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psychiatry in literature

Epidemics: black death terror in Florence, 1348 – by Giovanni Boccaccio

Greg Wilkinson 

Boccaccio prefaces his comedy *The Decameron* [1349–1353] with tragedy. He relates that in Florence between March and the following July upward of 100 000 perished in this 'pestiferous mortality'. Among survivors, comparable herd responses recur in the context of our COVID-19 pandemic:^a

'Some [...] conceived that to live moderately was the best defence [and they] shut themselves up in those houses where none had been sick [...]; and there, using [...] the most delicate viands and the finest wines and eschewing all incontinence, they abode with music and such other diversions as they might have, never suffering themselves to speak with any nor choosing to hear any news from without of death or sick folk. Others [...] maintained that to carouse and make merry and go about singing and frolicking and satisfy the appetite in everything possible and laugh and scoff at whatsoever befell was a very certain remedy [...], going about day and night, now to this tavern, now to that, drinking without stint or measure; and [...] they did yet more freely in other folk's houses [...]; and with all this bestial pre-occupation, they still shunned the sick to the best of their power.

[The] reverend authority of the laws [was all] dissolved and fallen into decay, for [lack of] the ministers and executors thereof, who, like other men, were all either dead or sick or else left so destitute of followers that they were unable to exercise any office, wherefore every one had license to do whatsoever pleased him. Many others held a middle course [...], but went about, carrying in their hands, some flowers, some odoriferous herbs and other some divers kinds of spiceries, which they set often to their noses [...] to fortify the brain with such odours, more by token that the air seemed all heavy and attainted with the stench of the dead bodies and that of the sick and of the remedies used.

Some were of a more barbarous way of thinking [...] avouching that there was no remedy against pestilences better than [...] to flee before them; [...] very many abandoned their own city [...] and sought the country seats of others, or, at the least, their own, as if the wrath of God [...] would content itself with afflicting those only who were found within their city [...].

Indeed, leaving be that townsman avoided townsman and that well nigh no neighbour took thought unto other and that kinsfolk seldom or never visited one another and held no converse together save from afar, this tribulation had stricken such terror to the hearts of all, that brother forsook brother, uncle nephew and sister brother and oftentimes wife husband; nay (what is yet more extraordinary and well-nigh incredible) fathers and mothers refused to visit or tend their very children'.

Boccaccio was in Naples, and his narrative is based on earlier observations (Paul the Deacon (c. 720–799)). Be that as it may, 'weary of going wandering so long among such miseries', Boccaccio then recounts 100 life-affirming tales told over ten nights by seven young women and three young men self-isolating in a hill-top palace outside Florence ...

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a. *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio, Translated by John Payne*. Villon Society, London, 1886.