

Boccaccio: *The Decameron*

“Introduction”

Thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had passed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when there came into the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of all Italian cities, a deadly pestilence, which, either because of the operations of the heavenly bodies, or because of the just wrath of God mandating punishment for our iniquitous ways, several years earlier had originated in the Orient, where it destroyed countless lives, scarcely resting in one place before it moved to the next, and turning westward its strength grew monstrously. No human wisdom or foresight had any value: enormous amounts of refuse and manure were removed from the city by appointed officials, the sick were barred from entering the city, and many instructions were given to preserve health; just as useless were the humble supplications to God given not one time but many times in appointed processions, and all the other ways devout people called on God; despite all this, at the beginning of the spring of that year, that horrible plague began with its dolorous effects in a most awe-inspiring manner, as I will tell you. And it did not behave as it did in the Orient, where if blood began to rush out the nose it was a manifest sign of inevitable death; but rather it began with swellings in the groin and armpit, in both men and women, some of which were as big as apples and some of which were shaped like eggs, some were small and others were large; the common people called these swellings *gavoccioli*. From these two parts of the body, the fatal *gavoccioli* would begin to spread and within a short while would appear over the entire body in various spots; the disease at this point began to take on the qualities of a deadly sickness, and the body would be covered with dark and livid spots, which would appear in great numbers on the arms, the thighs, and other parts of the body; some were large and widely spaced while some were small and bunched together. And just like the *gavaciolli* earlier, these were certain indications of coming death.

To cure these infirmities neither the advice of physicians nor the power of medicine appeared to have any value or profit; perhaps either the nature of the disease did not allow for any cure or the ignorance of the physicians (whose numbers, because men and women without any training in medicine invaded the profession, increased vastly) did not know how to cure it; as a consequence, very few were ever cured; all died three days after the appearance of the first outward signs, some lasted a little bit longer, some died a little bit more quickly, and some without fever or other symptoms. But what gave this pestilence particularly severe force was that whenever the diseased mixed with healthy people, like a fire through dry grass or oil it would rush upon the healthy. And this wasn't the worst of the evil: for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or mixed with the sick, but also touching bread or any other object which had been handled or worn by the sick would transport the sickness from the victim to the one touching the object. It is a wondrous tale that I have to tell: if I were not one of many people who saw it with their own eyes, I would scarcely have dared to believe it, let alone to write it down, even if I had heard it from a completely trustworthy person. I say that the pestilence I have been describing was so contagious, that not only did it visibly pass from one person to another, but also, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had died from the disease, I say not only did it become contaminated by the sickness, but also died literally within the instant. Of all these things, as I have said before, my own eyes had experience many times: once, the rags of a poor man who had just died from the disease were thrown into the public street and were noticed by two pigs, who, following their custom, pressed their snouts into the rags, and afterwards picked them up with their teeth, and shook them against their cheeks: and within a short time, they both began to convulse, and they both, the two of them, fell dead on the ground next to the evil rags.

Because of all these things, and many others that were similar or even worse, diverse fears and imaginings were born in those left alive, and all of them took recourse to the most cruel precaution: to avoid and run away from the sick and their things; by doing this, each person believed they could preserve their health. Others were of the opinion that they should live moderately and guard against all excess; by this means they would avoid infection. Having withdrawn, living separate from everybody else, they settled down and locked themselves in, where no sick person or any other living person could come, they ate small amounts of food and drank the most delicate wines and avoided all luxury, refraining from speech with outsiders, refusing news of the dead or the sick or anything else, and diverting themselves with music or whatever else was pleasant. Others, who disagreed with this, affirmed that drinking beer, enjoying oneself, and going around singing and ruckus-raising and satisfying all one's appetites whenever possible and laughing at the whole bloody thing was the best medicine; and these people put into practice what they heartily advised to others: day and night, going from tavern to tavern, drinking without moderation or measure, and many times going from house to house drinking up a storm and only listening to and talking about pleasing things. These parties were easy to find because everyone behaved as if they were going to die soon, so they cared nothing about themselves nor their belongings; as a result, most houses became common property, and any stranger passing by could enter and use the house as if he were its master. But for all their bestial living, these people always ran away from the sick. With so much affliction and misery, all reverence for the laws, both of God and of man, fell apart and dissolved, because the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or ill like everyone else, or were left with so few officials that they were unable to do their duties; as a result, everyone was free to do whatever they pleased. Many other people steered a middle course between these two extremes, neither restricting their diet like the first group, nor indulging so liberally in drinking and other forms of dissolution like the second group, but simply not going beyond their needs or satisfying their appetite beyond the necessary, and, instead of locking themselves away, these people walked about freely, holding in their hands a posy of flowers, or fragrant herbs, or diverse exotic spices, which sometimes they pressed to their nostrils, believing it would comfort the brain with smells of that sort because the stink of corpses, sick bodies, and medicines polluted the air all about the city. Others held a more cruel opinion, one that in the end probably guaranteed their safety, saying that there was no better or more effective medicine against the disease than to run away from it; convinced by this argument, and caring for no-one but themselves, huge numbers of men and women abandoned their rightful city, their rightful homes, their relatives and their parents and their things, and sought out the countryside, as if the wrath of God would punish the iniquities of men with this plague based on where they happened to be, as if the wrath of God was aroused against only those who unfortunately found themselves within the city walls, or as if the whole of the population of the city would be exterminated in its final hour.

Of all these people with these various opinions, not all died, nor did they all survive; on the contrary, many from each camp fell ill in all places, and having, when they were healthy, set an example to all those who remained healthy, they languished in their illness completely alone, having been abandoned by everybody. One citizen avoided another, everybody neglected their neighbors and rarely or never visited their parents and relatives unless from a distance; the ordeal had so withered the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother, and the uncle abandoned his nephew and the sister her brother and many times, wives abandoned their husbands, and, what is even more incredible and cruel, mothers and fathers abandoned their children and would refuse to visit them. As a result, of that innumerable number of those, men and women, who fell ill, there remained no-one to care for them except for friends, which were very few, or avaricious servants, who, despite the high salaries and easy service, became very scarce. And there were some men and women of such vulgar mind, that most of them were not accustomed to service, and did nothing other than serve things whenever the sick person asked and watch while they died; and the wages of this service was often death. And some of the sick

were totally abandoned by neighbors, relatives, and friends, and, on account of the scarcity of servants, turned to a custom no-one had ever heard of before: no sick woman, even if she were a svelte, beautiful, and gentle lady, would care if she were being served by a man, young or otherwise, and would have no shame exposing every part of her body to him as if he were another woman, if the necessity of her sickness required her to; and this is why the women who were cured were a little less chaste afterwards. Moreover, many people died by chance who would have survived had they been helped. And so, because of the shortage of people to care for the sick, and the violence of the disease, day and night such a multitude died that it would dumbfound any to hear of it who did not see it themselves. As a result, partly out of necessity, there arose customs among those surviving that were contrary to the original customs of the city.

There used to be a custom, which is today still followed, where the women relatives and neighbors of a dead person would gather in the house and there mourn; on the other hand, there would gather at the front of the dead man's house neighbors and other citizens as well, whose numbers followed from the quality of the deceased man, and along with these priests in their finery, and with all the funeral pomp and candles and singing, he would be carried by those closest to him to the church of his choice. When the ferocity of the pestilence began to mount, for the most part people ceased with this custom and replaced it with a far different one. For not only did many people die without women surrounding them, most passed away from this life without anyone there to witness it at all; there were very few who departed amid the pious wailing and beloved tears of those close to them, far from this, most took up the custom of laughing and partying while their loved ones died; this latter usage, the women, who formerly had been so merciful and concerned with the health of the deceased one's soul, especially mastered. Also, it became rare for the body to be born to the church accompanied by more than ten or twelve men, who were not noble and cherished citizens, but a kind of grave-digger fraternity made up of the least men of the city (they demanded to be called sextons, and demanded high wages) who would bear them away; and these would bear the body quickly away, not to the church the dead man had asked for, but to the nearest one they could find, with four to six priests, maybe with a candle but sometimes not, in front; and with the help of these sextons, without fatiguing themselves with any long ceremony or rite, in any old tomb that they found unoccupied they'd dump the corpse.

As for the lesser people, who were for the most part middle class, they presented the most miserable spectacle: for these, who had no hope or who were seized with poverty, had to remain in the area, and fell ill by the thousands every day, and since they had no servants or any other kind of help, almost without exception all of them died. And many would meet their end in the public streets both day and night, and many others, who met their ends in their own houses, would first come to the attention of their neighbors because of the stench of their rotting corpses more than anything else; and with these and others all dying, there were corpses everywhere. And the neighbors always followed a particular routine, more out of fear of being corrupted by the corpse than out of charity for the deceased. These, either by themselves or with the help of others when available, would carry the corpse of the recently deceased from the house and leave it lying in the street outside where, especially in the morning, a countless number of corpses could be seen lying about. Funeral biers would come, and if there was a shortage of funeral biers, some other flat table or something or other would be used to place the corpses on. Nor did it infrequently happen that a single funeral bier would carry two or three people at the same time, but rather one frequently saw on a single bier a husband and a wife, two or three brothers, a father and a son, or some other relatives. And an infinite number of times it happened that two priests bearing a cross would be going to bury someone when three or four other biers, being born by bearers, would follow behind them; the priests would believe themselves to be heading for a single burial, and would find, when they arrived at the churchyard, that they had six or eight more burials following behind them. Nor were there ever tears or candles or any company

honoring the dead; things had reached such a point, that people cared no more for the death of other people than they did for the death of a goat: for this thing, death, which even the wise never accept with patience, even though it occur rarely and relatively unobtrusively, had appeared manifestly to even the smallest intellects, but the catastrophe was so unimaginably great that nobody really cared. There was such a multitude of corpses that arrived at all churches every day and every hour, that sacred burial ground ran out, which was especially a problem if each person wanted their own plot in accordance with ancient custom. When the cemeteries were for the most part full, they excavated great pits in which they'd place hundreds of newly arrived corpses, and each corpse would be covered with a thin layer of dirt until the pit was filled.

And beyond all the particulars we suffered in the city, I will tell you not only about the ill times passing through the city, but also mention that the countryside was not spared these circumstances. For here, in the fortified towns, similar things occurred but on a lesser scale than in the city, through the small villages and through the camps of the miserable and poor laborers and their families, without any care from physicians or help from servants, and in the highways and the fields and their houses, day and night at whatever hour, not like humans but more like animals they died; and because of this, they came to neglect their customs, as did the people in the city, and had no concern for their belongings. Beyond all this, they began to behave as if every day were the day of their certain death, and they did no work to provide for their future needs by caring for their fields or their animals, but rather consumed everything they owned. Because of this, it happened that oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and dogs, the most faithful human companions, were driven from the houses, and in the fields, where the crops had been abandoned, not even reaped let alone gathered, they would wander about at their pleasure; and many, as if they possessed human reason, after they had pastured all day long, would return satiated to their houses without any guidance from any shepherd.

Let us leave the countryside and return to the city.

How much more can be said of the cruelty of heaven, and possibly, in part, that of humanity, which between March and July of that year, because of the ferocity of the pestilence and the fact that many of the sick were poorly cared for or abandoned in their hour of need by people frightened for their health, killed off one hundred thousand human creatures for certain within the walls of the city of Florence. Who, before this fatal calamity, would have thought there were so many within the city? Oh, how many grand palaces, how many beautiful homes, how many noble dwellings, filled with families, with lords and ladies, became completely emptied even of children! Oh, how many famous families, how many vast estates, how many renowned fortunes remained without any rightful successors! How many noble men, how many beautiful ladies, how many light-hearted youth, who were such that Galen, Hippocrates, or Asclepius would declare them the healthiest of all humans, had breakfast in the morning with their relatives, companions, or friends, and had dinner that evening in another world with their ancestors! As I think over these miseries, sorrow grows inside me . . .

Translated from the Italian by Richard Hooker ((c)1993

Posy A posy of flowers was thought to ward off the contagion; the children's song, "London Bridge is Falling Down" is a song about the plague: the "pocketful of posies" refers to the posies of flowers people would carry around during epidemics.

Sexton A sexton is a paid laborer who buries corpses; like most occupations in the Middle Ages, it was a profession and had its own guild (see our textbook). The fellows here, however, would be considered by Boccaccio's audience as "non-professional" opportunists.

Ancient Physicians These are the three great physicians of antiquity. Galen wrote several works on science including one on medicine; Hippocrates lived in Ancient Greece and a number of medical writings, mostly written by his followers, were collected under his name; Asclepius is a legendary figure who cured death and was punished by Apollo for going to far with his medical knowledge. The standard medical textbook in Boccaccio's time was Galen's.

1. What did Boccaccio say brought about the “deadly pestilence” from the Orient?
2. How did city officials deal with the disease?
3. Since physicians could neither cure nor prevent the disease, and because “all died three days after the appearance of the first outward signs,” what were some of the ways in which people coped with the prospect of imminent death?