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Author

Rupp, Katrin

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Katrin Rupp
University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

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The Consolation of Literature: Reading Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Katrin Rupp
University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Abstract

Engaging with plague literature such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* during the COVID-19 pandemic arguably enhances our understanding of medieval depictions of the plague. At the same time, medieval descriptions of the pestilence reflect on our current situation. Indeed, reading the *Decameron* with my MA students in a virtual classroom in the spring of 2021 showed that the human experience of fear and loss in the face of a potentially lethal disease has not fundamentally changed in seven hundred centuries. Furthermore, we all brought our individual experiences with the pandemic to the text, which enabled us to identify with the plague situation of Boccaccio's time in a way that would not have been possible before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Late in the spring of 1348, seven young women and three young men decide to leave plague-ridden Florence and spend two weeks in a palazzo in the idyllic countryside surrounding the city. Such is the setting that famously introduces the one hundred tales these young people will tell each other in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly rewarding to (re)read the *Decameron*, since our current experience of a global viral disease likely comes to bear on how we react to the plight of the plague that Boccaccio describes. This is what I proposed to explore in a master's seminar on "Medieval Dis-ease," taught online in the spring semester 2021 at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. In addition to the *Decameron*, the course schedule included Guillaume de Machaut's *Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, Geoffrey Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale," as well as *Cleanness* and *Pearl*.¹ Engaging with plague literature can arguably enhance our understanding of both the medieval texts and the current pandemic. Reading the *Decameron* with my students revealed the recreative effect that literature can have in a 21st-century virtual classroom, just as it did in a 14th-century Italian villa.

Even though modern science now understands the causes of both the plague and COVID-19, as well as offering effective cures, feelings such as despair and fear in the face of a (potentially) lethal disease have not fundamentally changed in seven hundred centuries. Naturally, individual experiences of the two diseases vary. As David Coley reminds us in his timely *Death and the Pearl Maiden* (2019), Boccaccio's description of the plague is mediated "through a prismatic range of social, psychological, cultural and literary filters" (2). Similarly, our own stories of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects us are informed by our personal experiences as well as our socio-cultural environments. At the same time, every individual story contributes to a collective memory of the pandemic, just as each of the Florentines' tales contributes to the *Decameron* as a whole.

In the spring of 2021, rather than moving to the countryside of their own volition, my students were forced to abandon the potentially contagious classroom and join me on WebEx for my course. Having swapped the community of the classroom for a virtual square in their private quarters, students and tutor were thus curiously alone together. While Boccaccio's *brigata* enjoys meals, music and stories in each other's company in their mansion on a Tuscan hill, the only thing we 'shared' was our computer screen, a rather frugal feast. But it was of course thanks to this screen and a broadband connection that we could at least continue to meet and thus uphold a sense of classroom community. In fact, we were grateful for this opportunity. It helped us structure the days we mainly spent at home, and it offered a minimum of social interaction. Thanks to breakout rooms, group discussions could be conducted almost as if in a classroom setting, and without having to bother with masks and safety distances. One student even joined my course from abroad, something she would not have been easily able to do under normal circumstances, or even at all. And to add my personal story here, the accessibility of the online setting offered me welcome relief, as commuting was difficult for me at the time. Indeed, I was barely able to walk: I had to have my right hip joint replaced by an artificial one in

¹ We read the frame narrative and a selection of tales from the *Decameron*. My inclusion of *Cleanness* and *Pearl* was inspired by David Coley, who convincingly argues that the trauma of the plague forms a subtle backdrop in the four poems by the Gawain Poet.

an emergency operation due to being pushed to the ground by a dog when I went for a run. After being on sick leave for five weeks, I was able – and glad – to resume work thanks to remote teaching. It is ironic that this non-normal setting provided me with the sense of normality I craved in my condition. Thus, remote teaching has its advantages.

Furthermore, studying Boccaccio's *Decameron* during the current pandemic opens up new perspectives on the disease that pre-pandemic readers would not have considered. As my students noted, social distancing, for example, was largely unheard of before the arrival of the Coronavirus, but it is not a recent invention. Boccaccio tells us that townspeople and relatives in medieval Florence keep to themselves and talk to one another only from afar, if they talk at all. Naturally, these people are afraid of the pestilence, but Boccaccio also deplores the fact that their withdrawal increases the loneliness of the afflicted and, ultimately, leads to more casualties. Ongoing studies on the socio-medical effects of keeping apart/isolation similarly report higher rates of mental illnesses like depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as an increase in suicide rates.²

In this light, the Florentines' countryside conviviality is a perfect remedy to eschew loneliness and depression at the same time as they avoid the potentially infectious crowds in the city. Just like these young people find solace in shared meals and storytelling, we can find comfort in reading and discussing their diverting stories. But while the *brigata* explicitly cuts itself off from any but pleasant news ("niuna novella, altro che lieta," 22), we are just one tempting click away from the news portals when meeting on a virtual platform. What are the latest numbers of infections? How many have died? The immediacy of people dying, which is the *brigata*'s prime motive for abandoning the city, is mostly reduced to a list of cyphers in our day and age. Still, the sense of death is not completely obliterated behind these figures, even less so for those of us who have lost friends or relatives to COVID-19.

In fact, the young Florentines do not flee the disease so much as the deaths and the sadness they bring. Feeling rejuvenated after an inspiring fortnight of merrymaking, they return to the city even though the pestilence has not yet abated. However, having indulged in reasonable pleasures, they have armed themselves against the ongoing plague. Indeed, medieval medical treatises emphasise the importance of moderation and serenity in all areas of life to avoid being infected by the plague,³ something Dioneo also underlines when the fifteen days in the countryside are over. They have comported themselves honourably ("onestamente abbiam fatto," 880), he states, which was not to be taken for granted: the delicious victuals and the pleasant tales ("liete novelle," 880) could easily have instigated concupiscence among them. Thus, they have fortified their bodies and minds with agreeable stories/news (Boccaccio uses "novella" for both terms) to face the plague again once back in Florence. In fact, Dioneo points out that their continued lingering in the countryside might result in less honourable behaviour. Time for the *brigata* to go home, time for Boccaccio to finish his work.

The *Decameron* ends with the author's afterword in which he defends his story collection against potential accusations of longwindedness and lewdness by his female audience. Just like the *brigata*

² See, for example, Leo Sher's "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Suicide Rates."

³ See, for example, John of Burgundy, a French physician whose medical treatise (1365) circulated widely: "you should avoid over-indulgence in food and drink, and also avoid baths and everything which might rarefy the body and open the pores, for the pores are the doorways through which poisonous air can enter, piercing the heart and corrupting the life force. Above all sexual intercourse should be avoided" (Horrox, 186). As Marafioti (31) points out, Boccaccio gestures to these therapeutic instructions in the first part of his introduction.

considers their stories a decent means to keep the plague at bay, Boccaccio advocates the *Decameron* as an honourable remedy against (female) lovesickness. The idea that reading can serve as a cure for disease is not just a literary convention, it is also grounded in lived experience. Indeed, my students confirm that engaging with the *Decameron* in a virtual classroom is a source of pleasure that offers them at least temporary relief from worries both COVID-related and other. Furthermore, they can (and do) identify with the ten young Florentines in a way that would not have been possible before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are also keenly aware of the way medicine has developed to the extent that it can now offer an additional means of defense against the current pandemic in the form of a vaccine.

Despite the progress in scientific research on viruses and bacteria, the effects of the pandemic on the human psyche then and now are not fundamentally different. If the plague of Boccaccio's time is "one of the great historical ruptures of the European Middle Ages" (Coley 4), the current pandemic can surely be considered the same for the first half of the 21st century. At the same time, these two events also underline the continuity of a human experience that is not really determined by the passage of time. On the contrary, reading the 14th-century *Decameron* in 2021 makes it more topical and salutary than we could have imagined two years ago.

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