

Boccaccio's deameron



Boccaccio was an Italian author and poet, an important Renaissance humanist in his own right and author of a number of notable works including *On Famous Women*, the *Decameron* and his poems in the vernacular. Boccaccio grew up in Florence, but it was in Naples that Boccaccio began what he considered his true vocation, poetry. Works produced in this period include *Filostrato*, a later source for Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Filocolo* a prose version of an existing French romance, and *La caccia di Diana* a poem in octave rhyme listing Neapolitan women. Boccaccio returned to Florence in early 1341, avoiding the plague in that city of 1340. Although discontented with his return to Florence, Boccaccio continued to work, producing *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, also known as *Ameto*, a mix of prose and poems in 1341, completing the fifty canto allegorical poem *Amorosa visione* in 1342, *Fiammetta* in 1343. In Florence the overthrow of Walter of Brienne brought about the government *popolo minuto*. The overthrow diminished the power of the nobility and the wealthier merchant classes and assisted in the relative decline of Florence. Further damage occurred in the city in 1348 due to the Black Death, later used in the *Decameron*, which killed an estimate of three-quarters of the city's population. During the plague Boccaccio spent a significant amount of time in Ravenna, seeking new support, and despite his claims it is not certain he was actually present in plague-ravaged Florence. Boccaccio suffered personal losses during the plague, his stepmother died during the epidemic. Boccaccio's characters are notable for their era in that they are realistic, spirited and clever individuals who are grounded in reality in contradiction to the characters of his contemporaries, who were more concerned with the medieval virtues of Chivalry, Piety and Humility. The work was largely

complete by 1352, becoming Boccaccio's final effort in literature. Boccaccio revised and rewrote the Decameron in 1370-71. This manuscript has survived to the present day. Boccaccio began work on the Decameron around 1349. The Decameron is a collection of 100 novellas; a medieval allegorical work known for its bawdy tales of love, appearing in all its possibilities from the erotic to the tragic. Other topics such as wit and witticism, practical jokes and worldly initiation also form part of the mosaic. Beyond its entertainment and literary popularity it remains an important historical document of life in the 14th century. Decameron is structured in a frame narrative, or frame tale. Boccaccio begins with a description of the Bubonic Plague specifically the epidemic which hit Florence in 1348 and leads into an introduction of a group of seven young women and three young men who flee from plague-ridden Florence to a villa in the countryside of Fiesole for two weeks. To pass the time, each member of the party tells one story for each one of the nights spent at the villa. Although 14 days pass, two days are set aside; one to do chores and another holy day where no activity must take place. In this manner, 100 stories are told by the end of the ten days. Each of the ten characters is charged as King or Queen of the company for one of the ten days in turn. This charge extends to choosing the theme of the stories for that day, and all but two days have topics assigned: examples of the power of fortune; examples of the power of human will; love tales that end tragically; love tales that end happily; clever replies that save the speaker; tricks that women play on men; tricks that men play on women; examples of virtue. Only Dioneo, who tells the tenth tale each day, has the right to tell a tale on any topic he wishes, due to his wit. Each day also includes a short introduction and conclusion to continue the frame of the

tales by describing other daily activities besides story-telling. These frame tale interludes frequently include transcriptions of Italian folk songs. The interactions among tales in a day, or across days, as Boccaccio spins variations and reversals of previous material, forms a whole and not just a collection of stories. The basic plots of the stories including mocking the lust and greed of the clergy; tensions in Italian society between the new wealthy commercial class and noble families; the perils and adventures of traveling merchants. The basic plots of the stories themselves should not be taken as Boccaccio's inventions; they are based on older Italian, Spanish, Latin, French, Provence, and the Near East. Most, though not all, are set in the period immediately preceding the authors own generation. Many of the characters in the stories actually existed, such as Giotto di Bondone and Guido Cavalcanti; the criminals from the Adreuccio tale are real, as are the tricksters in Frate Cipolla's delima. Even the description of the plague, which we know Boccaccio did witness personally, is not original—Vittore Branca has shown that it was based on the *Historia gentis Langobardorum* of Paul the Deacon. The title is a combination of two Greek words meaning "ten" (deca) and "day". Boccaccio made similar Greek etymological plays of words in his other works. The subtitle is *Prencipe Galeotto*. This derives from the opening material in which Boccaccio dedicates the work to ladies of the day who did not have the diversions of men—hunting, fishing, riding, falconry—who were forced to conceal their amorous passions and stay idle and concealed in their rooms. A number of the stories contained within *The Decameron* would later appear in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. However, Chaucer probably was not directly familiar with the *Decameron*. Instead, he most likely used common French and Latin sources that were inspirational material for Boccaccio's

work. Throughout Decameron the mercantile ethic prevails and predominates. The commercial and urban values of quick wit, sophistication and intelligence are treasured, while the vices of stupidity and dullness are cured, or punished. While these traits and values will seem obvious to the modern reader, they were an emerging feature in Europe with the rise of urban centers and a monetized economic system beyond the traditional rural feudal and monastery systems. Beyond the unity provided by the frame narrative, Decameron provides a unity in philosophical outlook. Throughout runs the common medieval theme of Lady Fortune, and how quickly one can rise and fall through the external influences of the "Wheel of Fortune".

Boccaccio had been educated in the tradition of Dante's Divine Comedy who used the various levels of allegory to show the connections between the literal events of the story and the hidden Christian message. However Decameron uses Dante's model not to educate the reader, but to satirize this method of learning. The Catholic Church, priests and religious belief becomes the satirical source of comedy throughout. This was part of a wider historical trend in the aftermath of the Black Death which saw widespread discontent with the church. The circumstances described in the Decameron are heavily infused with a medieval sense of numerological and mystical significance. For example, it is widely believed that the seven young women are meant to represent the Four Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude) and the Three Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity). It is further supposed that the three men represent the traditional Greek tripartite division of the soul (Reason, Anger, and Lust). Boccaccio himself notes that the names he gives for these ten characters are in fact pseudonyms chosen as "appropriate to the qualities of each". The

Italian names of the seven women, in the same (most likely significant) order as given in the text, are: Pampinea, Fiammetta, Filomena, Emilia, Lauretta, Neifile, and Elisa. The men, in order, are: Panfilo, Filostrato, and Dioneo. The Decameron is a distinctive work, in that it describes in detail the physical, psychological and social effects that the Bubonic Plague had on that part of Europe. Although it is by no means the only remaining description of the Black Plague of 1348, Boccaccio's account in the Decameron is probably the most well known portrayal among medieval historians and literary critics. Alberto Tenenti's article "La rappresentazione della morte collettiva nel Decameron" discusses the lack of Boccaccio's attachment of a moral or religious significance to the devastating event. Tenenti notes that the author takes care not to allow a Christian interpretation of the plague to prevail, indifferently attributing it either to the influence of the celestial bodies or to God's divine justice. Boccaccio refuses to take a position, but there is without doubt sympathy on his part toward the tragic situation of the Florentines. After speaking of the plague in detail in the Proem, Boccaccio does not speak of it similarly for the remainder of the work. The author does not present a catalogue of medical accounts of the plagues effects, although descriptions of the victim's black bruises and swollen glands are given in some detail. The most interesting anecdote in Boccaccio's introduction is that in which the two pigs die on the spot after shaking abandoned, plague-infested rags. Tenenti points out that many of the general elements of Boccaccio's account conflict with other late medieval representations of the epidemic. Boccaccio also does not provide the reader with any information particular to himself or his family or friends. Instead, the author focuses on the plague's dehumanizing effects on Florentine society. Boccaccio traces the behavior and attitudes of

<https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron/>

the Florentines, discreetly accompanied by a series of personal and moral notations. He does not speak of a return to barbarism in the Tuscan city nor does he suggest this, even if the Florentines' systematic flight from the infirm qualifies as somewhat barbarous. He describes how the connective tissue of the plague-ridden society had come undone and in its place a cruel, surreal rapport between Florentine citizens was instated: "... l'un fratello l'altro abbandonava e il zio il nipote e la sorella il fratello e spesse volte la donna il suo marito e - che maggior cosa Ã" e quasi non credibile - li padri e le madri i figlioli, quasi loro non fossero, di visitare e di servire schifavano." The plague conditions even caused the remaining women to loosen their morals when, on becoming ill, they allowed their nudity to be observed by manservants if maidservants were not available. For Boccaccio, how long one lived was not as important as how one lived. Boccaccio's descriptive masterpiece represents how the Florentines arrived at the limits of inhumanity but, according to Tenenti, it cannot be viewed as a complete picture of Florentine reality as other interpretations of the plague exist. The Florence to which the author refers could very well be another city, but no one else has been able to render an analogous description with greater precision of the Black Plague of 1348 than Boccaccio. Boccaccio utilizes the situation of the plague of 1348 as a backdrop to create the conditions essential for a group of young men and women such as the brigata, who are wealthy enough to provide for themselves in difficult times, to come together, enjoy each others company, and go against societal convention in the types of subject matter treated in their narratives. Ordinarily since young men were separated socially from their female counterparts, the plague serves as a justification of the formation of the mixed-sex brigata at a time of

strife and for the group's decision to abandon the urban environs of Florence for the surrounding countryside, thereby finding themselves in gardens which recall the culture of courtly love. In demonstrating how the moral climate of the city had been altered due to the dehumanizing effects of the plague, Boccaccio allows the narrators, and indeed himself as author, the freedom to express ideas not commonly discussed or accepted in the society of his time. The Black Death was a devastating pandemic that first struck Europe in the mid-14th century (1347-50), killing about a third of Europe's population, an estimated 34 million people. A series of plague epidemics also occurred in large portions of Asia and the Middle East during the same period, indicating that the European outbreak was actually part of a worldwide pandemic. The same disease is thought to have returned to Europe every generation with varying degrees of intensity and fatality until the 1700s. Notable late outbreaks include the Italian Plague of 1629-1631, the Great Plague of London (1665-66), and the Great Plague of Vienna (1679). The result of the plague was not just a massive decline in population. It irrevocably changed Europe's social structure, was a disastrous blow to Europe's predominant religious institution, the Roman Catholic Church, caused widespread persecutions of minorities like Jews and lepers, and created a general mood of morbidity that influenced people to live for the moment, unsure of their daily survival. The initial 14th-century European event was called the "Great Mortality" by contemporary writers and, with later outbreaks, became known as the "Black Death" because of a striking symptom of the disease, called acral necrosis, in which sufferers' skin would blacken due to sub dermal hemorrhages. Historical records attribute the Black Death to an outbreak of bubonic plague, an epidemic of the bacterium

<https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron/>

Yersinia pestis spread by fleas with the help of animals like the black rat. In October 1347, a fleet of Genoese trading ships fleeing Kaffa reached the port of Messina. By the time the fleet reached Messina, all the crew members were either infected or dead. It is presumed that the ships also carried infected rats and/or fleas. Some ships were found grounded on shorelines, with no one aboard remaining alive. Looting of these lost ships also helped spread the disease. From there, the plague spread to Genoa and Venice by the turn of 1347/1348. From Italy the disease spread northwest across Europe, striking France, Spain, Portugal, and Great Britain by June 1348, then turned and spread east through Germany and Scandinavia from 1348 to 1350, and finally to north-western Russia in 1351. The plague largely spared some parts of Europe, including the Kingdom of Poland and parts of Belgium and the Netherlands. The plague repeatedly returned to haunt Europe and the Mediterranean throughout the 14th to 17th centuries, and although the bubonic plague still exists with isolated cases today, the Great Plague of London in 1665-1666 is generally recognized as one of the last major outbreaks. The Great Fire of London in 1666, may have killed off any remaining plague bearing rats and fleas, which led to a decline in the plague. The destruction of rats in the Great Fire may also have contributed to the ascendancy of brown rats in England. According to the bubonic plague theory, one possible explanation for the disappearance of plague from Europe may be that the black rat (*Rattus rattus*) infection reservoir and its disease vector was subsequently displaced and succeeded by the bigger Norwegian, or brown, rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), which is not as prone to transmit the germ-bearing fleas to humans in large rat die-offs (see Appleby and Slack references below). Late outbreaks in central Europe include the

<https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron/>

Italian Plague of 1629-1631, which is associated with troop movements during the Thirty Years' War, and the Great Plague of Vienna in 1679, which may have been due to a reintroduction of the plague from eastern trading ports. The plague consisted of three forms: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The bubonic and septicemic plague are transmitted by direct contact with fleas. The bacteria multiplies inside a flea, blocking its stomach and causing it to become very hungry. The flea then voraciously bites a host and continues to feed because it is unable to satisfy its hunger. During the feeding process, infected blood carrying the plague bacteria flows into the wound. The plague bacteria then has a new host, and the fleas eventually die from starvation. The pneumonic plague has a different form of transmission. It is transmitted through infected droplets of saliva coughed up by bubonic or septicemic infected humans. The airborne bacteria enters the lungs through the windpipe and starts attacking the lungs and throat. The three forms of plague brought an array of signs and symptoms to those infected. Bubonic plague refers to the painful lymph node swellings called buboes. The septicemic plague is called " Blood poisoning", and pneumonic plague is an airborne plague that forms a first attack on the lungs. The classic sign of bubonic plague was the appearance of buboes in the groin and armpits, which ooze pus and blood. Victims underwent damage to the skin and underlying tissue until they were covered in dark blotches. This symptom, called acral necrosis, led to the disease being called the " Black" plague. Most victims died within four to seven days after infection. When plague reached Europe, it first struck port cities and then followed the trade routes, both by sea and land. The bubonic plague was the most commonly seen form of the Black Death, with a mortality rate of thirty to seventy-five

percent and symptoms including fever of 38 to 41 °C (101-105 °F), headaches, aching joints, nausea and vomiting, and a general feeling of malaise. The pneumonic plague was the second most commonly seen form of the Black Death, with a mortality rate of ninety to ninety-five percent. Symptoms included slimy sputum tinted with blood. As the disease progressed, sputum became free flowing and bright red. Septicemic plague was the most rare of the three forms, with mortality close to 100 percent. Symptoms were high fevers and skin turning deep shades of purple due to DIC (Disseminated intravascular coagulation). Information about the death toll varies widely by area and from source to source. Approximately 25 million deaths occurred in Europe alone, with many others occurring in northern Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Estimates of the demographic impact of plague in Asia are based on both population figures during this time and estimates of the disease's toll on population centers. The initial outbreak of plague in the Chinese province of Hubei in 1334 claimed up to 90 percent of the population, an estimated five million people. During 1353-54, outbreaks in eight distinct areas throughout the Mongol/Chinese empires may have caused the death of two-thirds of China's population, often yielding an estimate of 25 million deaths. It is estimated that between one-third and one-half of the European population died from the outbreak between 1348 and 1350. As many as 25% of all villages were depopulated, mostly the smaller communities, as the few survivors fled to larger towns and cities. The Black Death hit the culture of towns and cities disproportionately hard. Some rural areas, for example, Eastern Poland and Lithuania, had such low populations and were so isolated that the plague made little progress. Larger cities were the worst off, as population densities

and close living quarters made disease transmission easier. Cities were also strikingly filthy, infested with lice, fleas and rats, and subject to diseases related to malnutrition and poor hygiene. According to historian John Kelly, "(w)oeefully inadequate sanitation made medieval urban Europe so disease-ridden, no city of any size could maintain its population without a constant influx of immigrants from the countryside." (p. 68) The influx of new citizens facilitated the movement of the plague between communities, and contributed to the longevity of the plague within larger communities. The precise demographic impact of the disease in the Middle East is impossible to calculate. Mortality was particularly high in rural areas, including significant areas of Palestine and Syria. Many surviving rural people fled, leaving their fields and crops, and entire rural provinces are recorded as being totally depopulated. Surviving records in some cities reveal a devastating number of deaths. The 1348 outbreak in Gaza left an estimated 10, 000 people dead, while Aleppo recorded a death rate of 500 a day during the same year. In Damascus, at the disease's peak in September and October 1348, a thousand deaths were recorded every day, with overall mortality estimated at between 25 and 38 percent. Syria lost a total of 400, 000 people by the time the epidemic subsided in March 1349. In contrast to some higher mortality estimates in Asia and Europe, scholars believe the mortality rate in the Middle East was less than one-third of the total population, with higher rates in selected areas. The governments of Europe had no effective response to the crisis because no one knew its cause or how it spread. Most monarchs instituted measures that prohibited exports of foodstuffs, condemned black market speculators, set price controls on grain, and outlawed large-scale fishing. At best, they proved mostly unenforceable,

<https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron/>

and at worse they contributed to a continent-wide downward spiral. The hardest hit lands, like England, were unable to buy grain abroad, from France because of the prohibition, and from most of the rest of the grain producers because of crop failures from shortage of labor. Any grain that could be shipped was eventually taken by pirates or looters to be sold on the black market. Meanwhile, many of the largest countries, most notably England and Scotland, had been at war, using up much of their treasury and exacerbating inflation. In 1337, on the eve of the first wave of the Black Death, England and France went to war in what would become known as the Hundred Years' War. This, another of the crises of the fourteenth century, would deplete the treasuries, manpower, and infrastructure of both kingdoms throughout and beyond the worst of the plague. Malnutrition, poverty, disease and hunger, coupled with war, growing inflation and other economic concerns made Europe in the mid-fourteenth century ripe for tragedy. The plague did more than just devastate the medieval population; it caused a substantial change in economy and society in all areas of the world. Economic historians like Fernand Braudel have concluded that Black Death began during a recession in the European economy that had been under way since the beginning of the century, and only served to worsen it. As a consequence, it greatly accelerated social and economic change during the 14th and 15th centuries. First, the church's power was weakened, and in some cases, the social roles it had played were replaced by secular ones. It also led to peasant uprisings in many parts of Europe, such as France (the Jacquerie rebellion), Italy (the Ciompi rebellion, which swept the city of Florence), and in England (the English Peasant Revolt). The Black Death should have opened the way to increased peasant prosperity. Europe had been overpopulated before the

plague, and a reduction of 30% to 50% of the population should have meant less competition for resources: more available land and food, and higher wages. However, for reasons that are still debated, population levels in fact continued to decline until around 1420 and did not begin to rise again until 1470, so the initial Black Death event on its own does not entirely provide a satisfactory explanation to this extended period of decline in prosperity. See Medieval demography for a more complete treatment of this issue and current theories on why improvements in living standards took longer to evolve. The great population loss brought economic changes based on increased social mobility, as depopulation further eroded the peasants' already weakened obligations to remain on their traditional holdings. In Western Europe, the sudden scarcity of cheap labor provided an incentive for landlords to compete for peasants with wages and freedoms, an innovation that, some argue, represents the roots of capitalism, and the resulting social upheaval caused the Renaissance and even Reformation. In many ways the Black Death improved the situation of surviving peasants. In Western Europe, because of the shortage of labor they were in more demand and had more power, and because of the reduced population, there was more fertile land available; however, the benefits would not be fully realized until 1470, nearly 120 years later, when overall population levels finally began to rise again. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, renewed stringency of laws tied the remaining peasant population more tightly to the land than ever before through serfdom. Sparsely populated Eastern Europe was less affected by the Black Death and so peasant revolts were less common in the 14th and 15th centuries, not occurring in the east until the 16th through 19th centuries. Since it is believed to have in part caused the social upheavals of

<https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron/>

14th- and 15th-century Western Europe, some see the Black Death as a factor in the Renaissance and even the Reformation in Western Europe. Therefore, historians have cited the smaller impact of the plague as a contributing factor in Eastern Europe's failure to experience either of these movements on a similar scale. Extrapolating from this, the Black Death may be seen as partly responsible for Eastern Europe's considerable lag in scientific and philosophical advances as well as in the move to liberalise government by restricting the power of the monarch and aristocracy. A common example is that England is seen to have effectively ended serfdom by 1550 while moving towards more representative government; meanwhile, Russia did not abolish serfdom until an autocratic tsar decreed so in 1861. On top of all this, the plague's great population reduction brought cheaper land prices, more food for the average peasant, and a relatively large increase in per capita income among the peasantry, if not immediately, in the coming century. However, the upper class often attempted to stop these changes, initially in Western Europe, and more forcefully and successfully in Eastern Europe, by instituting laws which barred the peasantry from certain actions or material goods. A good example of this is the sumptuary laws which were passed throughout Europe which regulated what people (particularly of the peasant class) could wear, so that nobles could ensure that peasants did not begin to dress and act as a higher class member with their increased wealth. Another tactic was to fix prices and wages so that peasants could not demand more with increasing value. This was met with varying success depending on the amount of rebellion it inspired; such a law was one of the causes of England's 1381 Peasants' Revolt. The Black Death led to cynicism toward religious officials who could not keep their frequent

promises of curing plague victims and banishing the disease. No one, the Church included, was able to cure or even explain the plague. In fact, most thought it spread somehow through air, calling it miasma. This increased doubting of the clergy. Pope Clement VI reigned during the plague years in Europe during a time when the papacy was based in Avignon, France. This period in papal history, known as the Babylonian Captivity to its detractors, was a concurrent cause of the people's lack of faith in the Catholic Church. The Avignon popes were seen as having subordinated themselves to the French monarchy, and their ineffectiveness regarding the Black Death only compounded the common man's disillusionment. Extreme alienation with the church culminated in either support for different religious groups such as the flagellants, which grew tremendously during the opening years of the Black Death (angering church and political officials greatly), or to an increase in interest for more secular alternatives to problems facing European society and an increase of secular politicians. The Black Death hit the monasteries very hard because of their close quarters and their kindness in helping the sick, so that there was a severe shortage of clergy after the epidemic cycle. This resulted in a mass influx of new clergy members, most of whom did not share the life-long convictions and experiences of the veterans they replaced. This resulted in abuses by the clergy in years afterwards and a further deterioration of the position of the Church in the eyes of the people. After 1350 European culture in general turned very morbid. The general mood was one of pessimism, and the art turned dark with representations of death. The *Dies Irae* was created in this period as was the popular poem *La Danse Macabre* and the instructive and popular *Ars moriendi* ("the art of dying"). See also *The Decameron*. The science of alchemy was affected by <https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron/>

the plague. As a specialty and method of treatment, it was considered the norm for most scientists and doctors prior and during the Black Death. However, after the plague had taken its toll, the practice of alchemy slowly began to wane. The citizenry began to realize that, in most cases, it did not affect the progress of the epidemic and that some of the potions and "cures" used by many doctors throughout Christendom and the Islamic world only helped to worsen the condition of the sick. Liquor (distilled alcohol), originally made by alchemists, was commonly applied as a remedy for the Black Death, and as a result the popularity and consumption of liquor in Europe rose dramatically after the plague. The Decameron an XML-encoded English translation of the Italian text based on THE DECAMERON OF GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO faithfully translated by J. M. Rigg, London, 1921 (first printed 1903) <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecIndex.php> Medieval Sourcebook: Boccaccio: The Decameron - Introduction Paul Halsall Jan 1996 <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/boccacio2.html> Jewish History Sourcebook: The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.html> Marchione di Coppo Stefani, The Florentine Chronicle Rubric 643: Concerning A Mortality In The City Of Florence In Which Many People Died. Marchione di Coppo Stefani was born in Florence in 1336. He wrote his Florentine Chronicle in the late 1370s and early 1380s. Stefani, Marchione di Coppo. Cronaca fiorentina. Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, Vol. 30. , ed. Niccolo Rodolico. Citta di Castello: 1903-13. <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html>