Cecchi also examines the siege’s impact on the lives of leading artists residing in Florence. Michelangelo, for example, oversaw the restoration and construction of battlements, towers, and other fortifications of the city. Andrea del Sarto and Pontormo worked on commissions that served as republican propaganda. Moreover, some artists hedged their bets and fled before hostilities began. Others, like Michelangelo and del Sarto, remained steadfast in their loyalty to the republican government and stayed to support the republic with different consequences. Michelangelo, due to his fame and the wide appreciation for his style, was able to rely on powerful patrons to protect him from repercussions during and after the siege. Meanwhile, del Sarto died of the plague after the conflict’s end in September 1530, and was buried without ceremony at Santissima Annuziata. It is fitting, therefore, that the volume concludes with del Sarto’s death and the drawing up of his will, which left his inheritance to the Spedale degli Innocenti.

Cecchi’s study of the siege’s impact on art and artists is perhaps the most engaging and original aspect of his narrative. However, it is the very narrative structure of the book that ultimately makes it a frustrating read. At times, one hopes for a deeper analysis of the society and culture of Florence’s last republic. One could have wished for more accounts and testimonies of those defending the republic, detailing the fear and suffering they and noncombatants experienced during the siege, with the concomitant dearth and plague that it produced. Instead, Cecchi focuses entirely on military and diplomatic events, to the exclusion of social and even ideological developments (a problem considering he never discusses how deep the commitment to liberty was among the Florentine populace). Nevertheless, In difesa della “dolce libertà” fills a lacuna in the historiography of Florentine history by examining the much-neglected Siege of Florence. It should be the standard work of consultation for years to come.

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North American writing on medieval and early modern nature, monstrosity, and disaster is largely the realm of specialists in language and literature departments, continuing the semiotic connection between the word as representation and the external world. Literary study remains the primary hermeneutic key to ecocriticism and its ethical approach to nature. Despite the flowering of ecological writing in the 1960s and 1970s and a specific ecocriticism since the work of Greg Garrard in the 1970s, history,
economics, and other humanities and social-science fields have been slower to adopt such approaches.

The situation among Italian scholars is more fluid. This is due, first, to the localized and civic nature of Italian research into “the concept of disaster as a social event” (110), a context in which scholars include many fields in their broader purview without apologetics, and, second, to the continued predominance of philological-textual methodologies across fields, which opens access to a variety of scholars—but also, more importantly, to the willingness of Italian scholarship to embrace socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts.

*Disaster Narratives* is the result of a two-year research project directed by De Caprio. The book’s four parts cover well-known disasters that struck the kingdom of Naples and beyond in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including floods (Rome, 1598); earthquakes (Aquila, 1315, 1349, 1461/62; Capitanata, 1627; Calabria, 1638; Samnium, 1688); the eruption of Vesuvius (1631); and outbreaks of plague (1478–80, 1656). The authors approach these in an overlapping pattern: from philological and literary to historical, socioeconomic, anthropological, and even semiotic methodologies. They also cover a large and growing international literature on disasters.

After the editors’ comprehensive introduction, part 1 covers narrative structures and strategies, with essays by De Caprio, Francesco Montuori, and Rita Fresu on genres, authors, and audiences; dissemination and reception; and linguistic patterns of objective description and emotional reaction. These constitute a “lexicon of disasters” (48) that bridges individual and civic experience and creates a “stable interpretive framework” (70). As De Caprio notes, “disasters generate texts” (23). Part 2 offers case studies by Pierluigi Terenzi and Francesco Senatore exploring disaster reporting in chronicles, avvisi, relazioni, and petitions to the royal court from stricken, depopulated, and over-taxed communities.

Part 3’s essays, by Cecere, Giancarlo Alfano, Gianfrancesco, and Silvana D’Alessio, consider the “semiotic reconfiguration” (153) of such disasters: from popular, underground, and uncontrollable media in manuscript memoirs, pasquinades, and cheap print—extending textual communities via public readings—to official narratives by church and state promulgated in moralizing pamphlets, broadsides, and books. Here Naples clearly emerges as a powerhouse of early modern publishing. Part 4 examines religious conceptions of disaster through the cult of the saints (Palmieri) and the anthropology of ex-votos (Giovanni Gugg).

The volume’s focus on political and social contexts highlights the dramatic effect that Masaniello’s revolt (1647–48) against Spanish rule had on efforts to control the narrative. On one level, church and state took extraordinary measures to limit and channel rumors and victims’ expressions of grief and dislocation, fearing that they could again lead to dissent and widespread revolt. On a second level, of narrative, after Vesuvius’s eruption in 1631, official accounts consistently conflated popular revolt with natural upheaval, setting the stage for shifting representations: from Naples itself
as urban center and capital to Vesuvius as synecdoche. Henceforth the constant rumblings and violent eruptions of the volcano would symbolize Naples at home and abroad: a land seething toward revolt against established natural and human laws.

One of this book’s more important findings is that divine causality was not the unquestioned norm in the Mezzogiorno but was the object of a semiotic contest between subjects questioning the legitimacy of elites, on one side, and government attempting to soothe tensions and reassert social hierarchies, on the other. One of the most dramatic results of the 1631 eruption and 1656 plague and their resulting “typographic epidemic” (223) was that ecclesiastical and Spanish authorities forced underground the secularizing effects of Neapolitan scientific thought and replaced them with a “metaphorical web” (160) of religious ritual, the “distorting mirror” of hagiography (220), and mythological causality. Whether the disaster was earthquake, eruption, or plague, seventeenth-century oligarchy substituted emerging science and popular protest with its own version of “thoughts and prayers.”

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*La Farmacia Granducale di Firenze*. Giovanni Piccardi.


For nearly three centuries the state pharmacy of Florence served the ruling family, its court, and its people. Founded in ca. 1548 by Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici as the Fonderia Medicea, it changed location several times, but remained always under the direct control of the ruler who, regardless of dynasty, understood the pharmacy’s importance both in manufacturing medicines and advancing pharmaceutical science. The pharmacy’s products were so highly regarded that the grand dukes used them not only for their family and attendants but also as exclusive gifts for valued nobles, esteemed visitors, and fellow rulers. When, in 1808, the state pharmacy was closed, its last apothecary, Gaspere Puliti, reopened it as a private enterprise. As the Farmacia Pitti, it has continued to exist, complete with its eighteenth-century furnishings and decor, in the same location on Piazza San Felice, 4r, right next to the Palazzo Pitti, where it had last been.

In this volume, Giovanni Piccardi takes the reader through the pharmacy’s complex history from its founding in the mid-sixteenth century to its closing, in 1808. Drawing on a rich array of archival sources, Piccardi follows the pharmacy’s peripatetic movements from the Palazzo della Signoria through the Boboli gardens, the Casino Medici, the Uffizi, the Palazzo Pitti, and, finally, Piazza San Felice. As he does this, he also points out the pharmacy’s scientific activities, its innovative contributions to pharmaceutical science, and its important role in grand-ducal public relations.