

In Italy, Contagion Has Its Own Canon

Students under a coronavirus lockdown are learning from masterpieces inspired by Europe's historic plagues



Lucio Marazza, a senior at Alessandro Volta Scientific High School, doing his studies at home in Milan on Thursday.

PHOTO: GIULIO MARAZZA

By

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As Italians confront the [world's deadliest outbreak](#) of the coronavirus, under quarantine in their homes with no clear idea of when they will come out, not least among their resources is an unsurpassed heritage of plague culture.

From the mid-14th to the early 18th century, outbreaks of the plague varying in size from local epidemics to continental pandemics occurred roughly every five years in Europe, on average. According to Franco Mormando, a professor of Italian studies at Boston College who has studied the role of the plague in Italian art and literature, the disease became an almost inevitable topic for painters, with devotees commissioning works for churches even long after the event. One spectacular example is Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's "Saint Thecla Praying for the Plague-Stricken" (1758-59), a vision of celestial transcendence over misery and pestilence made for a cathedral in northeastern Italy and now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.



“Saint Thecla Praying for the Plague-Stricken” by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo.

PHOTO: CORBIS/VCG/GETTY IMAGES

The bubonic plague is a key element in two of the greatest works of Italian literature, Giovanni Boccaccio’s 14th-century prose work “The Decameron,” and Alessandro Manzoni’s 19th-century novel “The Betrothed.” Most Italians are familiar with both books, which are standard parts of their high school curriculum.

As part of the anti-contagion lockdown, Italian schools have been closed since early March all over the country and since late February in the northern regions worst hit by the pandemic. A leading textbook publisher, Zanichelli, has published a mini home-study curriculum which deals with the scientific, literary, mathematical and economic aspects of epidemics, and many teachers have given their housebound students assignments related to the extraordinary circumstances.

Domenico Squillace, principal of Alessandro Volta Scientific High School in Milan, wrote to his students last month to urge them to spend their time at home wisely, particularly by reading “The Betrothed.” Manzoni’s novel, considered the standard-setting classic of the modern Italian language, is set in the early 17th century and tells the story of two young people, Renzo and Lucia, and their struggle to wed despite a host of obstacles. Their quest is an allegory of the long journey to the unification of Italy as a modern nation-state, achieved only in 1861, a dozen years before the author’s death.

The plague became an almost inevitable topic for painters and writers.

One of the calamities that the couple encounters in their odyssey is the bubonic plague that struck Milan in 1630. Mr. Squillace recommended that section of the book to his students as a cautionary tale of what he termed the “poisoning of social life, of human relationships, the barbarization of civil life ... the atavistic instinct when threatened by an invisible enemy ... to see him everywhere.”

Manzoni's account of the plague is an excursus from the main plot and reads like history rather than fiction, with footnotes and commentary on the comparative reliability of different sources. Yet it is a dramatic story in itself, replete with irony and horror. The dominant theme of the account is the stubborn resistance of both the authorities and the general public to the mounting evidence of an epidemic.

The first deaths are attributed to everyday illnesses that almost no one finds alarming. Then people adopt euphemisms such as "malign fever" for the spreading plague. Physicians and others who insist on the reality of the threat are denounced as panic-mongers. Large public gatherings go on in spite of the risk of contagion. When the truth finally becomes undeniable, most blame the epidemic on poisoners motivated by the hope of gain or sheer malice. Mobs attack some suspects, especially foreigners, and courts condemn others to death. Those skeptical of the conspiracy theories are too intimidated to speak out.

"The angry seek to punish," Manzoni writes. "They would rather attribute adversity to human wickedness, against which they might seek revenge, than attribute it to some cause to which they can only resign themselves."

The book also offers portraits of heroism, notably of the Capuchin friars who gave their lives caring for plague victims in the city's hospital designated for the purpose—which stood on a site now occupied in part by Alessandro Volta Scientific High School.

"Manzoni teaches us the importance of holding together human relations and the social fabric," says Lucio Marazza, 18, a senior at the school, who adds that the reading assignment has informed his conversations with classmates about the current crisis: "Manzoni teaches us to observe and to use our reason." Fortunately, he says, Italian society has shown much more solidarity and respect for science in its response to the threat of coronavirus than it did to the bubonic plague, a sign of progress that he thinks is cause for hope, though not complacency.



Engraving depicting the plague of Florence in the 14th century as described by Giovanni Boccaccio.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Another masterpiece offering hope to Italian readers is “The Decameron,” set during the Black Death of 1348 in and near the city of Florence. Boccaccio’s account of the bubonic plague is at least as bleak as Manzoni’s, with an emphasis on the breakdown of morality and society. Parents abandon children, spouses abandon each other, and bodies are left in the streets without a decent burial.

“But I don’t want this to scare you from reading on, as if you will be reading through continuous sighs and tears,” Boccaccio writes in his introduction. “After this brief unpleasantness—I say brief because it’s summed up in just a few words—quickly follow the sweetness and pleasure that I promised you before.”

The plague prompts 10 well-born young Florentines to seek refuge in the country, where they spend 10 of the next 14 days telling each other stories—10 tales each day for a total of a hundred. The precisely organized cycle of storytelling represents

a reconstruction of civilization amid chaos and a reassertion of life against a landscape of death.

“The Decameron” is best known for its bawdy episodes—the critic Joan Acocella has called it “probably the dirtiest great book in the Western canon”—but the novellas encompass a range of tone and genre, including tragedy and ironic social commentary.

“I think of ‘The Decameron’ like Scheherazade’s ‘One Thousand and One Nights.’ It’s a representation of the whole of life, because to live is to tell stories and to tell stories is to be alive,” said Andrea Di Mario, the principal of Giosuè Carducci Classical High School, also in Milan, which has responded to the coronavirus epidemic with a padlet, or virtual bulletin board, inspired by Boccaccio’s book. Contributions from students, teachers and even parents have ranged from serious to whimsical, including articles from Scientific American and a trailer for the 2011 film “Contagion.”

Mr. Mormando of Boston College says that both “The Decameron” and “The Betrothed” are “tales of redemption. The plague ends, civilization survives and moves forward.” That message of survival, and the cathartic experience of imaginative recreations of earlier epidemics, can offer readers of all nations consolation during the current ordeal. But Mr. Mormando says these books have special resonance for Italians, who are able to say “these were our ancestors, we are made of the same flesh and blood. We’ve been through this before, and we’ve gotten through it.”

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