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Ben Hecko, University of Portland, undergraduate student, “Plague and Progress: An Analysis of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Reform during the Initial Outbreak of the Black Death”

Abstract: Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is a collection of one hundred stories told by a group of people during the initial outbreak of the Black Death in Italy in 1348. Though the work has been interpreted as an escapist piece, this limits its overall value. Through the inclusion of the frame that surrounds the fictional tales, Boccaccio establishes the importance of the plague to the meaning of the work as a whole. Many of the stories that Boccaccio tells attack the immorality of those in positions of authority. These critiques provide a social commentary that addresses the failures of his society and those that have greater authority within it. Furthermore, the *Decameron* provides a call to action to generate societal change in the wake of the Black Death. This paper argues that Boccaccio used the instability caused by the Black Death as a means of causing societal change. Through his condemning critique of those in positions of authority, he called for more just leadership from secular and religious leaders. Through a thorough analysis of the work, this paper considers the societal changes that occurred as a result of the plague and connects the overall message to the opportunity presented to Boccaccio.

Plague and Progress: An Analysis of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Reform during the
Initial Outbreak of the Black Death

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When considering the forces that shape a society, few have as lasting of an effect as a pandemic. They break down social hierarchies, economic systems, religious practices, and nearly every other element of society. To say that this is relevant in the year 2020 would be a gross understatement. The Coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally altered the way in which society functions at nearly every level. It has changed what it means to be a student, an employee, a businessowner, a medical worker. As *The Atlantic*'s Ed Yong notes in an interview with NPR, "an event such as this that shakes up society so much brings with it a huge amount of potential, both for harm - physical, mental, economic - but also for rebuilding a world that is better and more equitable than the one we currently live in."¹

As Covid-19 has shown, pandemics result in major changes to several elements of society. One of the most obvious examples of this widespread change from a pandemic is the Black Death. As historian David Herlihy notes, "the Black Death, broke the Malthusian deadlock. And in doing so it gave to Europeans the chance to rebuild their society along much different lines."² The plague drastically affected the entirety of Europe, spreading across the entire continent and decimating its people. Through its widespread effects, the ability to generate societal change was clearly present. Arriving in Messina in 1347 through the docking of twelve Genoese galleys, the plague spread throughout the island of Sicily.³ From the island, the disease made its way into the ports of Italy, throughout the region, and eventually the entire continent,

¹ NPR.org. "Forecasting The Long-Term Effects of The Coronavirus On American Society." Accessed November 7, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/27/822728341/forecasting-the-long-term-effects-of-the-coronavirus-on-american-society>.

² David Herlihy and Samuel Kline Cohn, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 39.; The Malthusian Deadlock is an idea proposed by Thomas Robert Malthus, an English scholar, in which the growth of a population exceeds the rate at which food can be produced, thereby limiting population through war and famine.

³ Michele Da Piazza, "Chronicle." In *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* by John Aberth, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 29-30.

decimating the populations that came into contact with it. Cities like Siena were struck in such magnitude that, according to the town's chronicler Agnolo di Tura, "fathers abandon their sons, wives their husbands, and one brother the other."⁴ This loss of relationships between kin reveals the extent to which society was affected in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death.

One of the most important literary works written as a product of the Black Death is the Florentine author Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Published in 1353, the text is a collection of one hundred short stories framed in the context of the plague. The stories are grouped in sets of ten, with one set being told each day. After an introduction that expresses the extent to which the plague has decimated Florence, the work focuses on a group of ten well-off Florentine citizens that decide to leave the city to escape the plague and travel into the countryside. They quarantine themselves in property away from the city for ten days and tell stories to one another to pass the time. While the work may initially seem to be simply a fictional piece meant to distract from the depressing nature of reality in Boccaccio's time, it is far more meaningful. In fact, as this paper will demonstrate, Boccaccio uses the stories to provide a social commentary that critiques his society through a careful use of satire. Through this, the work engages with several elements of Italian society that the author critiques.

As historians have shown, the Black Death caused physical, emotional, and social devastation that fundamentally changed society in numerous ways. Historians have addressed many of the ways that the Black Death changed European society in the long run. Art, religion, economics, politics.⁵ Each of these fields were fundamentally challenged by the plague and

⁴ Agnolo Di Tura, "Sienese Chronicle," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* by John Aberth, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 80–82.

⁵ Historical sources that provide valuable insight into the effects of the Black Death include; Samuel Kline Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Millard Meiss, *Painting in Siena and Florence after the Black Death*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951); Evelyn S. Welch, *Art and Society in Italy, 1350-1500*, Oxford History of

forced to adapt as a result. Many of these changes discussed by historians have been focused on elements of society that shifted because of the plague. These changes affected society, though they were not intentional shifts. However, the *Decameron* was not a reaction to the Black Death so much as an action that made use of the instability caused by the plague. Through a detailed analysis of the *Decameron*, this paper argues that Boccaccio attempted to create fundamental societal change by capitalizing on the opportunity provided by the Black Death. The *Decameron* attacks the lack of just action in society, connecting it to the divine punishment of the plague and the ensuing profound societal disruption. Boccaccio uses the plague as a means of causing societal change through his condemning critique of those in positions of authority, calling for more just leadership from secular and religious figures. The *Decameron* offers valuable criticisms of contemporaneous societal values and argues for the introduction of humanist values to establish a more just society. Though it was ultimately unable to affect immediate societal change, it influenced the development of both humanism and anticlericalism in Europe, two ideas that led to later cultural revolution in Europe.

To understand the prominence of the *Decameron*, it is important to have a sense of who the author was in his society. According to historian William Caferro, Giovanni Boccaccio was “a man of substantial political influence and financial means, who was deeply involved in Florentine affairs.”⁶ While he was writing the *Decameron*, Boccaccio was also the chamberlain of the *camera del comune* in Florence, the most prominent financial office in the city.⁷ This office controlled the payment and taxation of many public officials. He also acted as an

Art, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011; Diana Norman, “Art and Religion After the Black Death” in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, vol. 1, *Interpretative Essays*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1995).

⁶ William Caferro, “The Visconti War and Boccaccio’s Florentine Public Service in Context, 1351-53,” in *Heliotropia* 15 (2018), 112. https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/heliotropia/15/caferro.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

ambassador to other Italian city-states and oversaw income from public properties in Florence.⁸

Boccaccio's position of authority indicates his overall relevance and importance in the city-state. This status in conjunction with his employment in several other positions of authority in Florence made him a well-known individual.⁹ Because of this, he possessed a platform from which his works could be disseminated, giving the *Decameron* a larger audience.

To protect himself from criticism and attack from the authorities that he criticized, Boccaccio establishes the *Decameron* as a piece of little importance. In the preface to the work, he declares that it is meant for a specific audience and to serve a singular purpose. Boccaccio writes, "I intend to provide succour and diversion for the ladies, but only for those who are in love."¹⁰ By declaring the intent of the work as trifling and specific, Boccaccio avoids readily declaring war against those he criticizes. Instead, he disarms those reading it in search of heresies or defamations, presenting the work as a simple distraction. However, as he notes in the final paragraph of the preface, there is meaning to be derived from the work. He writes, "the aforesaid ladies... will learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued, and these things can only lead, in my opinion, to the removal of their affliction."¹¹ In this line, Boccaccio reveals that the *Decameron* holds meaning beyond a simple distraction. It is meant to act as a moral compass, to show others how to act and how not to act. Within his conceit of writing specifically for women, Boccaccio makes his writing shield him from the criticisms of those targeted in the stories.

⁸ Ibid., 161-178.

⁹ For a complete list of Boccaccio's public service record, see James Hankins, "Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism" in *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*, (Terra Haute, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 10.

¹⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio and G. H. McWilliam. *The Decameron*. 2nd ed. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2003, 3.

¹¹ Boccaccio, 3.

Though the *Decameron* is a work of fiction, it begins with a firsthand account of the Black Death in Florence. By doing so, Boccaccio places the work into the context surrounding its writing. In this initial setup, Boccaccio establishes the degree to which society has fallen apart through a dedicated description of several immediate effects of the plague. These effects include a complete loss of class distinction, the dissolution of professional and familial relationships, and the removal of functional ability from those in positions of authority. Through noting these cracks in the structure of Florentine society because of the plague, Boccaccio reveals the opportunity for societal change. As a result of this societal instability, those that had previously misused their positions of authority no longer possessed the means of suppressing criticism. As a result, Boccaccio was able to critique the immoral practices of those in authority, thereby establishing the opportunity for others to do the same. Through the contextualization of the work, the lessons of the tales told within are provided with real-world implications.

The most prominent target of Boccaccio's criticism throughout the *Decameron* is the clergy. Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church was the most powerful entity in Europe. By calling crusades, imposing interdict, and controlling entrance into Heaven, the Church was able to leverage their religious authority to wield incredible secular power. This dominion over religious belief in Europe gave the clergy the ability to act in any manner they desired. The clergy abused their positions of authority to act upon their own desires. Boccaccio notes the failures of the clergy to act morally through the satirical stories provided in the *Decameron*.

One of the stories in which Boccaccio's criticism of the clergy is most visible is that of Jehannot and Abraham on the first day of storytelling. The story centers around Jehannot's attempts to convert Abraham, a practicing Jew, to Catholicism. Abraham goes to Rome, observes the immorality of the Christian leaders, and returns home. The observations that Abraham makes

regarding the practices of the clergy in Rome condemn them in several ways, with greed being one of the most prominent. He notes that, “they had applied the name of ‘procuration’ to their unconcealed simony... (as if) God were ignorant of the intentions of their wicked minds and would allow Himself to be deceived, as men are, by the mere names of things.”¹² The priests that engaged in the practice of simony are called out through Abraham’s observations for their violation of their oaths of poverty and the greed that guided them. The continued taxation of everyone in society by the clergy removed money from the economy and harmed those that could not afford the extra expenditure. Boccaccio uses the malpractice of the clergy to address the failures of living religious authorities. By noting their failures in this story, he condemns the effects of the immoral actions of the clergy in a publicly accessible manner.

This failure to aid others through continued immorality is further addressed in the introduction to the second story on the fourth day. The storyteller Pampinea provides a scathing attack that indicates the continued abuse of authority by the clergy. She says, “when they are reproaching you with their own vices, or showing how the laity achieve salvation by almsgiving and the clerics by almsgrabbing, they positively deafen you with their loud and arrogant voices... one would think they were excused... from working their way to heaven on their merits, for they behave as though they actually own and govern the place.”¹³ The clergy act as complete hypocrites through their prescriptions of lessons and penances to ordinary laypeople. The vices that they indulge themselves in are far greater than their followers, yet they are the people that are given the role of guide. The actions of those in positions of authority serve as an example to the people whom they are supposed to serve. Due to the authority granted to them by their positions, the immoral choices that they make have a greater impact on those around them. They

¹²Ibid., 40.

¹³ Boccaccio, 302.

sated their own desires and relied on their office to grant immunity, engaging in sexual trysts and greed. Continued abuse of authority allowed the clergy to take what they wanted from laypeople without consent. However, because of their exalted position within society, they were left unpunished for their actions. Presenting this collection of overt criticisms in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio went against the restriction noted by his own character.

The *Decameron* also addresses secular authorities, criticizing them for a similar misuse of the power granted to them by their positions. The story of Tedaldo offers criticisms of both, addressing the failures of the clergy while also presenting a criticism of those that enforce the law. When Tedaldo discovers that the husband of his lover had been falsely arrested for killing him, he reflects upon the law process and its failures. He notes, “the blind severity of the law and its administrators, who in order to convey the impression that they are zealously seeking the truth, often have recourse to cruelty and cause falsehood to be accepted as proven fact, hence demonstrating... that their true allegiance is to the devil and his iniquities.”¹⁴ Again Boccaccio uses the word “iniquities” to express his criticisms of people in positions of authority. The enforcers of the law are acting in a manner that is immoral and directly impacts others, limiting their ability to function in society. Their authority lands an innocent man the penalty of death and fails to bring the true perpetrators to justice, revealing its misuse. As a result of the societal disruption caused by the plague, Boccaccio argued for a more just society. Through his attacks on the administrators for their immoral action in a time of drastic change, he establishes the need for morality within the justice system.

Another prominent criticism that Boccaccio puts forward in the *Decameron* is directed at the courtiers of Italy for their self-centered habits. These people served as advisors or

¹⁴ Boase, 240.

companions to royalty, giving them a higher degree of agency than many others possessed. When describing the character of Guiglielmo, Boccaccio notes that he is a courtier. However, instead of continuing with the story, he pauses to reflect on the failures of contemporary courtiers. He says, “our modern courtiers are better described as asses, brought up, not in any court, but on the dungheap of all the scum of the earth’s iniquities.”¹⁵ The greatest affront to Boccaccio by these courtiers is their perpetuation of immoral acts in contrast to the efforts of those in the past. He idolizes the past as a means of looking forward, indicative of the humanist mindset that modernity could improve from understanding the past. The men of his time committed scandalous and vile acts, treating vice as first nature and acting in a wholly self-centered manner. This is in direct contrast with the actions of past courtiers, Boccaccio notes, “[whose] efforts were expended, in making peace whenever disputes or conflicts arose between two nobles, negotiating treaties of marriage... and censuring the failures of miscreants.”¹⁶ By appealing to a mythical past in which people were more morally upright and just, Boccaccio advocates for social change in a way that had been done. Instead of suggesting social changes that are new and uncharted, he cites an idealized past that had stability. He appeals to their past morality as the future of a better, more just society.

The *Decameron* presents a moral standard for those in positions of authority and immediately expresses that contemporary position-holders fail to live up to it. On the final day of storytelling, the character of Filomena discusses the virtue of kings. She says, “Those people do well, then, who possess ample means and do all that is expected of them; but we ought neither to marvel thereat, nor laud them to the skies, as we should the person who is equally munificent but

¹⁵ Boccaccio, 60.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of whom, his means being slender, less is expected.”¹⁷ In this statement, Boccaccio establishes the degree to which authority figures ought to be held accountable. Because the clergy and secular authorities fail to act with the best interest of the state in mind, they condemn Italian society. As a result of their immoral actions, God punishes them with the plague. Through this, Boccaccio makes the case that it should not be rare for those with power to use it for the good of others; rather, it should be so common that it need not be mentioned. The standardization of morally upright behavior for authority figures is the change that the *Decameron* strives to induce.

Though Boccaccio attempted to capitalize on the opportunity for societal change, the *Decameron* did not cause an immediate moral reformation. The elite quickly reasserted themselves over society, limiting change to the actions of those in positions of authority. The city of Siena provides an excellent example of this lack of change. Historian William M. Bowsky argues that Sieneese government was relatively unchanged by the plague. He states, “governmental machinery was rapidly re-assembled and was manned by the same type personnel as before the epidemic.”¹⁸ Not only did the government fail to change, the clergy also continued their immoral practices. Members of the Church continued to sell indulgences and act without virtue prior to the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century.¹⁹ The *Decameron* sought to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the Black Death. However, the rapid reconstruction of governing structures stopped the moral reformation that Boccaccio desired.

Though the *Decameron* did not immediately reform Italian society, it was not a failure; rather, it became part of a large-scale shift towards humanism. In his essay, “Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism,” James Hankins establishes the effects of

¹⁷ Ibid., 746.

¹⁸ William M. Bowsky, “The Impact of the Black Death upon Sieneese Government and Society” in *Speculum*, Vol. 39 (January 1964), 20.

¹⁹ Brad Franco, “The Protestant Reformation,” Powerpoint presentation, November 25, 2019.

Boccaccio's work on Italian society. He argues that Boccaccio is a critical example of the Renaissance humanism that came to fruition during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy. Hankins notes, "the humanists saw virtue in the ruling class as the key to better government and the cure for corruption. In other words, they cared more about governors than governments, more about the morality of rulers than the legality of regimes."²⁰ In this statement, Hankins essentially summarizes the message of the *Decameron*. The critique presented by Boccaccio attempted to capitalize on the opportunity of unrest caused by the Black Death to call out the lack of virtue in the ruling class. Though this had little immediate impact on Italian society, it developed the viewpoint of Renaissance humanism towards those in positions of authority.

The application of the meaning within the *Decameron* to the current situation of the world and Covid-19 makes the work even more relevant. Boccaccio condemns the lack of accountability for the immoral actions of those in positions of authority and their continued abuse of their roles. This message is as important today as it was in 1353. In the United States, there are calls for accountability from Donald Trump for his continued misuse of authority. To quote the Los Angeles Times, "Trump has cheapened his office, instilled distrust in essential institutions of justice and democracy and replaced knowledge and professionalism with ignorance and amateurism."²¹ Furthermore, as Covid-19 began spreading rapidly, he refused to rely on medical experts and failed to alert the public to the danger that the virus posed. His continued misuse of the office represents the exact problem that the *Decameron* criticizes; the abuse of authority that damages the lives of those subjugated to the abuser.

²⁰ James Hankins, "Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism" in *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*, (Terra Haute, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 6.

²¹ "Trump's Presidency Is a Train Wreck. Let Us Count the Ways," Los Angeles Times, October 20, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-10-20/trump-failures-outrages>.

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