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Spitting Blood: The history of tuberculosis

Helen Bynum

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Tuberculosis is characterized as a social disease and few have been more inextricably linked with human history. There is evidence from the archaeological record that *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and its human hosts have been together for a very long time. The very mention of tuberculosis brings to mind romantic images of great literary figures pouring out their souls in creative works as their bodies were being decimated by consumption. It is a disease that at various times has had a certain glamour associated with it.

From the medieval period to the modern day, Helen Bynum explores the history and development of tuberculosis throughout the world, touching on the various discoveries that have emerged about the disease over time, and focussing on the experimental approaches of Jean-Antoine Villemin (1827-92) and Robert Koch (1842-1910). Bynum also examines the place tuberculosis holds in the popular imagination and its role in various forms of the dramatic arts.

The story of tuberculosis since the 1950s is complex, and Bynum describes the picture emerging from the World Health Organization of the difficulties that attended the management of the disease in the developing world. In the meantime, tuberculosis has emerged again in the West, both among the urban underclass and in association with a new infection - HIV. The disease has returned with a vengeance - in drug-resistant form. The story of tuberculosis is far from over.

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