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The Decameron: Past Meets Present, an Overview

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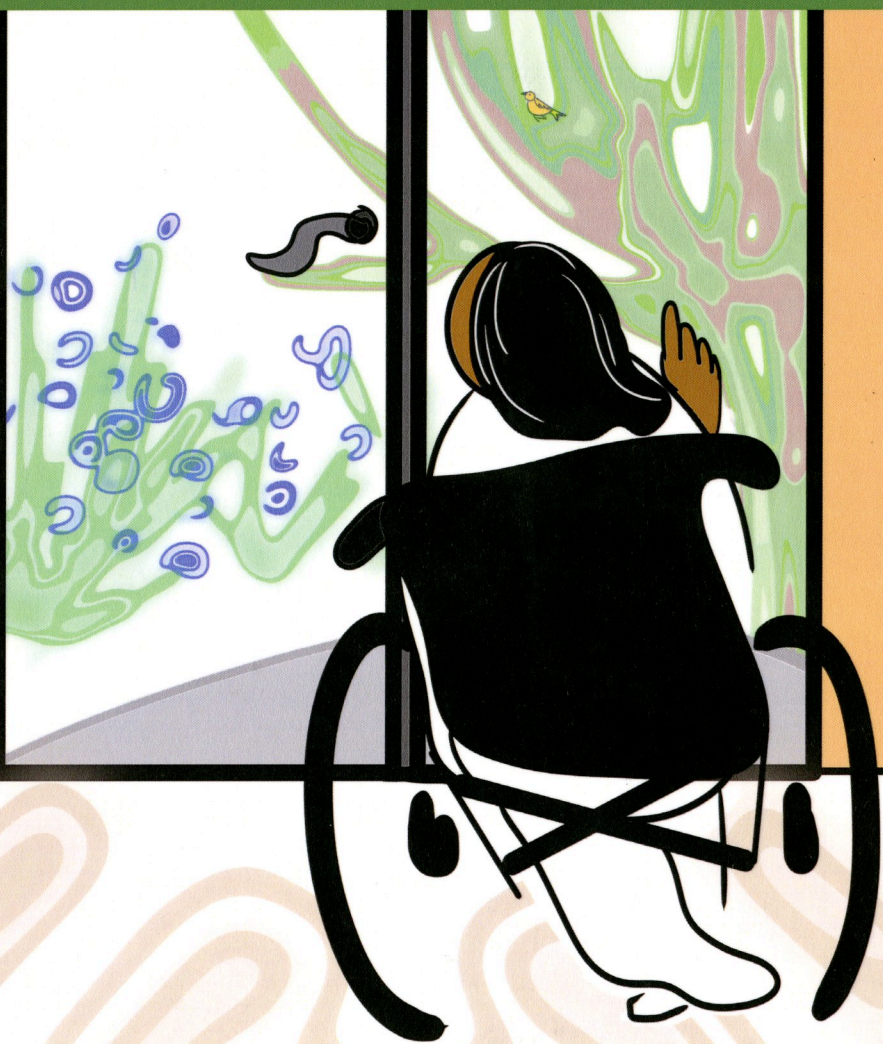
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The San Diego
**DECAMERON
PROJECT**
Anthology



STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC

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The Decameron: Past Meets Present, an Overview

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Boccaccio would have rather not started the *Decameron* by talking about the Plague. In fact, he insists that if there were any way around such a “somber and painful beginning,”¹ he would have gladly skipped the topic altogether. But the fact remains, he writes, that without recalling the tragic events of this epidemic, he could not explain *la cagione*—the cause, the reason, the origin—of the rest of what he has written; in other words, Boccaccio tells us that if we want to understand his book, we first have to understand something about the impact of this disease on human lives.

At the most literal level, a knowledge of the Plague is necessary for comprehending the structure and purpose of the book itself. The *Decameron* is a collection of tales within a larger tale, or frame story. In the containing narrative, Boccaccio describes a wave of “deadly pestilence”—which we now know to have been Bubonic Plague (a.k.a. the Black Death)—that hit Florence in 1348. This true event devastated the city—a thriving metropolis in Boccaccio’s day—decimating an estimated 60 percent of its population.² Boccaccio himself was an eyewitness to the event, having unluckily moved back to his native Florence several years before, after spending his adolescence in Naples. Among the victims of this epidemic were Boccaccio’s own father, stepmother, and, we can only imagine, countless friends and neighbors. In Boccaccio’s

fiction, ten young people, seven women and three men, watch as society breaks down and the threat of sickness and death becomes increasingly pervasive. They decide to flee to the nearby countryside for ten days, where they will distract themselves by telling stories: these will become the tales of the collection.

Yet the *Decameron* is a highly complex work that never operates on a single level. How else, then, may we understand Boccaccio's assertion that the Plague is *la cagione* for what we will find in the rest of the book? This disease—the physical and psychological suffering that it causes, the reevaluating of preconceptions and priorities that it inspires, the questions that it forces and yet leaves unanswered—these are the backdrops of the *Decameron's* 100 stories; not one of which, however, mentions the Plague explicitly. The role of these themes as the origin, the backbone, of Boccaccio's work is more perceptible, naturally, in the tragic tales—but the pandemic and its repercussions ripple beneath the surface of the seemingly lighthearted ones, as well: in the exaltation of the human will to live, even as it trespasses into moral ambiguity; in the heartbreaking nostalgia for blissful times, now in the past; in the apparent randomness of happy endings, which often seem to be only narrowly missed tragedies.

So while he would have rather not started the *Decameron* by talking about the Plague, Boccaccio realizes that he has no choice: he is unable to avoid the influence that so thoroughly pervades human existence in the moment in which he is living. In brief, you cannot write a book in Florence in 1349–1351 without writing about the Black Death. To this point, when I have taught the *Decameron* in my Italian Literature classes at the University of San Diego in the last year, I have often reflected upon how Covid-19 will also be *la cagione* of my students' college experience, and of their young adulthood in general. Years from now, I wonder, when they talk about an episode from this time with younger colleagues, with their students, with their children, will they suddenly pause to say, "but first I have to tell you about what it was like at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, or else you won't really understand my story . . ."

Truly, there has been no time like the present to teach the

Decameron. Boccaccio's marvelous irony, colorful characters, and straightforward prose has always made his book relatable, but now—and I say it, as I imagine would Boccaccio, with a smiling sadness—I no longer need to “connect the dots” for my students, so to speak, between the book's fourteenth-century context and their twenty-first century lives. When Boccaccio dedicates his *Decameron* to lovelorn women, whose anguish is intensified because of their being trapped indoors (a revelation, by the way, of the real condition of women in Boccaccio's society), I no longer have to invite my students to imagine the detrimental impact of confinement upon the human psyche; I can see it for myself, etched in each of their faces—my Zoom gallery view a mosaic of weariness. When he describes two general attitudes among the Florentines—those who alter their diet and behavior, self-isolate, and do whatever they can to reduce the risk of infection; and those who “drink to excess, and go about enjoying themselves, singing and satisfying their every appetite, laughing and blowing off what was happening”—a tension arises that was never prompted by my feeble hypothetical questioning, pre-Covid, of whether students thought they would have been one of the “play-it-safers” or “party people” during the Black Death. When Boccaccio juxtaposes aphorisms about universal suffering with observations of the disproportionate hardships faced by individuals in marginalized groups—he cites women, who are condemned for seeking medical help unchaperoned, even when their chaperones are dead; and those of the lower classes, who die in the streets because they have no means of escaping their infected neighborhoods—the implications of a pandemic's ability to lay bare society's most heinous injustices linger heavily in the virtual space we share.

The relevance of such themes recalls the other definition of *pandemic*; that is, ubiquitous, universal. There is, however, one parallel that I think my students are uniquely equipped to recognize, as is anyone who calls or has called San Diego home. In a word, we could call it the “landscape” of ours and Boccaccio's respective afflicted worlds. The Bubonic Plague hit Florence in the summer. It arrived in May, claimed most victims within a few months, and dwindled by September.³ There is something that I

find especially tragic about this timing, that death arrives at the cusp of a season of diversion and celebration. It is not hard to imagine that medieval Florentines, like modern-day San Diegans, were also sun-worshippers: climate changed during this era, a phenomenon of global cooling sometimes referred to as the “Little Ice Age,” would have made the winters of Boccaccio’s lifetime particularly brutal. Summer brought not only respite from chill, but the promise of citywide revelry (a relatively rare luxury in the Middle Ages, we may reasonably suppose, even in prosperous Florence): June 24 marks the feast day of San Giovanni, the patron saint of Florence. It is a poignant image, that of the Florentines waking on this midsummer morning (if, in fact, they had slept at all . . . or lived to see another sunrise). A year before, this day would have begun with joyous anticipation of its festivities; in 1348, it was another dawn upon the living nightmare of their plague-ridden city. It is the same bewildering cessation of activity, of life, that, in this collection, incites Kristin Helm’s anger as she revisits her calendar of events from a pre-pandemic year. As another famous Florentine, Dante Alighieri, wrote a generation before Boccaccio, there is no greater sorrow than remembering happy times while in misery.⁴

Outside Florence’s city walls, in the Tuscan countryside, the close of summer is marked by the *vendemmia*, the grape harvest. This is, after all, the famous region of Chianti. We should expect to see a community of villagers joyfully uniting for the ritual picking of grapes by day, drinking of wine and telling of stories by fireside at night. Instead, Boccaccio describes the scars of the Plague’s scourge here, as well: dead or dying, farmers are unable to tend to their crops or their livestock. We are met with an incredible scene of loose farm animals, roaming and grazing unchecked in unharvested fields. There is something so heartbreaking, so dystopian, about a desolate summer landscape. A silent *piazza*, an empty vineyard. An abandoned stadium, deserted fair grounds. Brett Bookser’s taped-off beach. Yubeen Cho’s closed dance studio.

It is to this countryside where the *Decameron*’s ten storytellers flee. I see Libby Brydolf’s browns so clearly here, in the rolling hills outside Florence; two of hers—sienna and umber—have namesakes in this area. The undulating topography and Mediterranean

climate of central Italy are not so different than San Diego's, after all; anyone who has spent a summer here will have no difficulty picturing the scene of that first afternoon, when the storytellers gather under the oppressive midday heat, surrounded by the sight and smell of dry grass and the sound of buzzing insects. This summer atmosphere, in fact, plays a distinct part in *la cagione* of the *Decameron's* tales. The hour is nones, or 3:00 p.m. Pampinea, the leader of the group, points out the obvious: "As you all can see," she says, "the sun is high and the heat is great, and you cannot hear anything except for the cicadas in the olive trees."

The sun is high. With a simple phrase, this young Plague survivor evokes everything that this season's long days should promise: late strolls through the city illuminated by ambient light that, thanks to Florence's latitude, can last until 10:00 p.m. In the absence of winter's chill, an opportunity to gaze in wonder at the vast number of stars that, without light pollution, must have been visible in this time period. A gathering of community at a public concert in Waterfront Park. A puppeteer performing to a room of giggling toddlers at the Central Library. A picnic lunch at Mission Bay that transforms, by the lazy magic of this season, into a long afternoon at the beach, and then an evening bonfire.

The sun is high and the heat is great—summer is here—and *you cannot hear anything except for the cicadas in the olive trees.* This last detail hits me hard. It's true that the cicadas can be absolutely deafening in this area in the summer, as I once learned when I tried to read a book at a park in Florence one July, and eventually had to pack up and leave after the noise level became unbearable. Their absurd volume is usually annoying—even laughable—but it has here transformed into something profoundly melancholy. My stomach turns as I picture their song reverberating through the stricken countryside, the singers oblivious to the death that surrounds them. In the landscape of the *Decameron*, their shrill chirping only puts into sharper relief the tragic absence of other voices on this idyllic summer day, now silenced forever.

Since moving around on a day like this would be *sciocchezza*, folly, Pampinea sees two options for passing the time: playing games and telling stories. She immediately vetoes the former, predicting

that this will lead to annoyance for the loser, apathy amid the spectators, and only mild pleasure for the winner. But by now we readers of Boccaccio know not to take what he writes at face value—is there not another, deeper reason for which games are not appropriate here? Could it be linked to their ineffectiveness as coping mechanisms for this level of trauma? Games offer distraction, but this is not enough. Distraction is not the antidote for death.

Destruction may only be countered by creation—the creation of worlds through fantasy, the creation of community through the shared participation of narrator and listener. These powers are encapsulated in Pampinea’s second suggestion—storytelling—which, as she explains, “even though one is talking, may offer pleasure to all in the company who listen.” The group unanimously approves.

Yes, Boccaccio would have rather not started the *Decameron* by talking about the Plague. But, he writes, he does not wish for this somber and painful beginning to frighten us from reading on. “This horrid beginning,” he reassures us, “will be to you no different than is, to wayfarers, a rugged and steep mountain, next to which is found a beautiful and delightful plain. The greater the difficulty of the ascent and descent, the greater pleasure this plain will bring them.” The plain represents the stories of the *Decameron* itself—fruits of the creative, unifying energy of shared narration to challenge the workings of destruction and division. Even more remarkable, though, is what Boccaccio says next—the words of a man who has lost to this disease his loved ones, his home, his way of life, his grasp of meaning in this world. I believe they may tell us as much about Giovanni Boccaccio as they do about the courage and tenacity of the human spirit in the face of adversity, of which the *Decameron*—and, nearly 700 years later and a half a world away, the project that it has inspired—is an unbridled celebration. With these words I take my leave of you, gentle wayfarers, and wish you *buona lettura*, happy reading, and the boldness to look forward, as did Boccaccio, to *allegrezza*.

*E sí come la estremità della allegrezza il dolore
occupa, così le miserie
da sopravveniente letizia sono terminate.*

*And as the height of joy turns into sorrow,
so misery is ended by the happiness that follows.*

Notes

- 1 All translations in this introduction are my own, and represent the most literal rendering of Boccaccio's words. There have been numerous translations of the *Decameron* into English, and some have done a superb job at conveying Boccaccio's unique tone, style, and word choice. I recommend, in particular, Wayne Rebhorn's (W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), as well as Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella's (Broadview, 2016). The latter presents one-third of the *Decameron*'s 100 stories.
- 2 It is difficult to discern exactly the number of deaths caused by this pandemic. An often-cited statistic is that the Black Death killed nearly two-thirds of the European population; this calculation, however, does not take into account the great loss of life in other areas—for example, in Asia and in North Africa. The fatality count also varied substantially in different locations; in a densely populated city like Florence, a loss of 50 to 60 percent of the inhabitants is a reasonable estimate.
- 3 This timeline describes the first wave of Bubonic Plague to hit Florence. After this, the Black Death would return periodically, becoming a significant threat every few generations. There is plentiful evidence of devastating outbreaks of this disease in Italy (and elsewhere, such as the infamous 1665–1666 Great Plague of London) even into the seventeenth century.
- 4 This idea appears in lines 121–123 of Canto V in *Inferno*, and is expressed by Francesca da Rimini, one of the souls that Dante meets in Hell.