

NYU CAS First-Year Seminar

Reading the Plague

Professor Rebecca Falkoff

T/Th 12:30-1:45

Seminar Description

Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a story about a group of young Florentines who flee their plague-devastated city to enjoy country estates, stories and song, begins with a simple claim: "It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer." The plague Boccaccio describes tests the strength of compassion and even humanity: brothers abandon their brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, wives their husbands, fathers and mothers their own children. The plague also tests the power of Boccaccio's pen and, more broadly, the possibility of language to evoke incomprehensible, apparently unprecedented pain and sorrow: "What I have to tell is incredible, and if I and many others had not seen these things with our own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe them, let alone write them down."



In this seminar we will read, discuss, and analyze historical and literary works about the plague and other contagious illnesses, real and fictional. In the account of Thucydides, the plague threw funeral customs into confusion, as desperate Athenians sought to dispose of the dead in any way possible. In a haunting story by Dino Buzzati, an infectious disease that afflicts automobiles also debases social relations, as friends turn on friends and neighbors turn on neighbors to report those suspected of harboring infected vehicles. Reading these and other seminal accounts of the plague through the centuries by survivors, historians, storytellers and philosophers, and noting remarkable similarities, we will gain perspective on these tragic and unsettling times, finding compassion in—that is, “suffering with”—the past.

Primary Texts

- Thucydides, selections from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*
- Lucretius, selections from *The Nature of Things*
- Giovanni Boccaccio, selections from *The Decameron*
- Alessandro Manzoni, selections from *The Betrothed*
- Thomas Mann, selections from *The Magic Mountain*
- Dino Buzzati, “Seven Stories,” “The Epidemic,” and “Motor Plague”
- Gesualdo Bufalino, *The Plague Sower*
- Primo Levi, “Cladonia rapida” and “The Plague Has No Borders”
- Curzio Malaparte, selections from *The Skin*
- Albert Camus, *The Plague*
- Antonin Artaud, “The Theater and the Plague”
- Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*
- Steven Soderbergh, *Contagion*

Secondary Texts

- René Girard, “The Plague in Literature and Myth”
- Susan Stewart, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*
- Roberto Esposito, selections from *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*
- Felice Cimatti, “The Metaphysics of Patient Zero”