

Boccaccio's *Decameron*:
A Fictional Effort to Grapple with Chaos

by
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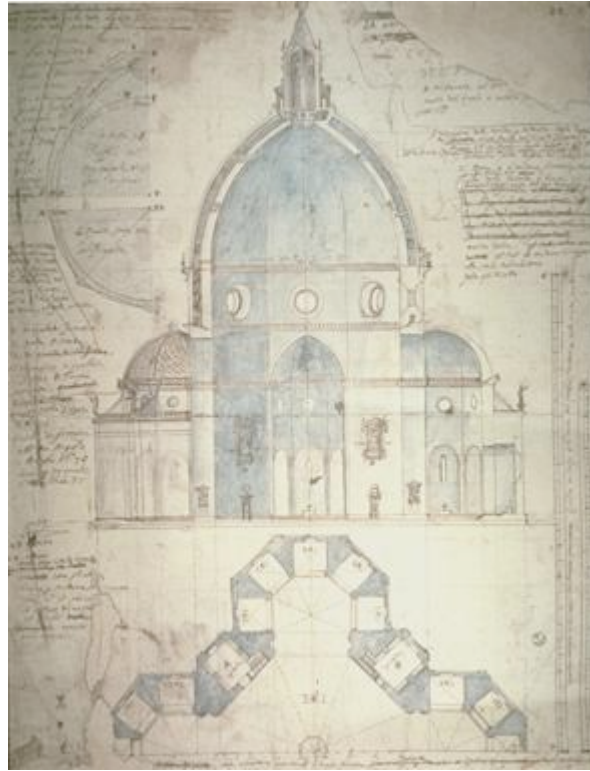


Painting by
Giorgio Vasari,
1544.
Among the six
figures shown
are Petrarch,
standing
behind the
seated Dante,
and Boccaccio,
to Petrarch's
right.

The Italian fourteenth century was a time of flourishing artistic activity. Indeed, there has been a long-standing debate over whether Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) is best understood as a medieval writer or a Renaissance one, and this kind of debate can easily be extended to include other fourteenth-century Italians, Giotto di Bondone among them. The world was being seen from new perspectives literally and figuratively--men like Masaccio and Filippo Brunelleschi would soon be wrestling with problems about representing space in two dimensions--and figures like Boccaccio and his fellow writers were inaugurating new ways to speak to daily human experience.



Masaccio *The Holy Trinity*
c. 1425 (in Santa Maria Novella,
Florence)



Filippo Brunelleschi *Santa Maria del Fiore* (Florence)
architectural study c. 1420-36

At this time in Italy, the teachings and power of the Church certainly held strong, but scholars now also see efforts of many *trecento* minds to carve new imaginative territories for understanding private and social experience that were not wholly dependent on religious assumptions.

While today Boccaccio is best known for his *Decameron* (probably composed between 1349 and 1351), he wrote many influential and rather daring works, some in Latin and some in Italian. He was also a Dante scholar of considerable repute and a man whose experience in the world of finance and canon (church) law made him remarkably suited to interconnecting various facets of the world he saw around him, often illuminating one by means of the others. By the time the plague reached Boccaccio's native Florence in 1348, Boccaccio had already established his literary reputation and

was friend to many influential figures, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) among them. Boccaccio's earlier work was surely innovative, but in the *Decameron* we see a new trajectory, undoubtedly occasioned by the terrible events in plague-ridden Florence.

The *peste* (plague) that ravaged the city is the focus of the introduction to the *Decameron*, which is a long work of one hundred *novellas* embedded into a fictional frame tale. In his introduction, Boccaccio presents us with ten young nobles, seven women and three men (customarily referred to as the *brigata*), who meet in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella and decide to temporarily take residence in their country villas to escape the plague in Florence. While in the country, the company decide to exchange stories, which they do for ten days, each telling one story every day.



The account of the Black Death that Boccaccio provides is extraordinary for its detailed accuracy and its vividness: Boccaccio captures the profound social chaos that must have prevailed not only in Florence but wherever the plague struck, and he paints a terrifying picture of the kinds of psychological as well as physical distress that undoubtedly pervaded the city. He begins by recounting the first appearance of the disease in the spring, saying that it manifested with unusual symptoms:

. . . its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit, some of which were egg-shaped, whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as *gavôccioli*. From the two areas already mentioned, this deadly *gavôcciolo* would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and few in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die as the *gavôcciolo* had been earlier, and as indeed it still was.¹

Boccaccio tells us that few who contracted the disease recovered and that medical intervention was ineffective. He also speaks to the fact that the disease was highly contagious, not only affecting people who had direct contact with those who were ill, but also seeming to spread through objects with which an infected person had come into contact.

After this initial description, Boccaccio moves quickly to the effect the disease had on people's behavior, saying that people fled from those afflicted by the disease, calling this a "single and very inhuman precaution" (52). Some Florentines, he tells us, opted for isolation and abstention, others sought to live extravagantly, while others were moderate in the behavior—all hoping to find a mode of living through which they would be spared. Perhaps more significant, Boccaccio claims that in the face of this disaster, "all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished" (52-3).

According to this account, people died alone in the streets and were carried to mass graves into which they were placed without ceremony: "no more respect was

accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown toward dead goats” (56).

Indeed, the living were themselves disregarded out of panic that spread through the city:

. . . this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them, (54)

Boccaccio tells us that between March and July some 100,000 people perished, but historians have long understood that this number is hyperbolic—it simply signifies many deaths, and we know that there were not even this many inhabitants of Florence before the plague. Modern estimates place the death toll in Florence between around 45,000 and 65,000 people; it is believed that between one-third and one-half the European population succumbed to the disease, with cities generally harder hit than rural areas.

After providing his readers with this picture of the plague’s devastation, Boccaccio introduces his storytellers, and the tales begin, broken up into groups of ten stories told over ten days, with each member of the *brigata* telling a story related to a chosen topic for each day.

Boccaccio coined a term, *novella*, for these tales, signaling to his audience the newness of his fictional project (the word *novella* means “little new thing”). Indeed, these *novelle* are fascinating narrative constructs; they bear some resemblance to short stories, but they are in fact their own genre of short narrative prose fiction, and they represent a major step in the use of prose fiction in the west.

Within the tales themselves we see a vast landscape of *trecento* Italian life. Boccaccio’s raconteurs have distinctive personalities and narrative voices, and they present us with characters from all walks of life. The *novelle* contain brilliant

characterization, fascinating use of direct discourse, and wonderfully economical narrative construction. They are, in other words, miniature portraits of the world (both Italian and beyond) apart from the plague with its variety, energy, joys, sorrows, and intrigues. They are thus in part a way of reconstituting, reordering, and re-imagining a world destroyed by the Black Death.

One aspect of the *Decameron* for which it has always been criticized is its sexual explicitness and even license. There are many references to extra-marital sex, and, indeed, adultery is sometimes seen as the deserved reward for cunning and daring. Petrarch early on objected to the text, telling Boccaccio that it was an abuse of his talent to have written it, and the text was condemned by the Church.² Boccaccio himself refers to criticism of the work (which he addressed to women) in the epilogue, in which he defends the collection on various grounds. He says, for example, that any story told decorously is worthy of being told, and he further states that interpretation and even usefulness of written material rests with the audience, so those who misinterpret his meaning are themselves culpable. Perhaps more interesting, he claims for literature the same kind of expressive freedom granted to the visual arts:

. . .no less latitude should be granted to my pen than to the brush of the painter, who without incurring censure, of a justified kind at least, depicts St Michael striking the serpent with his sword or his lance, and St. George transfixing the dragon wherever he pleases; but that is not all, for he makes Christ male and Eve female, and fixes to the cross, sometimes with a single nail, sometimes with two, the feet of Him who resolved to die thereon for the salvation of mankind. (830)

This is itself a fascinating defense of literary license that may only have been possible in the context of the chaotic social climate occasioned by the plague. In fact, Boccaccio himself adopted a new position regarding the *Decameron*, much closer to Petrarch's,

toward the end of his life, during which time he returned to writing Latin texts on religious subjects.

What accounts for this reversal? Probably, at least in part, a re-establishment of social order in the years following the plague. One can argue that the *Decameron* is a record of a deep crisis in Italian life in the largest sense and, simultaneously, Boccaccio's personal crisis of faith. The text repeatedly and courageously questions received assumptions about religion and social organization and offers views of *trecento* Italy that are diverse, often destabilized and destabilizing, and sometimes devoid of an overarching religious faith that would customarily have been assumed.

One of the most important aspects of the text is its insistence on the importance of individual agency. Characters in apparently impossible situations shape make their own fates through the exercise of wit, and resourcefulness is almost always rewarded in the *novella*. Moreover, many of the tales portray women whose intelligence allows them to successfully transgress social mores. This striking fact suggests that Boccaccio may have intended his work to serve as a practical handbook for life, serving the general populace in ways analogous to how Machiavelli's *Prince* or Castiglione's *Courtier* provide practical advice about ruling. This kind of transgressive stance was undoubtedly the result of the ravages of the plague, and it may even have been possible only because a calamity of such colossal proportions as the Black Death must have disturbed to the core Italian social and religious assumptions and conventions.

The *Decameron*, then, is simultaneously an innovative artistic product of the plague, a critique of contemporary social and religious life, and a remarkable polysemous record of fourteenth-century Italian life. Boccaccio utilizes the historical occasion of the

Black Death to create a fictional landscape through which he can re-create for the purpose of re-building and recreation, through which he can both renovate and innovate, through which he can re-establish order even as he calls order into question. For the fourteenth century, such a profound critical evaluation of the meaning of man's experience might have been not only unacceptable but unthinkable had it not been for the advent of an epidemic horror of enormous proportion.

Endnotes

¹Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. G.H. McWilliam. London and Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 50. Other references appear in the text.

²Petrarch wrote a letter to Boccaccio in 1373 (found in his *Letters of Riper Years*, XVII, 3) in which the former both gives the latter his reaction to the text and translates into Latin Boccaccio's last story, the famous tale of patient Griselda, which was later used by Chaucer among others.

Suggested Full-length Studies

Almansi, Guido. *The Writer as Liar: Narrative Technique in the Decameron*.

London: Routledge and Kegan, 1875.

Bergin, Thomas G. *Boccaccio*. New York: Viking, 1981.

Branca, Vittore. *Boccaccio: The Man and His Works*. Trans. Richard Monges.

New York: New York UP, 1976.

Cottino-Jones, Marga. *An Anatomy of Boccaccio's Style*. Naples: Cymba, 1968.

Dombroski, Robert S., ed. *Critical Perspectives on the Decameron*. New York:

Barnes and Noble, 1976.

Suggested Articles

Gibaldi, Joseph. "Towards a Definition of the Novella." *Studies in Short Fiction*

12 (1975), 91-8.

Greene, Thomas M. "Forms of Accommodation in the *Decameron*." *Italica* 45

(1968), 297-313.

Mazzotta, Giuseppe. "The *Decameron*: The Literal and the Allegorical."

Italian Quarterly 18 (1975), 53-73.

Singleton, Charles S. "On Meaning in the *Decameron*." *Italica* 21 (1944),

117-24.

Appendix I: Useful *Decameron* Hyperlinks

1. The Brown University Boccaccio *Decameron* website:

http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/dweb.shtml

2. An early fairly literal translation of the Proem to the *Decameron* by J. M. Rigg:

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecShowText.php?myID=proem&expand>

3. Image from the Bodleian Library (Oxford University) illustrating the brigata members at the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. From a manuscript of the *Decameron* (in Italian) illuminated by Taddeo Crivelli in Ferrara c. 1467. Follow this link to see other images from the manuscript.

<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/holkham/misc/49/1000/4900563.jpg>