

Vasari,” shares some of the lively one-sided dialogues that developed within the margins of Vasari’s text. She draws attention to the important evidence that can be found in early, annotated versions of the *Lives*, some indicative of multiple readers’ presence within a single volume. Her discussion of Vasari’s riposte to Condivi both complements and augments Wallace’s work, discussed above, and Pon’s account of the appropriation of Sansovino’s *Vite* by the architect’s son and grandson is both compelling and instructive. Fraser’s elegant “Vasari’s *Lives* and the Victorians,” provides a fitting close to Cast’s anthology. Her lucid analysis of mid-nineteenth century British paintings that take episodes from the *Vite* as their subject, reveals how attentively British artists and critics read Vasari’s text and also underscores its fundamental import in defining the Italian Renaissance and its aesthetics in the Victorian period. Even more significantly, Fraser demonstrates how crucially Vasari’s *Lives* framed and informed all levels of discourse—academic, artistic, and popular—regarding the role of art and its practitioners in a modern society. *Viva Vasari!* The beat goes on...

Evelyn Lord. *The Great Plague: A People’s History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014. xi + 173 pp. + 31 Illus. Review by LARRY BONDS, MCMURRY UNIVERSITY.

*The Great Plague: A People’s History* is Evelyn Lord’s compelling study of the effects of the bubonic plague on Cambridge during the outbreak of 1665-1666. Lord’s study is short, but full of interesting details about plague life and death. Drawing upon such sources as hearth-tax rolls, diaries, and letters, Lord introduces readers to Cambridge’s townspeople and then shows how they suffered through the outbreak. Lord’s study, as she says in the Preface, uses “faction,” in which the historian reports factual evidence that inspires fictional dialogue and situations for real-life people in “techniques reminiscent of docudrama” (x). Faction imbues the story of the Cambridge plague with riveting flesh-and-blood realism. *The Great Plague* has ten chapters of faction that presents two broad areas: introducing some of Cambridge’s plague-era residents so that readers care about these people and then showing how they suffered through the plague.

Lord begins with the terrifying story of the deaths of two boys—John Morley, aged five, and his unnamed younger brother. After John died, the younger Morley boy showed symptoms and then “was swept from his mother’s arms by men dressed in white robes and taken away” to die in lonely agony in a quarantining “pest house” (one of four in town) without the comfort of his “distraught parents [who] were shut up in their house with a red cross painted on the door and the words ‘Lord Have Mercy on Us’ written below it” (1). Lord later describes how people locked into their homes because of diseased family members lived:

Once a day the bellman announced the arrival of the dead cart, and the shout of ‘Here!’ could be heard; the watchmen [who were paid 8 pennies each for a twelve-hour shift of keeping victims from escaping] unlocked the padlock and chains securing the door and the corpse would be passed through. Once a day water and food were brought and the window shutters removed so that occupants could grab the victuals; if they had any cash left the coins would be dropped into a bowl of vinegar held out by the watch, and whispered requests would be made for medicine and other necessities. (99)

In this fearful atmosphere of anxious poverty, the Morley boys’ parents dealt somehow with their grief.

Besides bringing readers into the struggles of sympathy-inspiring people such as the Morleys, Lord’s book is the larger history of the plague’s impact on Cambridge as a town. Like the visage of a human victim of disfiguring disease, the face of Cambridge changed radically from pestilence. The first bout of plague in Cambridge in 1349 led to the erection of three institutions of higher learning during the next decade: Trinity Hall, Gonville Hall, and Corpus Christi College. The university added these institutions to “train men for the priesthood and replace those who had died”(2). Thus the plague shaped the architectural face of Cambridge.

Another feature of the town that changed from plague was Cambridge’s parish cemeteries, which rapidly overflowed with dead. One such cemetery is that of St. Clements parish, which suffered deeply. Before describing the cemetery, Lord notes that “[i]n that summer

of 1665 the riverside parish ... had a smell all of its own" caused by "rotting vegetation on the riverbank" baking in the hot sun (55). Another part of plague-relevant geography in St. Clements was the foul, man-made stream known as "King's Ditch," along whose shores in summer 1665 lay a "great number of dead rats" killed by plague (55). The first human plague death in the parish was Jacob King, the fourteen-year-old son of a tailor. An apprenticed shoemaker, Jacob gathered on summer afternoons with other children on the Great Bridge over the Cam. Jacob fell ill after a gathering in mid-August and died horribly on August 15. Plague subsequently devastated St. Clements. A letter by a fellow of Clare College states that pestilence "rageth most in St. Clements parish, where never a day passeth without one dead of the sickness" (71-72). The plague became so bad in St. Clements that, between September and December of 1665, one third of parish buildings were boarded up to quarantine people. The effect of all the burials on the St. Clements' graveyard was to raise it four feet above the surrounding roads; the cemetery had to be enlarged that much to accommodate layers of the dead.

Besides packing the town's cemeteries, plague disrupted the economic lives and daily routines of townspeople. Plague closed the university, caused the cancellation of the economically vital Stourbridge Fair, scared farmers off from delivering food, and panicked officials into banning public entertainments. These cancellations and stoppages profoundly depressed the town's economy.

A fascinating account of an earlier attack of plague concerns the economic life of Thomas Hobson—a letter-carrier, stable-owner, and philanthropist. This Thomas Hobson "is the Hobson of Hobson's Choice," an idiom meaning "Take it or leave it" (3). Lord explains that Hobson had a strict rotation for horses in his stable and would not allow renters of his animals to choose their own mounts. Hobson insisted that patrons accept whatever horse (no matter its characteristics) was next in the rotation. Besides inspiring the interesting phrase, Hobson changed the city landscape by paying for such public works as a conduit in the town's marketplace for fresh spring water (which people believed helped prevent plague) and a workhouse for indigent women. Hobson died during (but not of) the 1631 plague, when Milton was an undergraduate. Milton and others composed

a series of humorous poems about Hobson's death, which is generally attributed poetically to his grief over his inability to do business because of the plague.

Another notable whom the plague affected was Sir Isaac Newton, who studied in Cambridge during the 1665-1666 plague and who fled the outbreak to his rural home. There he had his apple-falling-from-the-tree experience. Lord uses the description of Newton to explain the basic organization of the university's colleges into chapel, library, and hall. Lord moves from this broad view of Cambridge's colleges to a description of the life of Isaac Newton the student. To warm himself, for instance, Newton spent eleven shillings for coal and turf in 1667. Local economic events enabled Newton to perform important scientific investigations. For example, at Stourbridge Fair in 1664, Newton bought the prism with which he reproduced some of Descartes' light experiments from the *Book of Colours* and found that Descartes was sometimes wrong. Besides being a student and scientist, Newton worked as a sizar. A sizar helped pay his way through college by "doing secretarial jobs, running errands, and performing domestic tasks such as lighting fires" (40). Fortunately, Newton served one Dr. Babington, who was "frequently absent from college," so Newton did not have to work very hard (40). Although he was a sizar, Newton employed at least three servants of his own; they included a laundress, a bed-maker, and a "gyp." A gyp did unpleasant jobs such as heavy lifting, brushing muddy boots, and taking messages. Though trustworthy gyps often had keys to students' rooms, gyps might spy and report students who were absent overnight to pursue illicit activities. Besides providing servant jobs for townspeople, students and faculty members patronized local artisans and merchants. Newton bought locks for his desk and study from a Cambridge locksmith. Similarly, records exist of Newton's purchases of shoes, shoelaces, and shoe repairs during his Cambridge years. He also had sewn for himself a vest, a new fashion from the court. Such trade dwindled to almost nothing during plague.

Another fascinating townsman Lord describes was John Evelyn, "a diarist and gardener" (10). Tracing Evelyn's entry into Cambridge in September 1664, Lord tells how Evelyn rode to town from Huntingdon along the old Roman road across the Fens (fetid swamps outside town), passed a common dunghill near the city, and crossed the Great

Bridge, which still had a cucking stool. The dunghill Evelyn passed probably contributed to the spread of plague, for—besides holding the excrement of animals and townspeople—dunghills were trash heaps on which were tossed “household waste, rotting vegetation and dead dogs and cats” (11). This trash provided excellent food and habitat for rats that carried fleas that spread pestilence. It is not surprising then that Evelyn hated the smell of the city’s air, calling it “thick, infested by the fens” (11). Because the miasmatic mixture of fog from the fens and of coal smoke and foul odors from the town was believed to cause plague, people regarded Cambridge as particularly dangerous. What was probably unhealthier was that people in Cambridge (like most Englishmen then) rarely bathed. Evelyn, for instance, his diary states, washed his hair only once a year. It is hardly surprising that fleas easily survived to infect people with such poor hygiene. Despite his filthiness, Evelyn suffered most from the plague through the deaths of two of his children. When his son Richard, aged five, succumbed, Evelyn wrote in his diary, “Here ends the joy of my life, which go[es] ever mourning to the grave” (21). When Richard’s sister Mary, aged nineteen, died, Evelyn grievously apostrophized her: “Never can I say enough; oh dear, my dear child, whose memory is so precious” (65). Lord says that many “parents who lost children in the plague of 1665-66 could not record their feelings” (65) because of illiteracy, but Evelyn’s words afford readers a poignant glimpse of parental anguish.

What pestilence meant to the faithful in Cambridge is a fascinating part of Lord’s study. One believer who interpreted the outbreak in metaphysical terms was Lancelot Hooper. Hooper and his wife Christian first lost a son to plague on June 24, 1666. The Hoopers were religious dissenters, and their home was licensed for Congregational meetings. Despite their leadership of a divergent sect, the Hoopers were obliged to bury five children in the Anglican parish churchyard during the plague. Also, despite his low status as a dissenter, Lancelot Hooper was a friend of the parish minister, whom Hooper allegedly asked, “[W]as it the wickedness of mankind, and especially the debauchery of the court, that had brought the plague upon them?” (94). People such as Hooper could make sense of the plague as God’s punishment of England for the sinful restoration of a corrupt, licentious monarchy. A desire to offer a supernatural explanation for terrible suffering is a

common human reaction; illogical attempts to blame human suffering on God's wrath are made to this day to condemn victims of HIV and of natural disasters such as hurricanes.

Cambridge's geography encouraged people to perpetuate their erroneous theory that bad air (called miasma) was the plague's physical cause. Cambridge and its splendid college buildings are located in a swampy region, and many seventeenth century folk incorrectly thought that breathing air from swamps caused plague (An airborne form of Black Death—pneumonic plague—does occur, but it is transmitted by infected mammals that sneeze and spray victims with mucus containing the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria). Furthermore, people actively killed stray dogs and cats in the belief that they transmitted plague. It seems likely that destroying those natural killers of rats helped increase rat populations and provided more hosts for plague-bearing fleas. Another irony is that the belief that plague was caused by bad air led many people to smoke in the vain hope that smoke would ward off disease.

Besides detailing misperceptions of the source of plague, Lord gives fascinating descriptions of the economic interdependence of town and gown. University proctors controlled for Cambridge the price of candles, the standards of weights and measures, the prosecution of prostitutes, and "the right to license or prohibit all actors, wrestlers, bear-baiters and jesters in the town or for five miles around" (23). People came to Cambridge not only for the university but also for four lucrative annual fairs, the most important of which was Stourbridge Fair. Stourbridge Fair was absolutely crucial to Cambridge's economic life; it took place, however, from late August through September, a period when plague flourished. In 1665-1666, Stourbridge Fair was cancelled, thus denying Cambridge an important source of goods and income. While people of the town and gown sustained each other economically, the colleges offered good, even lucrative opportunities on the campuses. Lord describes, for example, "the young women of Cambridge who clamored to become bed-makers in the hope of catching a wealthy husband" (43-44) from among the gentlemen-scholars. Besides women to deal with many domestic chores, the colleges hired townsfolk of both genders to serve as bakers, cooks, gardeners, custodians, vintners, brewers, tailors, shoemakers, porters, and so on.

Only porters remained employed at colleges when pestilence came. When plague struck, the university closed and the many people who worked for the colleges suddenly had no jobs and no money to support themselves and their families.

In her final chapter, Lord says that the number of burials for the 1665-1666 Cambridge plague was 920. This total was about twelve percent of the town's populace. The pestilence of 1665-1666 marked "the last serious outbreak of plague in Britain" (134). Lord then repeats the common explanation for the plague's end: the Great Fire of London destroyed the thatched roofs and medieval buildings that provided habitat for black rats. Cambridge, however, did not suffer that conflagration, yet the plague vanished there, too. Possible explanations offered for the disease's disappearance outside of London include the creation of widespread immunity in the surviving population, a misidentification by medical historians of the vector of transmission from bites from fleas hosted by black rats, the possibility that plague bacteria mutated into a less virulent form, or the simple meteorological luck that frigid winters after 1666 killed off plague bacteria. For whatever reason, the plague was, by December 1666, more or less done with Cambridge and England except for relatively small outbreaks over the next 300 years.

The world faces, as this review goes to press, the specter of an Ebola pandemic. In this context, Lord's study acquires a keen relevance as people again face the daunting prospect of fighting a horrible disease against which human defenses seem weak. Already, many of the same issues that Lord discusses—the pain of losing of loved ones, the agony of victims whose suffering may be unrelieved, the wretched loneliness of the quarantined, panicked calls for bans on the travel to and from affected areas, the devastating economic disruptions in afflicted populations, and the hurtful moralizations of religious zealots who blame victims for "sinfulness"—face people around the world. Perhaps readers of Lord's book can learn some lessons from what she says—especially lessons about the need for people to face this new pestilence with courage, calmness, competence, and compassion.