ottoman port of Saïda in today's Lebanon from where the *Grand Saint-Antoine* returned.[6] However, recent research has called this into doubt and suggested that more local plague foci could also have been the source, since the plague had been endemic in France since the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century.[7]

The immediate lived experience of the disaster understandably reveals little awareness of these causes and effects. Instead, the written and iconographic testimony of survivors supports Huet's notion that the plague constituted a clear and present existential threat to early modern society. To take just one striking example, the artist Michel Serre's first-hand depiction of the plague's worst ravages in front of the Hôtel de Ville uses the building's classical architecture as an imposing but impotent frame for the scenes of suffering and death playing out in the foreground.[8] As such, it portrays the irresistible return of a scourge from the Dark Ages, the barbarous destruction of the thriving port's civilizing commerce.[9] This last point is important. The Marseille plague of 1720 is a fatal disease visited upon a particular place and a particular people. However, the particular character of early eighteenth-century Marseille and its population, of its culture and trade, meant that it stood for a broader civilizing, Enlightenment culture. It was a place, as Daniel Gordon has argued, where the city as a classical polity or *polis* was superseded by the city as a site of vibrant multi-cultural sociability or *cosmopolis*.[10] As such, the nature of the plague's threat to Marseille – and so to enlightened society – was heightened, since the various forms of civilized exchange at its heart now had a deadly counterpart in the plague's rapid urban transmission. As Gordon puts it, 'commerce' in its broadest sense became 'the motor of both sociability and calamity, of both progress and death', and so the plague represented 'a disaster of the highest magnitude'.[11] The dead piling up in the streets were not just considered terrible because of the loss of human life that they represented but because they blocked the port and urban arteries of trade and so 'killed' civilized society itself.

Marseille had been rapidly modernized in the 1660s after its local Fronde was quashed and the young Louis XIV paraded through the city in triumph, protected by six thousand royal troops. Its four leading municipal councillors were renamed 'échevins', as the previous title of 'consul' (retained in Toulon and elsewhere)

[6] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, pp. 171–78.

[7] See Nükhet Varlık, 'Rethinking the History of Plague in the time of COVID-19,' *Centaurus*, 62.2 (2020), 285–93; and Paul Slack, 'Perceptions of Plague in Eighteenth-Century Europe,' *Economic History Review*, 75.1 (2022), 138–56.

[8] Michel Serre, *Vue de l'Hôtel de Ville de Marseille pendant la peste de 1720* (1721), Musée de Beaux-Arts de Marseille. See <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michel_Serre-Peste-H%C3%B4tel_de_ville.jpg> [accessed 12 September 2023].

[9] Yves Baille, 'Les peintres témoins de l'histoire (à propos de la peste de 1720 à Marseille),' *Histoire des sciences médicales*, 45.1 (2011), 43–4.

[10] Daniel Gordon, 'The City and the Plague in the Age of Enlightenment,' *Yale French Studies*, 92 (1997), 67–87.

[11] Ibid., p. 70.

smacked too much of Roman republican independence. This sense of state oversight was reinforced more directly by the Crown's appointment of a 'viguier' who symbolically held the city keys and practically oversaw the city council's deliberations. A decade later in 1669, in recognition of the city's renewed docility, and as a concession to its loyal and industrious 'notables', Marseille was granted the extraordinary status of a free port, quickly establishing it as the leading centre of French seaborne trade for the next fifty years.[12] Yet, if not politically, at least culturally and linguistically, a certain ambivalence and suspicion still characterized the way in which Marseille was viewed from Versailles and Paris. As a bustling port city with a near-monopoly on eastern and southern Mediterranean trade, Marseille was ostentatiously cosmopolitan and open to the wider world, a cosmopolitanism that was both policed – and paradoxically compounded – by it being the base for the royal galley fleet until 1748. The galleys were manned by convicts from across France, which from 1685 included Huguenots and other religious dissenters, although the bulk of their number was made up of slaves from the Near East and the Barbary coast of North Africa. Altogether they constituted a highly visible complement of approximately ten thousand oarsmen.[13] In addition, well into the eighteenth century, the principal language of the majority of Marseillais was Provençal. This was not just the language of the populace. As late as 1735, the funeral eulogy of the Intendant of Provence, Cardin Le Bret, was delivered in Provençal.[14] Moreover, early eighteenth-century climate theory suggested the southern character was given over to garrulousness and impulsivity, stimulated in part by the heat of the sun and a spicy local diet.[15] Nicolas Arnoul, who came to Marseille in the mid-1660s as the galleys' commander, wrote dismissively to Colbert in January 1667 that the Marseillais are naturally impulsive, bombastic, and gesticulating. He writes: 'la chaleur du pays les emporte et la raison leur vient un peu trop tard [...]. Vous les connaissez grands brailleurs qui parlent plus des épaules que de la langue, et qui expriment plus de mal par leurs gestes que par la bouche'.[16] Hence Félix Tavernier claims that the Académie de Marseille, founded in 1725, had as one of its goals the regulation of regional language and the imposition of a more standard French on this voluble, multilingual babble.[17]

It has thus been argued that Marseille's urban expansion, booming sea trade, and excitable local population also made it supremely vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases.[18] The very success of Marseille's international commerce, and a

[12] See Junko Thérèse Takeda, 'French Absolutism, Marseillais Civic Humanism, and the Languages of Public Good,' *The Historical Journal*, 49.3 (2006), 707–34; also Gordon, p. 79.

[13] On the galleys and those who served on them, see André Zysberg, *Les Galériens : Vies et destins de 60 000 forçats sur les galères de France (1680–1748)* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

[14] Félix Tavernier, *La Vie quotidienne à Marseille de Louis XIV à Louis-Philippe* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1973), p. 21.

[15] See Jean Ehrard, *L'idée de nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), pp. 691–736.

[16] Nicolas Arnoul à Jean-Baptiste Colbert, 18 and 22 January 1667, in *Correspondance administrative sous le règne de Louis XIV*, ed. by G. B. Depping, Tome 1: 'États provinciaux – Affaires municipales et communales' (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1850), pp. 779–83.

[17] Tavernier, p. 21.

[18] See, for example, Gordon, pp. 79–80.

certain complacent trust in the quarantine procedures in place for seventy years, allowed the bubonic plague into the city via the merchandise imported from the *Grand Saint-Antoine* in May 1720. What we would like to contend here, however, is that, if we follow the traditional accounts of the epidemic, the city's failure to protect its citizens from the disease hangs in no small part on at least three *discursive* choices made by actors in the plague, that is, on three key moments of misnaming or refusing to name the disease appropriately.

Firstly, as part of the quarantine processes, all ships arriving in Marseille had to wait offshore while their bills or health, called 'patentes', were brought to the offices of the 'consigne sanitaire' at the foot of the Fort Saint-Jean. There health officials of the port assessed the risk to the city. The 'patente' attested to the health conditions in the ships' ports of call and had three levels of threat: 'nette' for a clean bill of health in all ports visited, 'soupçonnée' for having moored in a port suspected of contamination, and 'brute' for any stay in a port known to be infected with plague or similar contagion. The *Grand Saint-Antoine* had clean bills of health from its trading ports in the Near East, in Saïda, Tripoli and in Cyprus. But by the time it reached Livorno, there had been a number of suspicious deaths on board and the authorities there provided an addendum to the 'patente' that 'fièvres malignes pestilentielles' were present among the crew. In practice, this meant that the ship should have spent a maximum spell of quarantine on the Île de Jarre some twenty kilometres from Marseille before approaching the port and offloading its cargo and crew. But this note from Livorno was not interpreted by officials as overruling the 'patente nette', and the description of the disease on board the ship was sufficiently general that a complacent reading of it could construe any number of infectious diseases from the term 'pestilentiel', rather than specifying the threat of plague. Hence the ship was allowed to dock at the nearer Île de Pomègues, with its merchandise and crew taken significantly sooner to the Infirmeries quarantine station.[19] From there the plague found multiple, insidious routes into the city.

Secondly, in late June and early July 1720, when porters and guards in the Infirmeries started dying of plague after opening the cargo in order to disinfect it, the first diagnoses by the port surgeons refused to recognize the tell-tales signs of plague, namely black necrotic marks formed around flea bites ('charbons') and inflamed swellings in the infected lymph nodes of victims ('bubons'). They were supported in their erroneous diagnoses by the doctor of the Infirmeries, Jean-Baptiste Michel, whose own reports would later inform State responses to the epidemic.[20] As local chroniclers of the plague noted, these misdiagnoses were often as fatal to the physician as to his patients. Nicholas Pichatty de Croissainte's first-hand account of the epidemic, his *Journal abrégé de ce qui s'est passé en la ville de Marseille, depuis qu'elle est affligée de la contagion*, cites the case of the

[19] On the official quarantine practices in the port, and specifically those regarding the *Grand Saint-Antoine*, see Charles Mourre, 'La peste de 1720 à Marseille et les intendants du bureau de santé,' *Provence historique*, (avril–juin 1963), 135–59; see also Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, pp. 206–10, 229–32.

[20] See Joël Coste, 'Chirac, la Cour et la peste de Provence (juillet 1720–avril 1721),' in *Santé et médecine à la cour de France (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. by S. Perez and J Vons (Paris: Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de santé, 2018), pp. 113–37 (pp. 119–20).

port surgeon, Guerard, who repeatedly denied the presence of plague in the quarantine station even when he found 'Tumeurs à l'Aine' on infected porters on 7 July.[21] The 'peine de son incrédulité', Pichatty observes, was his own death and the deadly contamination of his family.[22] By the time replacement surgeons, sent urgently from the Bureau de santé, had confirmed that the plague was rife in the Infirmeries, it was too little, too late.

By mid-July, similar misdiagnoses occurred in the old town as the plague spread through its narrow, crowded, insalubrious streets. Despite established father-son teams of physicians, such as the Sicards and Peyssonnels, alerting the authorities to the fact that bubonic plague was indeed present in these populous quarters, the city councillors preferred to believe the master surgeon, Bouzon, that the ill were ridden instead with 'fièvres vermineuses'.[23] As the local doctor Jean-Baptiste Bertrand would deplore, it was said that Bouzon was incapable of diagnosing the disease correctly, since he 'ne touchoit pas les malades, & qu'il ne leur parloit que de loin'.[24] Unlike in the port area, this fatal misdiagnosis in the old town was partly informed by social prejudice. The master surgeon's assumption was that the poor and wretched had effectively poisoned themselves with rotten foodstuffs, especially worm-eaten fruit, hence his hands-off diagnosis of 'verminous' fevers.[25] Nonetheless, the exponential death toll very soon forced the municipal authorities to admit that the plague was spreading within the city walls. They convened an emergency meeting on 28 July in the Hôtel de Ville, which introduced the first measures of isolation and segregation of the ill, dying, and dead in the city. These measures also implied the unofficial confinement of Marseille from the rest of Provence, a situation promptly made official by an edict from the Parlement d'Aix on 31 July.[26]

A third instance of refusing to correctly name the disease compounded this seriously deteriorating public health situation. By mid-August, when three hundred people a day were dying in the city, two eminent physicians from Montpellier, François Chicoyneau and Jean Verny, arrived in Marseille. They had their orders from the Court in Versailles and promptly set about examining the ill and performing autopsies on fresh corpses before privately and reluctantly confirming that the disease was 'véritablement la peste'.[27] However, after a further three days of intense consultations between medical chiefs and civic leaders, on 20 August 1720 the authorities issued a lethally misleading 'Avis au public' that

[21] Nicolas Pichatty de Crossainte, *Journal abrégé de ce que s'est passé en la ville de Marseille, depuis qu'elle est affligée de la contagion* (Paris: Charpentier, Jousse & Prault, 1721), p. 6.

[22] Pichatty, p. 6.

[23] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, p. 61.

[24] Jean-Baptiste Bertrand, *Relation historique de la peste de Marseille. En 1720* (Cologne: Pierre Marteau, 1721), p. 46.

[25] A rare fictionalized account of the Marseille plague, published in 1766, gives a further political twist to this misdiagnosis, suggesting that a surgeon named Crouzet was imprisoned by the city magistrates in order to silence evidence of the plague in the city, thereby favouring rumours that the disease was instead the result of an excessive consumption of fruit among the poor. See Marie Leprince de Beaumont, *Mémoires de Madame de Batteville, ou la veuve parfaite* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021), p. 58.

[26] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, p. 64.

[27] Cited in Pichatty, p. 42.

claimed that the disease ravaging the city had been identified only as a 'fièvre maligne, contagieuse', best tackled by the simple isolation of the infected from the healthy. The 'Avis' was published a day after Chicoyneau and Verny had left Marseille and in the face of vocal opposition from a number of prominent local doctors.[28]

Yet, given the visibly mounting death toll and strained municipal infrastructure, few people were fooled by the official announcement, not least those in charge of public health and civic order. As a municipal officer who remained at his post throughout the epidemic, Pichatty was well placed to note:

> Toutes les portes de la ville ont peine à suffire à la foule de ceux qui sortent […] Presque tous les intendants de la Santé, ceux du Bureau de l'Abondance, les conseillers de la ville, les commissaires de police […] jusque ceux qui doivent garder les autres et les empêcher de quitter, c'est-à-dire les capitaines et officiers de la ville qui ont leur compagnie en pied, tout déserte, tout abandonne, tout fuit […].[29]

This unseemly mass exodus from Marseille was also one of the major factors in spreading the disease through Provence.

The question, then, that most urgently arises is: why was there such a repeated resistance to naming the plague publicly when it was so clearly a matter of life and death for those concerned? To answer this question properly, we need to consider multiple, overlapping reasons for the reluctance or plain refusal to pronounce the word 'peste' in early eighteenth-century Marseille.

The first reason was economic. On a micro-level, the ship that allegedly brought the plague to Marseille, the *Grand Saint-Antoine*, was transporting silks and other expensive fabrics back to France for the city's leading 'échevin', Jean-Baptiste Estelle, who also held a quarter share in the vessel itself. The whole shipment was worth the huge sum of 300,000 livres. Estelle's luxury goods were due to be sold at the renowned Beaucaire fair opening on 22 July 1720. Hence he had an interest in foreshortening any extreme quarantining of the ship and its merchandise, as would have been known to the Intendants de la santé who ignored the health warning from Livorno and allowed the ship to discharge its cargo early into the Infirmeries.[30] On a macro-level, Estelle belonged to the community of approximately three hundred wealthy merchant families that effectively governed Marseille and oversaw its extended international trade, especially with the so-called 'Échelles du Levant', or trading posts, in the eastern Mediterranean. Any whiff of plague in the port would seriously damage this trade, to the advantage of the rival ports of Genoa, Nice, and Toulon, as well as affecting the inland commerce with the rest of Provence, Languedoc, and Lyon.[31] These mercantile arguments for locally

[28] The text of the 'Avis au public' is reproduced in full in Bertrand, p. 112. Bertrand was one of the Marseille doctors openly opposed to this medical cover-up. See the collective *Mémoire des médecins de Marseille sur la contagion présente*, written on 21 August 1720 and presented to Cardin Le Bret. Cited in Coste, p. 122.

[29] Pichatty, pp. 43–4.

[30] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, pp. 234–46; also Mourre.

[31] For the wider international ramifications of the plague in Marseille, see Cindy Ermus, *The Great Plague Scare of 1720: Disaster and Diplomacy in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

silencing the name of the plague found an interesting echo in pro-trade gazettes that reported on the troubling plight of the great port city. The most pronounced of these, as Denis Reynaud and Samy Ben Messaoud have shown, was the influential *Gazette de France*, which almost exclusively designated the plague as a 'mal contagieux' and whose sole mention of 'la peste' was to dismiss its presence in Marseille.[32]

The *Gazette de France* was State-censored, so it very much toed the Court line in seeking to maintain trade as much as possible with Provence, even at the rapidly rising cost to human life.[33] In this economic context, the *Gazette*'s caution in referring to the epidemic may have also been informed by other preoccupying developments in French finances at the time. For the outbreak of plague in Marseille coincided with the first serious convulsions of the national credit scheme introduced by the finance minister, John Law. Law's so-called 'Système' was based on stock options in the State-backed monopoly, La Compagnie des Indes, issued in the form of paper bank notes. But by the spring of 1720 these stocks had ballooned via speculation to sixty times their original worth. This in turn had fuelled the rapid inflation of food prices, so, in the May of that year, Law tried to check the spiralling cost of living by reducing the amount of shares available in the Compagnie. Unfortunately, this only provoked a mass panic to convert shares and paper bank notes to specie. By July 1720, as plague spread through Marseille, a riot of share-holders in the rue Quincampoix in Paris left seventeen people dead, and, as the bank run intensified over the summer, the State was obliged to limit coin use by decree.[34] In plague-ravaged Marseille, this meant that the city's merchants were bereft of hard currency to trade with their foreign counterparts who refused to accept payment in rapidly devaluing bank notes. At the same time, the municipal authorities had little available funds to pay their officers or for poor relief when a nationwide increase of approximately 60% in food prices deprived the lower social orders of essential foodstuffs. Economically, galloping inflation, not food shortages, was the plague's principal ally in the port city.[35] Hence, talk of plague in the early months of the epidemic was deliberately dampened so as not to aggravate the other economic woes weighing on the city and the country more broadly.

A second reason for not rushing to name the plague was social: a major medical disorder like the plague swiftly bred the conditions for widespread public disorder – a danger often more keenly feared than the disease itself. To give just one example:

[32] Denis Raynaud and Samy Ben Messaoud, 'La gestion médiatique du désastre : la peste de Marseille 1720,' in *L'Invention de la catastrophe au XVIIIe siècle : du châtiment divin au désastre naturel*, ed. by Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas (Geneva: Droz, 2008), pp. 199–207. Their comparative analyses show that the *Gazette d'Amsterdam* first names the plague, then reverts to a more guarded position in order to protect trade in line with the *Gazette de France*, while the *Gazette de Leyde* adopts a much more open approach, naming the plague consistently and treating the events in Marseille primarily as a human-interest story.

[33] See Coste, p. 121.

[34] On Law and his 'Système', see James Buchan, *John Law: A Scottish Adventurer of the Eighteenth Century* (London: MacLehose Press, 2018), and for a more expansive, original interpretation of the 'Système', see Arnaud Orain, *La politique du merveilleux. Un autre regard sur le Système de Law (1695–1795)* (Paris: Fayard, 2018).

[35] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, pp. 288–92.

by early August 1720, it became apparent that plague was ripping through the city. As we have seen, the misleading 'Avis au public' had if anything hastened the mass flight from the city of the guardians of civic and medical order. At the same moment, the poorest classes of citizen took to the streets to protest violently at the dearth of basic foodstuffs, especially bread. Four to five hundred angry residents mobbed the Hôtel de Ville and were only dispersed by promises from the city councillors of capping the prices of essential foods and of freely distributed bread and meat for the most destitute.[36] The municipal authorities then scrambled to establish a new public health police centred on the figure of the district 'commissaire', who coordinated local medical aid, public sanitation, and poor relief. This prevented further public unrest in the short term, not least because the 'commissaires' were often chosen from among the communities in each district and were aided by 'hommes de confiance' similarly well known to their fellow citizens. Yet, in a striking example of how the threat of public disorder unnerved the authorities in early modern Marseille, the numbers of the new health police would grow over the next two years (from forty-four in 1720 to one hundred and twenty in 1722), even as the plague receded.[37] In bio-political terms, this also demonstrated how a state of emergency could become a de facto state of exception, at least as far as public health regulation was concerned.[38]

One of the key discursive practices stoking civil unrest in a time of plague was rumour. As Marie-Hélène Huet has noted, rumour and misinformation about the plague often replicated the disease's own 'logic of proliferation' and increased a sense of social entropy.[39] The disease and chatter about it shared the same verbs of unfettered transmission: 'communiquer', 'se répandre', 'se propager'. The development of an international press in the early eighteenth century also meant that rumours of plague in Marseille provoked extreme responses abroad in trading cities such as Cadiz and London and had repercussions for colonial commerce too.[40] French ships were burnt offshore, and stories circulated of French sailors being shot in Naples for not presenting the appropriate paperwork to keep the city safe from infection. This last rumour was seized upon by Daniel Defoe, who became one of the more obsessive reporters of the Marseille plague and whose vivid accounts of the disaster stoked panic in English trading ports.[41] His own *Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722, ostensibly dealing with the great London plague of 1665, can be read as the historical transposition of the terrors aroused by the recent Marseille epidemic, informed by a foreboding 'apprehension' that the same plague bacillus remained endemic in early eighteenth-century London

36 Ibid., pp. 71–2.

37 See Fleur Beauvieux and Nicolas Vidoni, 'Dispositifs de contrôle, police et résistances pendant la peste de 1720,' *Études héraultaises*, 55 (2020), 53–63.

38 The standard reference for a bio-political reading of early modern plague outbreaks is Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 228–33. However, the responses to the epidemic in Marseille belie the Foucauldian axiom: 'À la peste répond l'ordre'. Foucault's statement is based on existing by-laws in early modern France for a *predicted* occurrence of plague; in Marseille, it is more accurate to say that the plague produced new forms of order, such as the health 'commissaires', exceptionally and belatedly.

39 Huet, p. 29.

40 See again on this point, Ermus, especially ch. 3–5.

41 Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, p. 141.

and was thus apt to break out at any time.[42] It is then all the more ironic that the sensationalist journalist of 1720 remarks in his 1722 text about London's terrible epidemic: 'the Plague was it self very terrible, and the Distress of the People very great […] but the Rumor was infinitely greater'.[43]

In Marseille itself, the rumours of a deadly contagion sweeping the city took both traditional and topical forms. As a counterpart to the social prejudice of the doctors attributing the disease to the bad diet of the poor, the lowest orders in the populous old town resorted to the age-old notion of famine plots designed to thin their numbers and based on the empirical observation that the poorest appeared to be the primary victims of the disease.[44] However, as Stéphanie Genand points out, when the plague spread to the wealthier east bank of the port in August 1720, its inhabitants were quick to claim that the poor were deliberately seeding the disease among them as a form of bacteriological class warfare.[45] More topically, at a time when Law's system of paper-based 'crédit' was unravelling, Bertrand reports an analogous distrust – or discrediting – of medical authorities among the city's residents, with doctors openly insulted in the streets. This distrust was condoned, even encouraged, according to Bertrand, by the municipal 'Magistrats' insofar as they spread the word that the physicians (including Bertrand himself) who publicly declared cases of plague in the city were simply speculating on and profiteering from the (alleged) spread of a deadly infection. 'Les Medecins de la Ville vouloient faire un *Mississipi* de cette affaire,' he writes. 'Ce sont les termes dont ils [les Magistrats] se servirent'.[46] In other words, the doctors were likened to the rapacious share-holders of the Compagnie des Indes, formerly the Compagnie du Mississippi, cashing in on the gullibility of their fellow citizens, with no concern for the public good.

The public maligning of medical professionals provided further grounds for doctors to be reticent about openly confirming the presence of plague in the city. It added a social reason to be cautious about diagnoses to the many existing scientific doubts and divisions within the profession over the causes and means of propagation of the disease. Broadly speaking, doctors in early modern France disputed whether pestilential infection was airborne or whether it spread primarily through physical contact, a distinction marked by the terms of 'épidémie' for airborne infection and 'contagion' for physical transmission.[47] In the longer term, the Marseille plague would represent a turning point in favour of 'contagionist' thinking about the spread of the disease, as Cindy Ermus has shown.[48] This is

[42] Claude Labrosse, 'L'écriture de la contagion chez Defoe,' in *L'Invention de la catastrophe*, pp. 465–80.

[43] Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year: being observations or memorials, of the most remarkable occurrences, as well publick as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665* (London: E. Nutt et al., 1722), p. 248.

[44] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, pp. 264–66.

[45] Stéphanie Genand, 'Fléau ou catastrophe ? Les enjeux du discours médical : la peste de Marseille, 1720,' in *L'Invention de la catastrophe*, pp. 303–18 (p. 310).

[46] Bertrand, p. 56.

[47] See Huet, p. 30.

[48] Cindy Ermus, 'Managing Disaster and Understanding Disease and the Environment in the Early Eighteenth Century,' in *Disease and the Environment in the Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, ed. by Lori Jones (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 91–106.

exemplified by the case of the Montpellier doctor Antoine Deidier, who arrived in Marseille in September 1720 as a confirmed 'miasmist' or believer in airborne infection. But Deidier was belatedly converted to the contagionist cause as a result of the experiments that he conducted there. He injected the infected bile of plague victims into healthy dogs, which died of the disease a few days later, proving physical transmission of the pathogen.[49] However, in the short term, factors other than purely scientific ones were in play and influenced how the disease ravaging the city was designated and treated. Thus, the leading doctors from the Montpellier school, such as Chicoyneau and Verny, remained staunch adepts of the 'epidemic' or airborne explanation of the plague's transmission. Crucially, these miasmists not only had the weight of traditional humoral medicine on their side but also much greater scientific and social capital. Thus, even when, like Chicoyneau and Verny, they recognized privately the symptoms of plague in the dead and dying in Marseille, they were prepared to accredit other diagnoses of the disease if these tallied with their preferred miasmist epidemiology.[50]

Moreover, the French medical community was swayed by larger social and political influences. Tellingly, Chicoyneau was the son-in-law of Pierre Chirac, no less than the personal physician to the Regent, Philippe d'Orléans, and director of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. From five hundred miles away in the capital, Chirac grandly dispatched his written diagnosis of the epidemic to Marseille on 19 August 1720, in the form of three 'Mémoires'. In the second of these texts, he asserted that the disease was not 'la peste' but 'une fièvre maligne très ordinaire', most likely due to malnutrition among the poor who remained its principal victims.[51] More significantly still, he made the dismissive claim that the plague was fundamentally a psychosomatic disorder, often induced by the very fear of contracting it.[52] This belief persisted through the eighteenth century, and it appears among Jaucourt's many contradictory aetiologies of the plague in his *Encyclopédie* article of 1765. Essentially, Jaucourt maintains that the airborne plague 'venin' acts internally on our humours but does so differently for different persons. There is then a 'cause dispositive' of the plague, a sort of constitutional predisposition to it, and for these vulnerable individuals in particular, he advises:

> l'essentiel est de ne point s'effrayer en temps de *peste*; la mort épargne ceux qui la méprisent, & poursuit ceux qui en ont peur ; tous les habitans de Marseille ne périrent point de la *peste*, & la frayeur en fit périr davantage que la contagion.[53]

[49] Olivier Dutour, 'Antoine Deidier, son approche expérimentale de la contagiosité de la peste à Marseille en 1720,' *Histoire des Sciences Médicales*, 45.1 (2011), 45–50.

[50] Michel Signoli et al., 'Du corps au cadavre pendant la Grande Peste de Marseille (1720–1722). Des données ostéo-archéologiques et historiques aux représentations sociales d'une épidémie,' *Bulletin et Mémoire de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, 10.1–2 (1998), 99–120.

[51] Cited in full in Bertrand, pp. 124–26.

[52] For example, in a letter to Chicoyneau of September 1720, Chirac concludes: 'Croyés moy il n'y a dans ce mal de contagieux que la peur'. The letter is cited in full as 'Annexe textuelle 1' in Coste, p. 133. This view was in fact widespread in early eighteenth-century French medical texts; see Genand, p. 307, for other examples.

[53] Jaucourt, 'Peste (Médecine)', p. 453.

This groundless claim about the lethal effects of simple fear in Marseille in 1720 revises our understanding of Jaucourt's broad assertion that 'Tout frémit au seul nom de cette maladie'. For, if the action of 'frémir' or intense shivering was already one of the many contradictory effects of contracting the plague, it was medically sound *not* to name it, since calling the disease out might induce its very symptoms. Naming the plague is thus so terrifying because it possesses the performative power to make the figurative literal, the abstract real, to be able to call into being that which is named with deadly consequences for certain of its speakers and/or interlocutors.[54] From its Latin root, *pestis*, the plague signifies a scourge; in its utterance, it becomes tantamount to a curse.[55] It also follows from this reading that Jaucourt's definition of the plague as 'de tous les maux le plus cruel' resonates with the homophony 'maux'/'mots'; that the plague inflicts terrible suffering as both disease *and* discourse.

One obvious recourse was thus to use euphemisms to refer to the plague, such as the term 'maladie contagieuse de Marseille', which was used in official papers about the epidemic in the wake of the deceptive 'Avis au public' of August 1720.[56] Yet, as the plague took hold in Marseille, one discursive community was more at ease than others with identifying the disease for what it was. The Catholic Church fully assumed the plague's etymology and presented it as a biblical-style 'fléau' or scourge. Moreover, the clergy were equally open about considering the plague a curse, that is, the physical manifestation of a divine malediction visited upon the people of Marseille. The plague itself was only the secondary expression of the primary cause of the misery and death heaped upon the Marseillais, the devastating means chosen by God, in his righteous anger, to blast the wanton sinfulness of the city's population.[57] The response proposed by the Church was thus less medical and more rhetorical: private prayer and public contrition, symbolic acts of deep repentance and sincere submission to the divine will. As Stéphanie Genand has remarked, this did not simply mean a fatalistic resignation in the face of the plague; the epidemic could also be taken as an ordeal, a test of godliness, of one's willingness to selflessly serve one's fellow humans in their agony.[58] Thus it is estimated that more than 20% of the city's priests of various confessions lost their lives consoling the ill, giving last rites to the dying, even baptizing plague-orphaned new-borns.[59] But this particular religious response to the plague – and an accompanying readiness to name it – also meant that a theological

[54] Chirac says more or less the same thing when, writing to Chicoyneau in September 1720, he notes: 'Car il n'en est pas de plus grand [maux] que celuy d'estre abandonné de tout le monde, de se voir perir sans secours et sans nourriture et de se voir craint et en horreur quand on est tombé malade […] tous ces maux *la declaration de la peste les produit*'. Cited in Coste, p. 133 (my italics).

[55] Of course, 'peste' already had this performative function in milder, even comical, imprecations such as 'peste de l'ignorant !' or 'peste soit du fou !' and in the proverbial speech act of 'Dire la rage et la peste de quelqu'un'. See the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 2 vols (Paris: Coignard, 1694), II, p. 225.

[56] Coste, p. 123.

[57] See Gilbert Buti, *Colère de Dieu, mémoire des hommes. La peste en Provence 1720–2020* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2020).

[58] Genand, pp. 310–11.

[59] Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, p. 100.

'script', to use Colin Jones's term, supplanted civic, economic, medical, and military 'readings' of the epidemic.[60]

This religious 'script' was almost wholly dictated by the charismatic bishop of Marseille, Henri-François-Xavier de Belsunce, whose own example of selfless devotion to his parishioners throughout the epidemic took as its model the canonized archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo's tireless service to the faithful in the terrible plague of 1630.[61] Belsunce's interpretation of the Marseille plague finds its fullest contemporary expression in his publicly distributed 'Mandement' or pastoral letter of 22 October 1720. It demonstrates how other understandings of the plague are displaced and overwritten by an orthodox Catholic reading of the disaster befalling the city. His fellow citizens' godless pursuit of riches has thus brought the plague upon them, with the plague levelling all distinctions of wealth in its desolation:

> Nous avons vu les corps de quelques riches du siècle enveloppés d'un simple drap, mêlés et confondus avec ceux des plus pauvres et des plus méprisables en apparence, jetés comme eux dans de vils et infâmes tombereaux, et traînés avec eux sans distinction à une sépulture profane hors de l'enceinte de nos murs ; Dieu l'ordonnant ainsi, pour faire connaître aux hommes la vanité et le néant des richesses de la terre, et des honneurs après lesquels ils courent avec si peu de terme.[62]

Belsunce exaggerates the city's prosperity and commercial reach, the better to execrate sacrilegious 'commerce' in all the lay senses of the term:

> Marseille, cette ville si florissante, si superbe, si peuplée il y a peu de mois [...] cette ville dont le *commerce* s'étendait d'un bout de l'univers à l'autre [...] cette ville enfin dans les rues de laquelle on avait, il y a peu de tems, de la peine à passer par l'affluence ordinaire du peuple qu'elle contenait, est aujourd'hui livrée à la solitude, au silence, à l'indigence, à la désolation, à la mort. Toute la France, toute l'Europe est en garde, et est armée contre ses infortunés habitans devenus odieux au reste des mortels, et avec lesquels on ne craint rien tant à présent que d'avoir quelque sorte de *commerce*.[63]

For Belsunce, the plague has made commerce synonymous with contagion. The city's streets once bustling with traders are now full only of pestilential corpses. Where the merchants ruled supreme, priests now give spiritual succour to the infected and dying. The plague thus allows a righteous correction to the workings of civil society in Marseille whereby the Church ousts the markets from the heart of the city, exemplified by Belsunce's imposing procession of penitence and submission of 1 November 1720. This event culminated in an open-air mass given to large crowds of penitents in the 300-metre-long Cours, a modern thoroughfare

[60] Colin Jones, 'Plague and its Metaphors in Early Modern France,' *Representations*, 53 (Winter 1996), 97–127.

[61] See, for example, Pichatty, pp. 154–55.

[62] Henri-François-Xavier de Belsunce de Castelmoron, 'Mandement de Mgr. l'Évêque de Marseille, sur la désolation qu'a causé [*sic*] la peste à Marseille, et sur l'établissement de la fête du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus,' in Jauffret, I, pp. 164–73 (p. 167). The full text of the 'Mandement' is also given in Bertrand, pp. 172–85.

[63] Belsunce, p. 168 (my italics).

built in 1687 on the profits of international trade, now reclaimed by the one true faith.[64]

A theological reading of the Marseille epidemic also reconfigures the medical discourse on the disease. Contagionist and, to a lesser extent, miasmist presentations of the plague understand the pestilential body as attacked from without, by contact with others, by inhaling corrupted air. 'Charbons', buboes, lesions, fever, vomiting, etc. are thus reactions to something introduced into the victim's body. Plague is a physical process of material cause and effect. For the Church, however, corruption is innate in the mortal flesh of fallen humankind. The plague only makes visible the impurity of sin already present in the sinner. It marks not the physical but the metaphysical excrescence of vice and iniquity among the city's population. Thus Belsunce writes: 'c'est par le débordement de nos crimes, que nous avons merité cette effusion des vases de la colère et de la fureur de Dieu. [...] si nous avons le malheur de servir d'exemple à nos voisins et à toutes les nations, n'en cherchons point la cause hors de nous'.[65] Individually and collectively, sinners are thus exhorted to look inwards to recognize the cause of their infection.

However, Belsunce is far from being inclusive in his call for prayer and repentance as the sole means of salvation from the plague. He uses the epidemic to settle sectarian scores, listing among the 'crimes' of his fellow citizens 'l'impiété, l'irreligion, la mauvaise foi, l'usure, l'impureté', which could be read as stigmatizing respectively free-thinkers, Protestants, Jansenists, Jews, and Muslims.[66] In seeking the means to cast out the plague from the city, Belsunce's strictly Catholic reading of the disease lights on the strategy of portraying it as something necessarily 'foreign' to his vision of Marseille. In this much, the religious 'script' explaining the epidemic of 1720 aligns with political and medical discourses on the disease, since the latter, even as they shy away from naming the plague, prove less reticent in designating its principal agents. For some doctors, this might mean scapegoating the malnourished poor inhabiting the most insanitary quarters of the city, or doctors themselves might be accused by their fellow citizens of exploiting fears of the disease for personal financial gain, as we have seen. What seems clear is that the fraught process of (not) naming the plague in Marseille in 1720 often involved an exclusionary logic. Bertrand, one of the more engaged and lucid witnesses to the epidemic, would thus conclude that the plague itself was ultimately the manifestation of nature's struggle within the infected body to '*chasser un ennemi étranger*'.[67] The military metaphor suggests that an enemy, an 'other', needed to be sought and identified in order to understand and overcome the plague. In this sense, it is noteworthy that, in the longer historical narrative, the Marseille epidemic of 1720 was a significant event in a broad cultural process of designating the plague as primarily a foreign disease, a non-European, traditionally Eastern, affliction. The plague might not always have been effectively named in timely fashion in 1720, but the accounts of its outbreak, beginning from the *Grand*

[64] Gordon, pp. 83–4.
[65] Belsunce, pp. 68–9.
[66] Belsunce, p. 68. On Belsunce's sectarianism, see Carrière, Courdurié and Rebuffat, pp. 34–6.
[67] Bertrand, p. 512 (italics in the original).

Saint-Antoine's return from the Levant, did allow for it to be successfully and successively 'orientalized' thereafter.[68] Hence, we return in conclusion to Jaucourt, who remained deeply troubled by the epidemiology of the plague, except insofar as its Eastern origins were concerned:

> La *peste* nous vient de l'Asie, & depuis deux mille ans toutes les *pestes* qui ont paru en Europe y ont été transmises par la communication des Sarrasins, des Arabes, des Maures, ou des Turcs avec nous, & toutes les *pestes* n'ont pas eu chez nous d'autre source.[69]

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[68] See Lori Jones, '"Turkey is Almost a Perpetual Seminary of the Plague": Relocating Pathogenic Plague Environments,' in *Disease and the Environment*, pp. 67–90; also Varlık.

[69] Jaucourt, 'Peste (Médecine)', p. 452.