The previous chapter demonstrated that in Bologna the family remained intact and resilient in the face of plague. The investigation of notarial acts made by individuals for private purposes allowed us to enter into the homes of Bolognese and follow family members throughout the epidemic. Because notarial acts permeated all aspects of daily life and required the cooperation of individuals in addition to the transacting parties of the act, these records can also provide evidence on public life during the epidemic. This chapter examines the activities of public men whose professions involved serving the populace and maintaining public order: men of the law and state, such as government officials, judges, and notaries; practitioners of medicine; the clergy; and parish officials or ministrales cappellarum. This investigation of the public response to the epidemic will begin by analyzing the more commonly used records, viz. governmental deliberations, but the principal means of analysis will be to use notarial records to find evidence of what public men did during the Black Death.

As in the previous chapter, the information from notarial acts stands in contrast to that of literary accounts of the actions of public officials during the epidemic. Contemporary Italian authors bitterly lamented the behavior of men of the church and law during the Black Death. In the Introduction to the Decameron, Boccaccio initially explained that the Florentine government took steps to remove garbage and prevent infection, but then claimed chaos and anarchy prevailed, stating that no law, either of man or God, held during the epidemic. Michele da Piazza’s account of the Black Death in Sicily states that “many Messinese looked to make confession of their sins and to make their wills, but priests, judges, and notaries refused to visit them, and if anyone did visit their houses, whether to hear confession or draw up a will, they were soon sure to die themselves”.¹ The Storie Pistoresi declared that

¹ Cronaca of Michele da Piazza translated in Horrox, The Black Death, p. 36.
friars and priests could not be found to serve the sick or bury the dead. Doctors come under severe criticism in these accounts. Agnolo di Tura del Grasso of Siena presented a typical account: “no medicine nor any other remedy worked, and the more remedies were administered, the sooner the victims died.” Matteo Villani claimed that the physicians of Florence “had neither explanation nor cure through natural philosophy, or through medicine, or through astrology. Some, in order to make a profit, paid visits and gave their explanations. These showed by their deaths that their art was feigned and not real.” Boccaccio’s Introduction is emphatic on the inadequacy of medical advice during the Black Death.

As argued in the last chapter, the history of the Black Death should not rest on these accounts, since there is evidence within them that contradicts their claims of abandonment of duty and because the biases and moral intentions of these authors are clear. For example, Michele da Piazza, a Franciscan, wished to draw attention in his report to the exceptional behavior of the mendicants who did visit the sick and died in large numbers as a result. It is possible to go beyond the problematic chronicle sources with information drawn from wills. There are abundant references to the whereabouts and activities of notaries and clergy during the epidemic in the testaments of the Memoriale and Demaniale of 1348 simply because the presence of these men was necessary in

---

2 “[N]on si trovava chi volesse servire nullo malato né portare morto a sepoltura né frate né prete che andare vi volesse” in “Storie Pistoresi,” p. 235.
4 Cronica di Matteo Villani a miglior lezione ridotta coll’aiuto de’ testi a penna, ed. Ignazio Moutier (Florence, 1825), 1:8–9.
5 “A cura delle quali infermità né consiglio di medico né virtù di medicina alcuna pareva che valesse o facesse profitto.” Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, writing after Boccaccio, stated that physicians charged exorbitant prices and kept their distance from the patient: “Medici non si trovavano, perocchè moriano come gli altri; quelli che si trovavano, voleano smisurato prezzo in mano innanzi che intrassero nella casa, ed entratovi, tocavano il polso col viso volto adrieto, e’ da lungi volevano vedere l’urina con cose odorifere al naso” in Marchionne, “Cronica,” p. 230. Petrarch famously attacked doctors in his Invece contra medicum completed in 1353. This is a forceful invective attacking medicine for its pretensions to rhetorical and philosophical learning, but it is not directed at doctors’s activities during the Black Death. Rather it is the result of an affront from an individual doctor called to cure the pope. See Conrad H. Rawski, “Notes on the Rhetoric in Petrarch’s Invece contra medicum,” in Francis Petrarch, Six Centuries Later: A Symposium, ed. Aldo Scaglione (Chapel Hill and The Newberry Library, Chicago, 1975), 249–277, especially, pp. 249–252.