

THE TARANTELLA

Dr. William B. Peck

Although tarantulas are known to inspire a number of diverse passions among their devotees and detractors, probably one of the most bizarre is documented from ages past - the passion for dancing the Tarantella. Ancient accounts of the phenomenon, although many times fully recorded in literature, tend to have become confounded by combination with other causes, perhaps, and most likely with a mis-attribution to the wrong spiders. But they make fascinating tales and remnants of them still endure.

Tarantism, that is, the disease resulting from having been bitten by a tarantula, was well known in southern Europe, and references to it permeated medical literature, music, and folklore for 500 years or more. It had its origin in Apulia around the city of Taranto, in southern Italy. From Taranto the disease, the spider, and the Tarantella music and dances derive their names. Obviously already known earlier among the local people, the disease was first reported in the medical writings of Dr. **Pietro Matthiolo** of Siena in 1370. And it was probably most recently discussed by the late Dr. **Zvonimir Maretic** who practiced medicine at the Medicinski Centar in Pula, Yugoslavia (now Croatia).

Dr. **Maretic**, who was for many years interested in spider venoms, has told me of comparable cases which still existed in recent years in rural Balkan villages. First, however, there needs to be some clarification of terms. None of the foregoing or following has anything to do with the large, hairy theraphosids that we commonly call tarantulas. Those spiders have no close relatives in Europe. The "true tarantula," that is, the one which lives around Taranto, is a large wolf spider, *Lycosa tarantula* (L.), that is widespread and common around the Mediterranean. It was the bite of this spider that was thought to cause the remarkable sickness, tarantism, the symptoms of which were most alarming. No organ or part of the body, it was reported, seemed to be immune to the poison. Victims were reported to suffer general pain and swelling, both paralysis and muscular agitation, nausea, vomiting, palpitations, delirium, priapism, exhibitionism, and melancholic depression. No known drug had any effect, and the only cure was found to be prolonged and strenuous dancing that was inspired by the appropriate music. Music expressly composed for the treatment of the disease. So much interest was excited in the populace, as well as in medical circles, that for literally centuries there were case histories of tarantism which outlined both credible and incredible symptoms and prescribed methods of treatment - especially the kind of music that was most effective. Many of these treatises, it should be noted, were written by writers of scientific experience and of more than local reputation for their medical ability.

Georges Baglivi, a well known Italian physician, published "De Anatomia, Morsu et Effectibus Tarantulae" in 1696, which in addition to both accurate and inaccurate observations, including treatment by music, included a drawing of the spider itself and a bar of Tarantella music. There were also skeptics along the way who doubted that the disease was a true clinical entity, but they were often strongly refuted clear up into the 19th century. In fact, so eminent a scientist as **Sir Robert Boyle**, well known for his early contributions in chemistry, in a paper before the British Royal Society in 1686, reported that his doubts regarding tarantism as a disease had been replaced by conviction that it was. The epidemic, beginning in southern Italy and having spread widely throughout the adjacent area, reached its peak about 1650, nearly 300 years after it first appeared in medical literature. Thereafter it seems to have declined there although its traces remain evident in

the Tarantellas that are still Apulian and Calabrian folk dances and in the music (also known as Tarantellas) that is known worldwide. Frenetic mass dancing became epidemic in much of Central Europe during this period and has been associated with tarantism by some writers.

Others, however, have speculated that here it may have had its origin as a treatment for the plague and had no real connection with the long-lived, spider-inspired hysteria in Italy, but rather in the Medieval "St. Vitus dance" the roots of which are obscure. Whatever the case, this kind of dancing invaded large parts of Europe in the 14th century. One report tells of the villagers of Utrecht dancing so vigorously on a bridge over the Mosel that they caused the bridge to collapse. Interestingly, as tarantism began to decline in Italy it reappeared in Spain in all its intensity. In 1785, Dr. **Manuel Iraneta y Jauregut**, in Barcelona, published a 121 page "Tratado de Tarantismo" in which he described six cases known to him and argued that the Spanish disease was identical to that of Italy. And two years later Dr. **Francisco Xavier Cid**, an eminent physician in Toledo, in consultation with numbers of Spanish doctors, compiled data on 38 cases and published an erudite, critically written compendium in which he accepted proof of the curative power of music and ended with a chapter on the philosophy of music. Other papers known from the early 19th century culminated in a comprehensive review of 286 pages published in Paris in 1866. (We Americans at that time were fighting the Civil War).

In 1978, HNH Records Inc. issued an LP record, *The Tarantula*, a recording of 27 Tarantellas played on 17th Century instruments by the Atrium Musicae de Madrid. It is stirring and fascinating music although the ensemble no longer claims that it will cure disease; it's more like a centuries-long, spider-inspired disco.

One of the surprising things about tarantism, aside from its having been such an obviously genuine belief that persisted so long and was so well documented, is that it connected such dire effects to an essentially harmless spider. The venom of the European "tarantula", it is now known, causes no greater distress than the sting of a bee. And although there had been those who doubted the serious consequences of its bite all along, Dr. **Maretic** has pointed out that some of the cases cited in the old accounts described symptoms that closely parallel modern case histories of the bite of the European widow spider, *Latrodectus tridecimguttatus* (Rossi). He surmises that there may have been validity in connecting them with an authentic spider bite but that they were attributed to the wrong spider - for half a millennium.

One explanation of the tarantism phenomenon published by an anonymous doubter in Gottingen in 1795 may be more interesting than most other denials. It says, in part: "The patients are dressed in white with red, green, or yellow ribbons, their hair flowing loosely about their ears. They are exact copies of the ancient priestesses of Bacchus. The orgies of that God were no doubt performed with energy and enthusiasm by the lively inhabitants of that warm climate. The introduction of Christianity (had) abolished all public exhibitions of their heathen rites, and the women no longer durst act the frantic part in the character of Bacchantes. Unwilling to give up so darling an amusement, they devised other pretenses. Accident may have led them to the discovery of the tarantula, and, upon the strength of its poison Puglian dames still enjoy their old dance although time has effaced the memory of its ancient name and institution.

We may smile indulgently at such accounts and such practices today, but it did persist longer than the United States has been a nation. And we should not lose sight of the possibility that our practices and attitudes may generate similar smiles in generations to come - if, indeed, considering many of our present day destructive practices, there are "generations to come."

Although tarantulas, and spiders in general, no longer incite public hysteria as apparently they once did, their (undeserved) onerous reputation has not disappeared, as we all know. Even the

U.S. Army published a bulletin in 1946 entitled, "A Poison-squirting Spider" an imaginative treatise on some mythical spider that does not exist.

REFERENCES CITED

Maretic, Z. & D. Lebez. 1979. Araneism with special reference to Europe. Nolit. Publ. House. Belgrade, Yugoslavia. 255 pp.

Paniagua R., Gregorio. 1978. The Tarantula. HNH Records Inc., Evanston, Illinois.

Savory, T. H. 1961. Spiders, Men, and Scorpions. Univ. London Press. London. 191 pp.