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## Boccaccio's Pisan Allegory of "Death" in Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis*

Kristen Keach Muyo

From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, literary and visual representations of Death rose in both number and popularity. Initially seen incorporating one of the Biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the early-thirteenth-century image of Death—as either a clothed woman or a skeleton riding on horseback—offered artists a compelling model to depict the concerns one might face in preparing to transition to the afterlife.<sup>1</sup> It is within this context that one image of Death would evolve into a stand-alone, ferocious, winged female, representative of the Italian tradition of the "Triumph of Death." Oftentimes situated in church complexes, such images served important purposes for large public audiences, as well as within funerary processions. This essay will trace the evolution, from thirteenth-century processional displays of death to fifteenth-century visual depictions of Francesco Petrarca's *Triumphus Mortis* (c.1369). This civic-artistic dialogue reflects, more broadly, in the intertextual and intervisual influence traceable among Petrarch's *Trionfi*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *l'Amorosa visione* (c.1342), and the fresco known as the *Triumph of Death* by Buonamico Buffalmacco in the Pisa Camposanto (c.1336–1340, fig. 1). Since Buffalmacco's *Triumph of Death* belongs to a larger fresco cycle within the Pisan cemetery complex, it is evident that aspects of funerary processions influenced the artist's interpretation of Death. While there has been considerable scholarly debate concerning the intertextual and intervisual relationship between Boccaccio's *Decameron* (c. 1353) and the Pisan fresco,<sup>2</sup> critical weight has not yet been given to the relationship between Buffalmacco's *Triumph of Death* and Boccaccio's representation of the "Triumphs of Death and Fortune" in his earlier *Amorosa visione*. This essay will demonstrate how and why the intermedial dialogue between Boccaccio's and Buffalmacco's respective representations of Death resurfaces in Petrarch's *Trionfi* (*Triumphs*), a text which includes Death as part of the pilgrim-poet's triumphal procession toward Eternity. It is my intention to show that it is this close relationship between the Pisa Camposanto and the *Amorosa visione*—both precursor texts to the *Trionfi*—to which Petrarch intertextually and intermedially refers within his *Triumphus Mortis*.

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of this motif which survive are Bartolo de Fredi's *Triumph of Death* in Lucignano, and the *Triumphs of Death* in Subiaco and Palermo, all from the second half of the fourteenth century. See Giuseppe Carta, "L'Affresco del Trionfo della Morte (1441) nell'Ospedale Grande e Nuoto di Palermo," in *Il trionfo della morte e le danze macabre*, ed. Clara Forte (Clusone: Città di Clusone, 1997), 113–124 and Pierroberto Scaramella, "The Italy of Triumphs and of Contrasts," in *Humanas Fragilitas: The Themes of Death in Europe from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Alberto Tenenti (Clusone: Ferrari Editrice, 2002), 25–98.

<sup>2</sup> Liliane Brion-Guerry, *Le Thème du "Triomphe de la Mort" dans la Peinture Italienne* (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve, 1950); Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel Giardino: Boccaccio e i cicli pittorici del Trionfo della Morte* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2000); Lina Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini. Predicazione in volgare dalle origini a Bernardino da Siena* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002). Though most scholars today now agree that the "Triumph of Death" in the Pisa Camposanto is the work of Buonamico Buffalmacco from around 1336–1340, we cannot ignore Millard Meiss' seminal work, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), in which he attributes this work to Francesco Traini, dating it to 1350.



Fig. 1. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *The Triumph of Death*, 1336–1340, fresco, Camposanto monumentale, Pisa.  
Image via Wikimedia Commons.

With the Black Death of 1348 and various other contagions thereafter,<sup>3</sup> came a heightened attention to the swiftly destructive, unforgiving nature of Death. In response to the overwhelming number of lives lost, modifications to public funerary pageantry and a thorough interest in contemporary literary and visual examples of the “Triumph of Death” inspired Petrarch’s *Triumphus Mortis*. Petrarch did not begin the *Trionfi* until roughly 1352; the poet completed his *Triumphus Mortis* around 1369, well after the Pisan *Triumph of Death* fresco and both Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* and *Decameron*.<sup>4</sup> By synthesizing these previous visual and discursive models, Petrarch reconstructs the allegory of Death in his *Triumphus Mortis*. The details from the intermedial dialogue among Buffalmacco, Boccaccio, and Petrarch continues to shape visual depictions of Petrarch’s *Triumphus Mortis*, beginning in the fifteenth century. Such intertextual, intervisual, and intermedial dialogues across civic life, art, and poetry provide compelling exempla for communities striving to overcome the uncertainty of Death and the fear of disease during particularly precarious historical times.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the fourteenth century, plagues or “pestilence” repeatedly struck the city of Florence. From 1340 through 1527, there were at least nineteen additional outbreaks of disease, including the plagues of 1361 and 1363. See Francesco Rondinelli’s *Relazione del Contagio Stato in Firenze L’anno 1630 e 1633* (1634).

<sup>4</sup> The circulation history of the *Amorosa visione* in relation to Petrarch’s *Trionfi* is the subject of much debate. While previously scholars had thought the *Trionfi* predated the *Amorosa visione*, Giuseppe Billanovich, Vittore Branca, and Martin Eisner argue that the *Trionfi* came after the *Amorosa visione*. See: Giuseppe Billanovich, *Petrarca Letterato: Lo scrittoio del Petrarca*, vol. I (Rome: Istituto Grafico Tiberino, 1947); Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man and his Works*, ed. Dennis J. McAuliffe and trans. Richard Monges (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Martin Eisner, “Petrarch Reading Boccaccio: Revisiting the Genesis of the *Trionfi*,” in *Petrarch and the Textual Origins of Interpretation*, eds. Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (Boston: Brill, 2007). For my paper, I will follow the argument posed by these three scholars and suggest that the *Trionfi* follows the *Amorosa visione*. For a brief overview of the *Trionfi* and visual iterations thereof, see Esther Nyholm’s essay, “Triumph as a motif in the poems of Petrarch and in contemporary and later art,” in *Medieval Iconography and Narrative: A Symposium*, eds. Flemming G. Andersen, Esther Nyholm, Marianne Powell, Flemming Talbo Stubkjær (Odense: Odense University Press, 1980), 70–99.

## Funerary Rituals in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: Pre- and Post-Black Death

Throughout the Due- and Trecento, death remained a highly sacred and spiritual practice that transformed private displays of grief into opportunities for public viewing.<sup>5</sup> To incorporate both public and private means of honoring the dead and to ascribe both civic and sacred values to the mourning procession, funerary rites consisted of two parts: the procession to the church (the funeral) and the mass within the church (the requiem). The first half of the parade included members of the clergy, whose presence visually communicated the physical “death” of the body and the passing of the soul into the afterlife. Following the clerics were individuals bearing flags, banners, swords, shields, or emblems representative of the family of the deceased. In the center of the procession stood the figure of most importance—the corpse—that appeared cleanly dressed and heavily ornamented,<sup>6</sup> slowly transported through the streets on an oxen-pulled wagon or funeral bier.<sup>7</sup> The final section of the procession included mourners, members of the family, neighbors, and professional acquaintances of the deceased. Per the ritual, the procession would “pause” momentarily as the requiem took place, before proceeding from the church to the final burial site as a unique form of civic-spiritual spectacle.<sup>8</sup>

Though the funeral was a “private,” personal or familial event made “public,” not all members of society could participate in each part of the funeral. By 1277, male mourners no longer could demonstrate public displays of grief and were, instead, expected to behave as poised, dignified members of society. For a short time, women were permitted to cry in public; however, by the mid-fourteenth century women’s expression of lament was limited to private quarters.<sup>9</sup> The absence of women from the public sphere and their seclusion from certain rituals within contemporary society—specifically those in which women would, indeed, be expected to mourn—speaks to women’s marginal social status. Though funerary rites evolved over the course of these centuries, Boccaccio’s and Petrarch’s poetic works refer to the seemingly unaltered attitudes shown towards female mourners.

While the public funeral procession evolved as a strictly male-dominated space, the requiem, on the other hand, offered a more inclusive sense of community through its emphasis on death as the great equalizing force among all Christians. The focus of the requiem was on those who survive the deceased—the kin and family members, including women—whose actions would determine the continued legacies of the loved ones they had lost. Since women were

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<sup>5</sup> Bartolomeo del Corazza, *Diario Fiorentino (1405–1439)*, ed. Roberta Gentile (Rome: De Rubéis, 1991), 29–30; Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 30; Peter F. Howard, “The Aural Space of the Sacred in Renaissance Florence,” in *Renaissance Florence*, eds. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 381.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 6–8.

<sup>7</sup> Brion-Guerry, *Le Thème du “Triomphe de la Mort” dans la Peinture Italienne*, 85–91; Scaramella, “The Italy of Triumphs and Contrasts,” 54.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen M. Ashley, Wilhelmus Norbertus, and Maria Hüsken, eds., *Moving Subjects: Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Leeds: Brill, 2001), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, “Mourning Rites,” in *Riti e rituali nelle società medievali*, eds. Jacques Chiffolleau, Lauro Martines, and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull’alto Medioevo, 1994), 26; Natalie Tomas, “Did Women Have a Space?” in *Renaissance Florence*, eds. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 315. Though painted scenes of mourning, in particular biblical subjects such as the *Crucifixion* or *Lamentation*, include both men and women, this could be due to the fact that the narrative to which the painting refers details specific men and women participating in that event. These images often were in church complexes and thus would have been seen by both men and women during the requiem.

present during the requiem, their clothing served as a visual sign of grief: women's headdresses were often colored black,<sup>10</sup> which allowed them to participate visually—if inaudibly—in this “private” ritual made “public.”

Unsurprisingly, the Black Death of 1348 disrupted much of the civic and sacred ritual aspects of honoring the deceased, temporarily altering the status of the dead themselves. The introduction to Day I of Boccaccio's *Decameron* illustrates what some of these historical alterations involved.<sup>11</sup> The narrator reports that the Black Death forced the community of Florence to reassess the nature and value of funerary practices within the city, out of sheer necessity and concern for public health. According to Boccaccio, women no longer were responsible for tending to the bodies of the deceased, thus permitting gravediggers to move the body from the street to the bier and treat the corpse as if it were not all that distinct from a dead “capr[a]” (“goat”).<sup>12</sup> Civic-sacred processional rituals diminished during times of contagion in number and form, reflecting the need to economize human life; the most accessible method of honoring the dead was through the use of communal monuments erected to recall a collective loss, rather than through individualized ceremonies.<sup>13</sup>

However, immediately following the Black Death, there was a return to splendidly ornamented displays within funerary pageants, even more so than was evident in the decades leading up to the plague. Such ornamentation included objects such as candles, bier cloths, horses, and an array of material goods.<sup>14</sup> This revival of funerary processions was, in part, due to the rise of social mobility and the redistribution of wealth. At the same time, however, contagion's mass destruction innovatively transformed both reading and viewing practices where art imitated the anxieties and devastation experienced in life. The return to a more public, traditional funerary ritual ingrained several key iconographic images, or *memento mori*, into the cultural memory of the Quattrocento, such as skulls, skeletons, reapers, and scythes. Rather than solely serve funerary processions, these objects invoked a communal memory that, when referenced in a painted or literary work, recalled at once the collective vulnerability inherent in mortality and the everlasting bond between the living and the dead.<sup>15</sup>

### The “Non-Petrarchan” *Triumph of Death*

The Due- and Trecento mark a shift in the visual arts that reflected new reading practices of the medieval period. Large-scale public paintings no longer merely portrayed *historia*, but evolved

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<sup>10</sup> Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 11, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, 6; Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, eds. Amedeo Quondam, Maurizio Fiorilla and Giancarlo Alfano (Milan: BUR Rizzoli, 2017), 173–175.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Cohen Jr., “Burial in the Early Renaissance: Six cities in Central Italy,” in *Riti e rituali nelle società medievali*, eds. Jacques Chiffolleau, Lauro Martines, and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1994), 44–45. Leading up to the Trecento, tombs were not lavishly decorated but might showcase either a portrait of or inscription about the deceased. This practice diminished during the medieval period, leaving most tombs anonymous and non-descript. *Transi* images, or images representing different aspects of death and the decaying process, primarily existed in France and Germany and did not become a prominent aspect of Italian funerary monuments until after the sixteenth century. See Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Boccaccio, in his letter to Zanobi da Strada of 1353 (Epistle VIII) remarks on the lavish funerary ritual prepared for their mutual friend, Lorenzo di Niccolò Acciaiuoli. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Opere Latine Minori*, ed. Aldo Francesco Massera (Bari: Gius, Laterza & Figli, 1928).

<sup>15</sup> Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 31–32, 55–57.

into narrative “fiction,” or allegory, intended to offer *exempla* and to serve as a bridge between form and meaning, stimulating active interpretation on the part of the viewer.<sup>16</sup> The earliest images in Western Europe that unite the idea of the macabre with a personified figure of Death are from thirteenth-century Italy. These images focus primarily on the “Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead,” exemplified in the fresco located in the church of Santa Margherita in Melfi from 1225 (fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> Historian Pietro Vigo suggests that the legend originated from a twelfth-century version of the *Cum apertam sepulturam* (*With uncovered burial*).<sup>18</sup> The allegory tells of three noblemen pursuing a hunt, when they encounter three corpses in open coffins, each representative of different moments in the decaying process. The living and the dead begin a dialogue with one another, in which the latter offer cautionary warnings about life’s precariousness to the former. With the assistance of a hermit, who instructs the three living men to reflect on what they have seen, the legend concludes with the hope that the living will seek to conduct a better life and thus avoid a similar fate.<sup>19</sup> Within the Santa Margherita fresco, the viewer witnesses three elite members of society, thought to be Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, his wife Isabel, and their son Conrad, dressed in colorful clothing, as they approach two white, emaciated skeletal bodies with maggots covering their abdomens.<sup>20</sup>

Though the fresco differs slightly from the textual model—it does not include representations of the coffins nor hermit<sup>21</sup>—the allegorical warning to the patron and viewer remains consistent with later Italian and Western European iterations of the tale. The image conveys Death’s presence, even if Death itself does not feature as a concrete figure in the story. However, as the “Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead” and images of the macabre

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Belting, “The New Role of Narrative in Public Painting of the Trecento: ‘Historia’ and Allegory,” *Studies in the History of Art* 16 (1985): 154–155; Hans Belting, “Das Bild als Text: Wandmalerei und Literatur im Zeitalter Dantes,” in *Malerei und Stadtkultur in der Dantezeit: Die Argumentation der Bilder*, eds. Hans Belting and Dieter Blume (Munich: Himer Verlag, 1989), 39; Anne Dunlop, “Allegory, painting and Petrarch,” *Word & Image* 24, no. 1 (2008): 83–84. For more on the question of allegory, see Theresa Holler’s *Jenseitsbilder: Dantes Commedia und ihr Weiterleben im Weltgericht bis 1500* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag [DKV], 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Brion-Guerry, *Le Thème du “Triomphe de la Mort” dans la Peinture Italienne*, 45–57. Binski, *Medieval Death*, 158; Scaramella, “The Italy of Triumphs and Contrasts,” 26. Christine M. Kralik, “A Matter of Life of Death: Forms, Functions and Audiences for ‘The Three Living and the Three Dead’ in Late Medieval Manuscripts” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013), 6. Early critical attention to this legend traced its connection to French and English literary and visual contexts. See: Georges Kastner, *Les Danses des morts* (Paris: Brandus, 1852); Stephen Glixelli, *Les cinq poèmes des trois morts et des trois vifs* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne H. Champion, 1914); Willy Rotzler, “Drei Lebende und Drei Tote,” in *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, eds. Ernst Gall and L.H. Heydenreich (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmüller, 1961), yet this was contested by Pietro Vigo, *Le Danze Macabre in Italia* (Bergamo: Arnaldo Forni, 1901) and later disproven by Brion-Guerry and Hellmut Rosenfeld *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz: Entstehung, Entwicklung, Bedeutung* (Münster: Bohlau, 1954). Binski notes that medieval artists also chose to include the personification of Death encircled by various vices, such as pride and humility. This figuration would match their location and appearance on Fortune’s Wheel, further indicating the close relationship between Death, Fortune, Pride, and Humility (146).

<sup>18</sup> Vigo, *Le Danze Macabre*, 82; Pavel Chihaiia, *Immortalité et décomposition dans l’art du Moyen Âge* (Madrid: Foundation Culturelle Roumaine, 1988), 43–70; Kralik, “A Matter of Life and Death,” 3–5. The earliest surviving copy, which is located in Ferrara, dates from the fourteenth century.

<sup>19</sup> Kralik, “A Matter of Life and Death,” 7; Sarah Briggs, “The Three Living and the Three Dead,” *Medieval Manuscripts Blog*, British Library, 2014, [blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/01/the-three-living-and-the-three-dead.html](https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/01/the-three-living-and-the-three-dead.html).

<sup>20</sup> Scaramella, “The Italy of Triumphs and Contrasts,” 26. Though Scaramella argues for a date of 1258–1266, the painting would still be under Frederick II’s rule.

<sup>21</sup> There are other painted editions of the “Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead” that do include corpses in coffins and the hermit, as found in the Pisa Camposanto.



became more commonplace, artists began to insert the personification of Death as a central figure within the fresco cycle,<sup>22</sup> such as in the Pisa Camposanto.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 2 *Incontro dei tre vivi e dei tre morti*, 13th century, fresco, Chiese rupestre di Santa Margherita, Melfi. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

By the fourteenth century, the personified allegory of Death earned its place in the Italian visual canon as the emblem for “Triumph of Death.” With the Pisa Camposanto tri-part fresco cycle serving as the iconographic standard for the visual “Triumph of Death,”<sup>24</sup> Buffalmacco’s painted scene follows a linear, left to right narrative structure from the *Triumph of Death* to a fresco of the *Last Judgment*, and concludes with a representation of *Hell*. Since the Camposanto was the main burial site for the Pisa Cathedral, the *Triumph of Death* was part of a larger visual program within the space, designed specifically so that those who marched in procession throughout the complex could view the fresco images. The *Triumph of Death* also includes certain features that appear in dialogue with poetic texts, a point to which I will return.

Looking at the *Triumph of Death* painting, from the lower left and proceeding to the right, the viewer first encounters the “Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead,” which includes the corpses within their coffins and a hermit outstretching a scroll toward the noblemen. Depicted above the legend is a scene of the anchorites at different stages of prayer, meditation, and attention to nearby animals.<sup>25</sup> Various members of society, including aristocratic men,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> Outside of the Pisa Camposanto, the legend motif was not familiar to a Tuscan audience, nor widespread in Central and Northern Italy. See Hayden B. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 158–163.

<sup>24</sup> Alberto Tenenti, introduction to *Humanas Fragilitas: The Themes of Death in Europe from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century*, ed. Alberto Tenenti (Clusone: Ferrari Editrice, 2002), 14. Some additional fourteenth-century examples worth comparing to those listed herein are Andrea Orcagna’s *Triumph of Death* in Santa Croce, Florence and Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Allegory of Redemption* in Siena. For Orcagna’s work, which only survives as a fragment, see Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*; for Lorenzetti’s fresco, see Diana Norman’s *Siena and the Virgin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci, “Transition between Life and Afterlife: Analyzing *The Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto of Pisa,” *Signs and Society* 2, no. 51 (2014): 101.

women, and clergy approach the encounter of the three living and the three dead with a group of beggars behind them, suggesting that these figures are pleading or potentially negotiating their fates with Death. The central image features Death, an old woman, dressed in tattered black clothing with long, loosely-cast white hair. This figure then flaps her large wings in flight toward a group of ten joyful youths sitting in a garden in the right corner of the fresco. Death raises her scythe in the air as if she is about to strike the group, towering over the pile of lifeless bodies that have already fallen subject to her violent blows. Surrounding Death are angels and demons alike, who carry away the souls of her victims toward the *Last Judgment*. Such a revision to traditional depictions of Death as a Fourth Horseman suggests that this figure might now resemble a rebellious angel or, as Lina Bolzoni notes, remind viewers of the demons found in Dante Alighieri's Malebranche (*Inferno*, Canto XXI).<sup>26</sup> Despite the looming threat cast upon their surroundings, the young *brigata* remain peacefully cheerful as they sing and dance in the garden, seemingly unaware of Death's executions and impending menace nearby.

While Hans Belting argues that there is no unity of action nor space within Buffalmacco's image, each figural group works together to impart to the viewer the spiritual idea of one's transition from a mortal "body" to the raised "soul"<sup>27</sup> upon death. By also including a representation of the "Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead," the cycle further emphasizes the significance of textual narrative in this sequence, since the figures of the "Legend" verbally warn others about the effects of Death and personify a message that reaches both the figures depicted within the painting and, it would appear, viewers within the Camposanto. Through hierarchy of scale and the centrality of Death, it is clear that Buffalmacco's fresco illustrates this figure's importance in the triumph narrative. That figures from diverse social statuses are threatened by Death's violence effectively conveys how this allegory serves as the great equalizer of all individuals.<sup>28</sup> However, just as Boccaccio represents his storytelling *brigata* as having little concern for Death's terrorizing advances, the fresco restricts the allegory's fatal influence from disturbing sites that recall literary and artistic refuge.

### **Boccaccio's *L'Amorosa visione*: The Fortune of Death**

It is evident from the *Decameron*'s detailed accounts of Buffalmacco's many pranks played on Calandrino that Boccaccio not only knew of the name "Buonamico Buffalmacco," but also may have met the artist or have interacted with members of his social circle.<sup>29</sup> Lucia Battaglia Ricci makes a compelling case for why Buffalmacco's *Triumph of Death* influenced Boccaccio's *Decameron*, rather than the other way around: the manner in which Boccaccio describes Florentine life—in particular, the difficulties suffered as a result of the plague—juxtaposed with

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<sup>26</sup> Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini*, 13. Bolzoni claims that it is not just the figure of Death who reminds us of the Malebranche, but that there are several references to the *Commedia* within the *Triumph of Death*, *Last Judgment* and *Hell* frescoes in the Camposanto.

<sup>27</sup> Belting, "'Historia' and Allegory," 162; Christine Boeckl, "The Pisan 'Triumph of Death' and Papal Constitution 'Benedictus Deus,'" *Artibus et Historiae* 18, no. 36 (1997): 55.

<sup>28</sup> Boeckl, "The Pisan 'Triumph of Death' and Papal Constitution 'Benedictus Deus,'" 59.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Kuhns in his chapter, "The Writer as Painter: Observations on Boccaccio's *Decameron*," in *Malerei und Stadtkultur in der Dantezeit: Die Argumentation der Bilder*, eds. Hans Belting and Dieter Blume (Munich: Himer Verlag, 1989), notes that there should be no doubt Boccaccio knew Buffalmacco (69), but does not provide concrete evidence to confirm this. Janet Levarie Smarr, in her introduction to *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, eds. Victoria Kirkham, Michael Sherberg, and Janet Levarie Smarr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), notes that it is not uncommon for Boccaccio to refer to his earlier works throughout the *Decameron* (5).



the gaiety of the *brigata* in their new bucolic location, directly mirrors the visual narrative of the Pisan fresco.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it has not yet been observed that this visual-literary structure, in which the figure of Death appears adjacent to the *brigata*, existed already within Boccaccio's allegorical *l'Amorosa visione*, beginning with the "Triumph of Death" in Canto XXX and ending in the paradisiac garden in Canto XXXVIII. My reading seeks to expand the intermedial coordinates therein that map elements from the Pisa Camposanto onto our reading not only of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but also the *Amorosa visione*'s "Triumph of Death" and "Triumph of Fortune."

Boccaccio composed the *Amorosa visione* while living in Florence between the years 1340 and 1343.<sup>31</sup> Though the Pisan painting was completed in 1340 and predates the final composition and initial circulation of *l'Amorosa visione*, chronologically, there was a year of overlap between Boccaccio's and Buffalmacco's works, suggesting the possibility that the *Triumph of Death* remained a pressing image in Boccaccio's mind while writing his allegorical poem. In Canto XXX, immediately following the conclusion of Love's triumphal parade, the pilgrim-poet marvels at the wonders of the previous four *ekphrastic* triumphs, momentarily losing sight of the fact that these triumphs do not adequately represent the ideals of Christian truths.<sup>32</sup> Boccaccio's unidentified female guide quickly rebukes him for believing in the false nature of these triumphal images, and reminds him that these *ekphrases* once drew the pilgrim-poet away from the Christian love of God and too closely towards the pursuit of earthly passions and possessions.

The female guide continues to criticize the pilgrim-poet, urging: "ricorditi che morte col dubbioso/ colpo già vinse tutta questa gente" ("remember that death, with a distrustful blow, already triumphed over these people").<sup>33</sup> Without mentioning any explicit physical characteristics or identifying features reminiscent of the visual vocabulary associated with Death, the guide describes this allegory as a chilling force that annihilates anyone who participates in one of the previous four triumphs. Boccaccio's guide further explains that, regardless of one's fame and glory acquired in life, death is a collective, ubiquitous experience.<sup>34</sup> Though there is no explicit image of the personification of Death offered in Boccaccio's description, the use of "dubbioso colpo" recalls Death's forceful blow as she strikes her "victims." The reader digests the allegorical message offered by Boccaccio's text and thus conjures the image of an overwhelming figure on the hunt, prepared to quickly seize the life of its next victim, such as we find within the Pisa Camposanto.

However, Boccaccio does not require his readers to rely solely upon his intermedial interpretation of previous iconography for the *Triumph of Death* in the imagination of Death in his *l'Amorosa visione*. Rather, the author follows suit with earlier precedents that had established visual associations between Death and Fortune,<sup>35</sup> uniting the two allegories in one personification. Following the brief mention of the "Triumph of Death," Boccaccio's female guide further scolds the pilgrim-poet for his blind attitude toward the previous four triumphs. She then proceeds to vaguely describe an ominous, violent force, without explicitly naming the

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<sup>30</sup> Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel Giardino*, 173.

<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Padoan, *Il Boccaccio, le muse, il parnaso, e l'arno* (Florence: Olschki Editore, 1978), 103; Vittore Branca, introduction to *l'Amorosa visione*, eds. and trans. Robert Hollander, Timothy Hampton, and Margherita Frankel (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), ix.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *l'Amorosa visione*, eds. and trans. Robert Hollander, Timothy Hampton, and Margherita Frankel (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), Canto XXX, lines 7–18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 20–22. All translations, unless specified otherwise, are by the author.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 23–24.

<sup>35</sup> Binski, *Medieval Death*, 146.

allegory.<sup>36</sup> This fatal figure, “con cieca mente” (“with a blind mind”),<sup>37</sup> both gives and takes from everyone. When one’s body dies, one not only loses all possessions and titles, but must face God’s judgment for pursuing earthly possessions and impulses. Once again, the explicit directive returns us to consider the veiled didactic allegory presented within the Pisa Camposanto. By briefly noting the events that follow one’s death in this description, the author of *l’Amorosa visione* subtly implies that this could be Death personified, or at least, that Fortune and Death are co-conspirators in the destruction of all earthly goods.

In the following *canto* (XXXI), the female guide leads the pilgrim-poet into another chamber in which a fifth *ekphrasis* “moves” across the wall. Boccaccio immediately comments upon the stark contrast between the pleasant scenes of the previous four triumphs and the sorrowful, melancholic figures that appear within the parade visualized in this fifth image. The pilgrim-poet then observes a female figure located in the center of the *ekphrastic* fresco.<sup>38</sup> Once more, Boccaccio does not clearly state who the female figure is, but directs his attention to her physical appearance. In the painting, a woman with a horrific demeanor sits atop a chariot pulled by multi-colored beasts. She has wild hair, is both blind and deaf, and appears unsympathetic to the cries of her next victims (“horribile in la fronte sol avea/ li capei volti, e a nessun priego fatto/ sorda e cieca mai si rivolgea” (“horrific, she had her hair gathered on her brow, and she, blind and deaf, is never moved by any prayers made”).<sup>39</sup> The specific identity of this figure is not revealed, yet that the reader might well assume this is the body of Boccaccio’s Death.<sup>40</sup> At this point, the only distinction between Boccaccio’s female figure and previous images of the *Triumph of Death* is his inclusion of a chariot pulled by “fiere” or “beasts.” The term “fiere” evokes the wild and animalistic features of this figure’s physical form. Let us recall that, at the time of Boccaccio’s text, the funeral bier or wagon would be pulled by oxen, thus providing a historical image in the reader’s mind for what they might have witnessed on the streets during an actualized “Triumph of Death,” or a funerary procession.

What is of particular importance is that, just after this description, the reader learns that this figure’s weapon of choice is a wheel, or “una gran ruota.”<sup>41</sup> Such an iconographic indication confirms that this mysterious woman is indeed Fortune, not Death, though these figures’ juxtaposed iconographies may synthesize the two allegories into one.<sup>42</sup> Boccaccio further extends the union of Death with Fortune by the fact that the latter does not actually have a triumph, but rather what Vittore Branca calls an “anti-triumph,”<sup>43</sup> where the “followers” of Fortune’s parade experience unfavorable outcomes due to the spinning of her wheel, and thus become her unfortunate victims.<sup>44</sup> During Boccaccio’s time, Fortune and Death were “equivalent instruments of Providence and divine justice,” ravaging vain thoughts and mortal pleasures and

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<sup>36</sup> Boccaccio, *l’Amorosa visione*, Canto XXX, lines 45–54; 58–60.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Canto XXXI, line 59.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 16–24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 22–24.

<sup>40</sup> It was not until the sixteenth century, with Andrea Alciato’s book of emblems, that a bald patch with a tuft of wind-blown hair became closely linked with the iconography for Occasio. See Peter M. Daly, *Companion to Emblem Studies* (New York: AMS Press, 2008); Ellen M. Caldwell, “Opportunistic Portia as Fortuna in Shakespeare’s ‘Merchant of Venice,’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 349-373.

<sup>41</sup> Boccaccio, *l’Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXI, line 29.

<sup>42</sup> Boccaccio does not actually name Fortune until Canto XXXII.

<sup>43</sup> Branca, introduction to *l’Amorosa visione*, xxix.

<sup>44</sup> Both Boccaccio’s and Petrarch’s *Triumphs of Love* also present Love’s followers as “victims.” However, in the case of Love’s triumph, the “victims” are not physically punished and their love does not lead to the cause of their deaths.

leaving only the “virtuous” to pursue the path toward God.<sup>45</sup> Boccaccio alludes to this idea explicitly in the middle of Fortune’s triumph in Canto XXXV: “ma quel che costei/ non fé, morte privollo d’ogni stato” (“but what she did not do death did, depriving him of every existence”).<sup>46</sup>

To further illustrate the close connections between the Pisa Camposanto and this section of Boccaccio’s *l’Amorosa visione*, let us look at how Boccaccio transitions out of Death-Fortune’s “anti-triumph” toward the next phase of his journey. At the conclusion of Fortune’s *ekphrastic* procession in Canto XXXVIII, the female guide leads the pilgrim-poet into a *hortus conclusus*, in which he finds a fountain, decorated with sculptures of seven ladies and diverse animals. While Battaglia Ricci suggests that the inclusion of the *brigata* in the Pisa Camposanto serves as the intervisual model for the garden of the *Decameron* Day III,<sup>47</sup> my reading expands upon this interpretation to consider Boccaccio’s other poetic texts, in particular the fountain and garden scene in his *Amorosa visione*.

After examining the fountain in depth, the pilgrim-poet notices a parade of ladies:

Hor oltre con costor tosto passai  
in su la riva del bel fiumicello  
ov’eran donne ch’io conobbi assai;  
e riguardando lor con occhio isnello,  
qual gia cantando e qual cogliendo fiori,  
chi sedea, chi danzava in bel pratello<sup>48</sup>

(Now I promptly moved ahead with them onto the riverbank of a beautiful stream where there were many women whom I knew; and I looked at them with an eager eye one was already singing and another was gathering flowers, one sat, another was dancing in the beautiful field)

These women dance, collect flowers, and sing in a circle around a figure that will soon be revealed to be Fiammetta. Just as the viewer would move around the space in Pisa from the “Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead” on the left, to the image of Death standing at the center, and finally to the garden scene in the right corner of the fresco, so too does Boccaccio’s narrative move linearly from “left” to “right”—from the “Triumph of Death-Fortune” to the *brigata* in the garden. It is after this moment in *l’Amorosa visione* when Fiammetta becomes Boccaccio’s spiritual guide, hoping to lead him to God’s Paradise. Yet, the pilgrim-poet Boccaccio cannot free himself of carnal desires: just after acting upon his lustful thoughts, the pilgrim is immediately awoken from the dream (Canto XLIX). Though this is not explicitly a “Last Judgment” and “Hell” moment for the pilgrim-poet, Boccaccio’s sequence of events—starting from the “Triumph of Death” through the end of the poem—directly follows the spatial movement and progression of Buffalmacco’s three-part painted narrative in the Pisa Camposanto.

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<sup>45</sup> Branca, introduction to *l’Amorosa visione*, xix.

<sup>46</sup> Boccaccio, *l’Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXV, lines 11–12. I have consulted the translation of the *Amorosa visione* by Hollander, Hampton, and Frankel (1986).

<sup>47</sup> Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel Giardino*, 167–168.

<sup>48</sup> Boccaccio, *l’Amorosa visione*, Canto XL, lines 22–27.

## Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis*, Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione*, and the Pisan *Triumph of Death*

The effects of Boccaccio's and Pisa's influence on Petrarch's allegorical dream-vision, *I Trionfi*, illustrate an intermedial dialogue born at the crossroads of artistic and literary innovation. In the *Triumphus Mortis*, Petrarch divides the conquest of Death into two distinct scenes.<sup>49</sup> Part I begins with a brief summary of the previous *canto* and returns to the vision of Chastity's (i.e., Laura's) triumph over Love. Petrarch first provides a description of the female "brigata allegra" ("happy group") that bears banners displaying emblems of chastity, such as the ermine, and which follows in line behind Laura-Chastity.<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that Petrarch specifically uses the term "brigata allegra"<sup>51</sup> when describing the female companions of Laura-Chastity as they continue their triumphal journey before encountering Death. The setting for this triumph imagines the women joining in dance and song, ornamented with floral decorations that evoke springtime.<sup>52</sup> Though the term "brigata allegra" is synonymous with Boccaccio's group of storytellers in the *Decameron*, it is difficult to ignore that the image of a *brigata* taking pleasure in the garden also existed in the *Amorosa visione* and that this earlier text's female *brigata* stands in direct dialogue with the Pisa Camposanto. It is precisely this chain of influences that inspires Petrarch's placement of the "brigata allegra" within his *Triumphus Mortis*.

In Petrarch's text, however, the cheerful procession comes to an abrupt halt when Death intervenes to speak to the group:

quando vidi un'insegna oscura e trista;  
ed una donna involta in veste negra,  
con un furor qual io non so se mai  
al tempo de' giganti fusse a Flegra,  
si mosse e disse: "O tu, donna, che vai  
di gioventute e di bellezze altera,  
e di tua vita il termine non sai,  
io son colei che sì importuna e fera  
chiamata son da voi, e sorda e cieca  
gente, a cui si fa notte innanzi sera;  
io ò condotto al fin la gente greca  
e la troiana, a l'ultimo i Romani,  
con la mia spada la qual punge e seca,  
e popoli altri barbareschi e strani;  
e giugnendo quand'altri non m'aspetta  
ò interrotti infiniti penser vani.  
Or a voi, quando il viver più diletta,  
drizzo 'l mio corso innanzi che Fortuna

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<sup>49</sup> In dividing the *Triumphus Mortis* into two sections, Petrarch hints at the notion that death is both a singular moment in time and a "moving" (i.e., transitional) element that initiates one's journey toward Eternity. This idea is not new, but rather has its representational origins in Dante's *Commedia* and the "death" of Beatrice, which Boccaccio's *l'Amorosa visione* imitates in Fiammetta's "death."

<sup>50</sup> Francesco Petrarca, "Triumphs Mortis" in *Rime, Trionfi, e Poesie Latine*, eds. F. Neri, G. Martellotti, E. Bianchi, and N. Sapegno (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1951), Part I, lines 1–30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, line 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, line 25.

nel vostro dolce qualche amaro metta.”<sup>53</sup>

(when I saw a dark and sad banner; and a woman clothed in a black dress, with fury such as had perchance been seen when giants raged in the Phlegraeon vale,<sup>54</sup> she moved and said: “O you, woman, who goes by lofty youth and beauty, and you do not know when your life will end, I am she who relentless and fierce am called by you, and the deaf and blind folk, on whom night falls ahead of day; I brought the end of the Greeks and the Trojans, and ultimately the Romans, with my sword that plunges and cuts, and the other barbarous and foreign people; and joining when others do not wait for me I interrupted the endless vain thoughts. Now to you, when life is most pleasing, I straighten my course ahead that Fortune may put in your sweetness some bitterness.)

Petrarch mentions neither a chariot nor a procession in tow, but instead fixates on the allegorical figure herself. Similar to the other allegorical figures and triumphal “parades” featured in *Trionfi*, the personification of Death appears without visual specificities in the text, suggesting very little about the potential historical pageant or parade to which this triumph could refer. Death—a female figure dressed in black, with a dark banner raised overhead—instructs the group of her role as the “destroyer” of human life. It is her mission to seize any sweetness from her victims before Fortune turns these moments into bitterness: “or a voi, quando il viver più diletto,/ drizzo ’l mio corso innanzi che Fortuna/ nel vostro dolce qualche amaro metta.” Though Death is responsible for the demise of the Greek, Roman, and Trojan warriors, she also actively searches for figures who belong to the “sorda e cieca gente” or “deaf and blind folk,” implying that these souls have been led astray from their Christian duties.<sup>55</sup>

Although Boccaccio’s imagery for the personification of Death-Fortune does not explicitly indicate that she wears a black shroud in the same way that Petrarch’s figure does, the former alludes to contemporary clothes associated with mourning within the “Triumph of Death-Fortune” in Canto XXXV: “In abito dolente e con sospetto/ quivi Asdrubale ancora si vedea,/ con capo basso mirandosi ’l petto” (“in clothes of grief and with a look of concern, Hasdrubal could still be seen with his head lowered, gazing at his own chest”).<sup>56</sup> Even more evidently, previous *Triumph of Death* imagery, including the Pisa Camposanto, represented the personified allegory robed in tattered black clothing.<sup>57</sup> Since black was the color associated with grief and mourning—often referring to women’s attire worn during the funerary requiem<sup>58</sup>—the visual image offered by Petrarch draws his reader to construct a connection between his personification of Death, visual images of Death, and female mourners in funerary rituals.

While Death describes how she collects her victims’ lives with her “spada” or “sword,” the majority of previous iconography represents Death holding a scythe. The explicit mention of the sword transfigures the image of Death into a female warrior, battling with her victims as if she

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<sup>53</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part I, lines 30–48.

<sup>54</sup> For this particular line, I have consulted the translation of the *Trionfi* by Ernest Hatch Wilkins (1962).

<sup>55</sup> Roberto Andrea Lorenzi, “L’antropologia Cristiana nel ‘Triumphus Mortis’ di Francesco Petrarca,” in *Noi spregieremo adunque li denari...* *Danze macabre, Trionfi e Dogma della Morte*, eds. Mino Scandella, Roberto Andrea Lorenzi, Gabriella Ferri Piccaluga, Gianfranca Martinenghi Rossetti, Laura Moreschi, and Fulvio Sina (Brescia: Pisogne, 2002), 16–17.

<sup>56</sup> Boccaccio, *l’Amorosa visione*, Canto XXV, lines 70–72.

<sup>57</sup> Scaramella, “The Italy of Triumphs and Contrasts,” 86.

<sup>58</sup> Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 10.

were among the ancient Greek, Roman, and Trojan figures who fell victim to her fatal hand. Within the triumph of Boccaccio's Death-Fortune, the female guide narrates to the pilgrim-poet that Fortune ravages her victims through a violent blow, as if in a joust.<sup>59</sup> This acute depiction of aggressive action intertextually influences Petrarch's choice of Death's "spada," and draws a parallel to the military origins of the triumph as a Roman celebration of conquest.

Though Petrarch claims that Death's conquests are "sorda e cieca gente," this imagery also comes from Boccaccio's personification of Death-Fortune. Prior to encountering the personification of Death-Fortune, the female guide chastises the pilgrim-poet. Boccaccio will himself soon become a victim of Death and, as the reader will learn when Fortune arrives, is a current victim of Fortune's vengeful blows, and thus a member himself of the "cieca gente."<sup>60</sup> To further illustrate this point, in Boccaccio's Canto XXXI, the mysterious allegory is described as being both "sorda e cieca,"<sup>61</sup> which symbolically represents the "deadly effects of *Fortuna* and her knowing full well her purposes" in "blinding" her followers against moral good.<sup>62</sup> Death-Fortune's "form" follows her "function" and imitates the folly of man in their desire for earthly goods. As such, Petrarch invokes the Boccaccian imagery from his Death-Fortune in the *Triumphus Mortis*' ideation of Death to further emphasize that the two allegories are visually interchangeable.

The dark banner of death, when juxtaposed with the vibrant banner carried by the *brigata* in Laura-Chastity's triumph, indicates a reliance on public displays of mourning rituals, since banners were traditionally included in funerary processions.<sup>63</sup> Instead of inscribing the banner with one word or phrase, Petrarch ventriloquizes Death as she speaks directly to Laura and the *brigata*. Death's discourse further echoes Petrarch's mediation of the Pisa Camposanto fresco through Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione* in that certain phrases in the painting, those directly linked to Death, intermedially "appear" in Boccaccio and intertextually come to the forefront in Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis*.

Within the Pisan *Triumph of Death* are several inscriptions, in both Latin and vernacular Italian, that both frame its edges and appear within the painting as scrolls held by angels and other figures. While Lina Bolzoni argues that the interplay between text and image, as well as that between Latin and vernacular Italian, play a didactic role in reinforcing ideas from scripture and the sermons of the Dominicans in the mind of the viewer,<sup>64</sup> we might also consider the inscriptions through the earlier literary and visual traditions that placed emphasis on Death's allegorical role as the great equalizer, the figure who initiates the spiritual transcendence from life to the afterlife. As Giorgio Vasari claimed much later, Buffalmacco believed the inclusion of

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<sup>59</sup> Boccaccio, *l'Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXIV, line 1, 49–50.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, Canto XXX, lines 40–42.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Canto XXXI, lines 24.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Hollander, Timothy Hampton, Margherita Frankel, eds. and trans., *l'Amorosa visione* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1986), 233.

<sup>63</sup> Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 32. The dark banner also reminds us of the banner held by the "neutral" angels in *Inferno* Canto III, lines 52–53.

<sup>64</sup> Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini*, 26–27; Carletti and Polacci, "Transition between Life and Afterlife: Analyzing *The Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto of Pisa," 103. Boeckl, prior to Bolzoni, offered that the inscriptions reflect the writings of Pope Benedict XII in his *Benedictus Deus* and the eschatological debate about the fate of one's soul upon death.



words added a level of authenticity to painted figures,<sup>65</sup> further bridging the gap between the experiences offered within the “fictitious” narrative and real viewer.

Petrarch’s Death first introduces herself by calling out to Laura, commenting upon the seemingly eternal qualities of her “gioventute e bellezze altera” (“lofty youth and beauty”).<sup>66</sup> Though Death directly speaks to Laura, she uses the impersonal term “donna,”<sup>67</sup> rather than a specified “Laura” or “Pudicitie,” thus subtly alluding not only to Laura, but to a figure who might represent all women, especially the *brigata* from the opening of the *canto*. Towards the end of Death’s introduction, she concludes that she will end all vain thoughts: “ò interrotti infiniti penser vani,”<sup>68</sup> underscoring the vanity of female beauty that lies at the heart of her speech. Similarly, when Boccaccio’s female guide begins to describe Death-Fortune, she utters the words: “Voi, terrestri animali, disiate/ i voler vostri tututti seguire/ mediante questa, la qual voi chiamate/ Fortuna bona e rea, secondo ch’essa/ vi dà e tol mondana facultate” (“You earthly creatures/ who desire to follow every wish/ by her whom you call good and bad Fortune, according as she gives to you and takes away your worldly goods”).<sup>69</sup> Boccaccio’s Death-Fortune, like Petrarch’s, destroys all vain thoughts counter to God’s will. Though not explicitly addressed directly at a woman or female audience, the idea of vanity in thoughts corresponds to the vanity of female beauty emphasized within Petrarch’s text.

This becomes more apparent when examining the two passages in relation to a scroll from the Camposanto painting. Within the fresco, there is a scroll that is specifically directed toward the *brigata* on the right side of the scene. The Italian text reads: “Femina vana perché ti diletta/ d’andar così dipinta et adorna?/ Che vuoi piacere al mondo più che a Dio?/ Ai, lassa, che sentenza tu aspetti/ se incontanente lo tuo cor non torna/ a confessarsi spesso” (“Vain woman, why does it please you to go out so painted and adorned? What do you want to enjoy more in this world than God? Ah, miserable [woman], you must wait for judgment, if your heart does not come back immediately to confess for itself often”). The direct address to the “femina vana” and the use of the Italian vernacular suggests that this admonishing advice reaches beyond the wall of the painting toward a larger female public. Adhering to the precedent set by the Pisa Camposanto, the non-descript “donna” which Petrarch’s Death uses to address Laura becomes a synecdoche and a message for the larger whole, Chastity’s *brigata*.

Following Death’s address to the *brigata*, Petrarch’s Death then emphasizes that she will arrive whenever she pleases: “e giugnendo quand’altri non m’aspetta” (“and joining when others do not wait for me”),<sup>70</sup> highlighting the unpredictability and the swift action with which Death seizes her victims. While not a direct one-to-one relationship, the implication that Fortune strikes at any moment comes into play with the spinning of her wheel: “colei che muta ogni mondano stato” (“she who changes every earthly condition”).<sup>71</sup> Boccaccio’s female guide instructs the pilgrim-poet that none of Death-Fortune’s subjects know exactly when or how Fortune will

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<sup>65</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite*, ed. W. Gaunt (London, 1970), 512–513; Roger Tarr, “‘Visibile parlare’: The spoken word in fourteenth-century central Italian painting,” *Word & Image* 13, no. 3 (1997): 232. Hans Belting famously argues that allegorical narrative is fictitious (“‘Historia’ and Allegory,” 154).

<sup>66</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part I, lines 35–36.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, line 34.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, line 45.

<sup>69</sup> Boccaccio, *l’Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXII, lines 2–5.

<sup>70</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part I, line 44.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, line 16.

strike. Though Fortune may bring happiness, she could just as easily annihilate her followers,<sup>72</sup> demonstrating the unpredictable, volatile fates she inflicts upon her victims.

Similarly, within Buffalmacco's fresco, there are two phrases that indicate to the viewer that Death will arrive at any moment. The first phrase appears in the central scroll held by the angelic figures close behind Death:

Schermo di sapere o de richeça  
Di nobiltà et ancor di gentileça  
Vaglian niente a' colpi di costei.  
Dè, che non trovi dumque contra lei,  
O tu lector, niuno argomento?  
Or non haver il tuo intellecto spento  
Di starci sempre [sì] apparecchiato  
Che non ti giunga nel mortal peccato.

(Shields of knowledge and wealth of nobility and also of gentleness. They are not strong enough against her blows. Do you not find against her any argument, oh reader? Now your intellect does not have to be off from always being set there that she will not arrive in your mortal sin.)

The second phrase, however, "Nescit homo finem suum; sed sicut pisces capiuntur amo, et sicut aves comprehenduntur [l] aqueo, ita homines capiuntur in tempore malo" ("no one knows when his hour will come: but just as fish are caught in a pall; and just as birds are captured in a snare, so men are caught in evil time[s]") is located in the middle lower frame, directly below Death. Though one text is in the vernacular and the other in Latin, the placement of these two complimentary phrases about the uncertainty of Death corresponds directly with her image rapidly charging toward the *brigata*. At the same time, the use of both Latin and the vernacular once again aids in addressing a multitude of viewing communities, unlike the previous address that was strictly intended for the "femina vana." This double emphasis on the uncontrollable, sudden nature of Death further leads to the idea of Death as the "equalizer among humans," punishing the privileged and underserved, happy and sad, Christian and non-Christian.

Petrarch first alludes to this idea when Death instructs Laura that she is the one whom everyone, valiant warriors and commoners alike, fears,<sup>73</sup> an idea which resurfaces during Laura's "death" later in Part I.<sup>74</sup> As Petrarch then reflects on Death's triumph, he notes that no one may escape her unforgiving grip and that when she arrives, distinguishable features unique to individuals fade away, leaving all earthly and bodily possessions behind. The idea of every man "losing" not only his life but also his goods through Death echoes Boccaccio's description of Death-Fortune in the *Amorosa visione*. Before the "anti-triumph" begins, Boccaccio's guide warns him that every earthly good will be destroyed<sup>75</sup> and with it will come Fortune's utter disregard for fame, name, or person.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Boccaccio, *l'Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXI, line 17, 25–30.

<sup>73</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part I, lines 41–43.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 73–87.

<sup>75</sup> Boccaccio, *l'Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXIII, line 85.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, Canto XXXVII, lines 34–39.

While this idea intertextually hinges on both Petrarch's and Boccaccio's poems, it is also expressed explicitly and allegorically via the Pisa Camposanto. Let us return once more to the scroll held by angels in the center of the painting that begins "Schermo di sapere o di ricchezza..." The second half of this inscription addresses the role Death plays, while the first half reiterates that no one is immune to Death. While this inscription is in the vernacular, allowing it to appear more accessible than its Latin counterpart, there is also a direct call to the reader located in the middle of the inscription: "Dè, che non trovi dunque contra lei./ O tu lector, niuno argomento?" While the text communicates the message to a broader community of viewers—Death comes for all persons, regardless of their wealth, status, or fame on earth—the juxtaposition of this address to the reader behind the central image Death, surrounded by angels and demons, insists upon its didactic message. The angels who hold the scroll visually accord with the angelic figures who transport the virtuous souls toward Heaven, leaving those who remain as the unrepentant victims of the demonic Malebranche. Like the "Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead," if the "lectors"/viewers can learn from their mistakes and alter their behaviors on Earth, when Death arrives to claim her victims, there is hope for salvation in the afterlife. By intermedially referencing the play between word and image and the allegorical meaning of Death offered by the Pisa Camposanto, Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis* assumes another layer of meaning—the potential for Death to bring peace in the afterlife.

### Imagery for "Petrarch's" *Triumphus Mortis*

While images of the *Triumph of Death* and the macabre were not new to the Italian visual tradition, heightened communal attention to contagion-caused death and the unpredictability of its spread, particularly after 1348, yielded new stylistic approaches to these themes' representations in art. There are two standard iterations for representing Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis*. One mode, that which Francesco di Antonio del Chierico and his workshop established in the later fifteenth century (fig. 3), adheres to the visual example initiated in the Camposanto.<sup>77</sup> From 1460–1480, most manuscripts of the *Trionfi* were illustrated by artists associated with del Chierico's workshop, or they indicate influence of his style,<sup>78</sup> such as the MS Harley 5761 which was commissioned by the Medici.

Within this page of the manuscript, we find both a historiated initial 'Q'uesta, and a small vignette at the bottom of the page (fig. 3) depicting the personification of Death as a swift, demonic figure endowed with large bat-like wings, who wields a scythe in the moments leading up to her potential kill. The border surrounding the page is typical of fifteenth-century Florentine manuscripts and includes flowers, birds, *putti*, and deer.<sup>79</sup> However, del Chierico also inserts skulls, emblems of death now ingrained in the cultural memory of the Quattrocento, and coral beads strewn across the vignette. Coral beads, a luxury item, served as both a symbol of beauty and as a tool for protection against illness or sudden death.<sup>80</sup> The presence of the coral beads in

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<sup>77</sup> Del Chierico's workshop also produced images for Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis* in which the allegory appears on a chariot, such as the image found in MS 905, Milano, Biblioteca Trivulziana, following in line with the prototype initially devised by Apollonio di Giovanni.

<sup>78</sup> Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 315.

<sup>79</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Canon. Ital. 62, <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/b2590067-583d-492c-a843-80b27ed310f1/>.

<sup>80</sup> Vincenzo Ambrogi, "Piero della Francesca's coral pendants: the hidden bronchial anatomy," *BJM Journals* 69, no. 12 (1 April 2014): 1161.

this image perhaps demonstrates the elite status of the Medici, yet alerts the reader to the indiscriminate power of Death.



Fig. 3. Francesco Antonio del Chierico, *Triumph of Death*, detail of a marginal vignette, late fifteenth century, tempera colors, ink. MS Hartley 5761 fol. 29, British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Del Chierico's interpretation of Petrarch's allegory of Death may be more accurately related to the text of the *Triumphus Mortis*. In his initial description of Death, Petrarch labels the personification with the word "furor" or "fury."<sup>81</sup> Though Petrarch's inclusion of the noun "furor" may recall Statius, it also intertextually returns the contemporary reader to opening line of Dante's *Inferno* Canto IX, which introduces the Furies who guard the entrance to the City of Dis.<sup>82</sup> A contemporary audience may associate this visual image of Death with Dante's demonic *female* forces that share similar features with the Malebranche. Additionally, the imagery of the Furies and Malebranche implicitly conjured by Petrarch's text further invite viewers to return to the Pisa Camposanto as a direct model for this interpretation of a female "fury" of Death.<sup>83</sup>

In these images in which the figure of Death as a Fury hovers above the victims, del Chierico's workshop attributes to Death characteristics of swift mobility across time and space. While there are bodies lying behind Death's floating figure, there is also often included a group of figures fleeing the personification's threats. In contrast to the skeletal body of Death, the victims, both men and women, are dressed in colorful clothing and demonstrate the wide strata of society called to participate in Death's parade. This active threat underscores the allegorical fate of the mortal "body" visualized in the Camposanto<sup>84</sup> and intermedially appears in the visual and textual *Triumphus Mortis*. Impending Death corresponds with the image of Petrarch's Death *before* her ultimate "triumph" over Laura as seen in the *Triumphus Mortis* Part I, the section centered on the demise of the physical body of Laura. The emotions sparked in the viewer by

<sup>81</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part I, lines 32–33.

<sup>82</sup> Lorenzi, "L'antropologia Cristiana nel 'Triumphus Mortis' di Francesco Petrarca," 16. "Furor" is also used by Dante to describe the giant's madness in assailing heaven in *Inferno* Canto XXXI, line 114.

<sup>83</sup> Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel Giardino*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> Boeckl, "The Pisan 'Triumph of Death' and Papal Constitution 'Benedictus Deus,'" 58.

witnessing Death in this way imitate Petrarch's intertextual and intermedial connection to Boccaccio's fierce female Death-Fortune and the horrific visual of Death from the Pisa Camposanto.

The second and more common visual iteration of Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis* (fig. 4) follows the basic model initiated by Apollonio di Giovanni and his workshop in the 1440s, which was used for both the earliest manuscript illuminations and *cassoni* thereafter. Until the 1480s, the illuminations for most of the *Trionfi* manuscripts were Florentine and adhered to di Giovanni's model.<sup>85</sup> As we see in the front panel of a *cassone* depicting Petrarch's *Triumphs of Love, Chastity and Death*, attributed to Francesco Pesellino and originally commissioned by Piero de Medici to celebrate his wedding to Lucrezia Tornabuoni in 1448,<sup>86</sup> Pesellino follows di Giovanni's prototype where the allegory is mounted on top of a chariot pulled by either two or four black oxen. Though the personification of Death usually appears clothed in a black shroud and carrying a scythe, Pesellino depicts the allegory as a frail female figure with strands of hair cast wildly into the wind and a dreadful expression painted on her gaunt face.<sup>87</sup>



Fig. 4. Francesco Pesellino, detail of *Triumph of Death*, c. 1448, tempera and gold on panel, *cassone*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

<sup>85</sup> Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art*, 304.

<sup>86</sup> Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, "The Medici-Tornabuoni Desco da Parto in Context," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 33 (1998): 145.

<sup>87</sup> Some versions from Apollonio di Giovanni's workshop also portray the allegory of Death as a skeleton such as in the MS Pal. 72, fol. 80r, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana.

Visually, this communicates Petrarch's intertextual hints towards Boccaccio's Death-Fortune and the earlier iconography from Buffalmacco's *Triumph of Death*. Images of crosses, bones, or skulls adorn the black or gold colored chariot. While di Giovanni restricts his vision of the *Triumphus Mortis* to only the allegory riding atop the chariot, in the 1450s and 1460s, such artists as Pesellino, expanded the initial prototype, copying the images of mass devastation brought about by contemporary contagions. We see Death in the process of trampling over its newly conquered victims with the bodies of the personification's earlier "followers" either strewn along the sides of Death's path, underneath the chariot, or lying still behind the "procession." The background setting is often a desolate, desert landscape painted in muted, earth tone colors.

If we consider, for a moment, the chariot, we may recall that Petrarch does not explicitly mention this object within his *Triumphus Mortis*. In fact, outside of the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, no other allegory from Petrarch's text is described as riding atop a chariot. What is the reason, then, for including a chariot, especially when earlier iconography associated with the *Triumph of Death* does not portray Death on a chariot pulled by animals? As mentioned above, Petrarch, like Boccaccio, blurs the roles of Death and Fortune within his *Triumphus Mortis* by first suggesting that Fortune subsequently aids Death in their mutual goal toward destructive ends: "drizzo 'l mio corso innanzi che Fortuna/ nel vostro dolce qualche amaro metta" ("I straighten my course ahead that Fortune may put in your sweetness some bitterness."<sup>88</sup> Then, once Laura "dies," Petrarch does not blame Death, but rather substitutes Death for Fortune as the one who seized his beloved from him: "L'ora prima era, il dì sesto d'aprile,/ che già mi strinse, ed or, lasso, mi sciolse: come Fortuna va cangiando stile!" ("it was the first hour of the sixth of April when I was bound and loosened, how Fortune changes her manner!").<sup>89</sup> In doing so, Petrarch intertextually reminds the reader that his personification of Death adopts the model of Boccaccio's Death-Fortune in the *Amorosa visione*.

If we return to Boccaccio's Death-Fortune, we remember that she rides on a chariot pulled by "fiere."<sup>90</sup> In public funerary pageants, these parades typically featured a cart pulled by oxen that transported the corpse across the city to its final resting place. In the case of *l'Amorosa visione*, Boccaccio expands upon the overlapping imageries of Fortune and Death with this subtle hint at a "funerary/Death procession" for Fortune. When Petrarch calls to mind Boccaccio's Death-Fortune and her "anti-triumph," the passage offers a tangible, portable, instrument—the chariot pulled by "fiere"—to carry visually Petrarch's allegory of Death within painted renditions.

The vision of the female on the chariot as opposed to the floating Fury further brings into relief a reading of Part II of Petrarch's *canto*. In contrast to the fast Fury of Death who represents the moment *before* the "triumph," the image of Death in "procession" on her chariot invokes the moment of Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis* *after* Death triumphs over Laura-Chastity. Rather than approach her victims, Death is surrounded by those whom she left lifeless in her wake. However, Brion-Guerry argues that these particular images are meant to represent the allegory of Death not as a threatening force set on terminating others, but rather as one that brings peace and solace to souls *after* she triumphs over them,<sup>91</sup> an idea that is at the heart of Petrarch's *Triumphs Mortis* Part II.

<sup>88</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part I, lines 46–47.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 133–135.

<sup>90</sup> Boccaccio, *l'Amorosa visione*, Canto XXXI, lines 19–20.

<sup>91</sup> Brion-Guerry, *Le Thème du "Triomphe de la Mort" dans la Peinture Italienne*, 96.



Once Death “conquers” Laura’s physical body and beauty, the pilgrim-poet Petrarch and the dream-spirit Laura engage in a conversation that will lead Petrarch towards his journey into Paradise. After asking Laura whether she is “dead or alive,” Petrarch’s voice serves as a mouthpiece through which his contemporary reading community may “respond” to the devastation caused by the plague. The poet asks Laura whether the experience of Death is as unbearably bitter as it seems, to which she responds:

“Mentre al vulgo dietro vai  
ed a la opinion sua cieca e dura,  
esser felice non puoi tu già mai.  
La morte è fin d’una pregione oscura  
all’anime gentili; all’altre è noia  
ch’anno posto nel fango ogni lor cura.  
Ed ora il morir mio, che sì t’annoia,  
ti farebbe allegrar se tu sentissi  
la millesima parte di mia gioia.”<sup>92</sup>

(“While you go behind the herd and toward their blind and stubborn opinion, you will never be able to be happy. Death is the end of a dark prison for the gentle souls; for the others it is a bother who had all their cares in the mired place. And now my death, that gives you such grief, would make you happy if you could feel a thousandth part of my joy.”)

Laura quickly confirms for the pilgrim-poet that Death, which will be labeled a specifically *Christian* death following God, leads to the end of all suffering and inspires joy that will accompany the spirit throughout eternity.<sup>93</sup> The motionless chariot and “non-parade” thus demonstrate the shift from Death as an aggressive agent that extinguishes the lives of her victims to Death who peacefully liberates the soul free from its body (“la morte è fin d’una pregione oscura”). In this way, while the images explicitly call to mind public funerary pageantry, the visuals of the processional “Triumph of Death” also implicitly allude to the allegorical significance of Death offered by Petrarch in Part II of the *Triumphus Mortis*. This idea further returns the reader/viewer to the Pisa Camposanto, reinforcing its scroll’s didactic message (“Schermo di sapere o di ricchezza...”), wherein Death is a universal phenomenon experienced by all communities. The two parts of Petrarch’s poem, and their slightly divergent visual examples, additionally recall the relationship between the mortal “body” and the eternal “soul” implicitly offered by the Camposanto image.

## Conclusion

Petrarch’s *Triumphus Mortis* may seem non-descript and difficult to represent in a visual mode, but in fact, there are a number of intervisual and intertextual indications woven throughout. Though Boccaccio’s *Decameron* adapts elements and aspects also found in the Pisa Camposanto, it is really Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* that works side by side with the Pisa Camposanto and the post-plague responses to Death in setting the stage for Petrarch’s evolution of this image in

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<sup>92</sup> Petrarch, *Triumphus Mortis*, Part II, lines 31–39.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

his *Triumphus Mortis*. The references to live-action funerary models within each of these two-dimensional media transform not only the Pisan fresco and Boccaccio's literary "parade," but also Petrarch's words into a living, moving spectacle when re-translated upon the visual stage. With an increased awareness to the fatal vulnerabilities to which communities can be exposed, especially during times of disease and contagion, the visual tradition of the *Triumph of Death* evolved stylistically and didactically, as did the visual vocabulary on which artists could rely for depicting their iterations of the *Triumphus Mortis*. With each new approach to representing the personification of Death, visually and textually, its image and descriptions are given new life. It is clear that Petrarch does not offer one singular image of Death; rather, the poet's borrowing from both earlier and contemporary historical, visual, and literary interpretations opens the doors for artists to creatively contribute new representations of this figure for centuries to come.