

University of Portland

Pilot Scholars

History Undergraduate Publications and
Presentations

History

12-2020

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

Ben Hecko

Follow this and additional works at: https://pilotscholars.up.edu/hst_studpubs



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Hecko, Ben, "Plague and Progress: An Analysis of Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron and Reform during the Initial Outbreak of the Black Death" (2020). *History Undergraduate Publications and Presentations*. 31. https://pilotscholars.up.edu/hst_studpubs/31

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Undergraduate Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact library@up.edu.

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

By
Ben Hecko

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History
University of Portland
December 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As historians have shown, the Black Death caused physical, emotional, and social devastation that fundamentally changed society in numerous ways. Historians have addressed many of the ways that the Black Death changed European society in the long run. Art, religion, economics, politics. Each of these fields were fundamentally challenged by the plague and forced to adapt as a result. Many of these changes discussed by historians have been focused on

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

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

To understand the prominence of the *Decameron*, it is important to have a sense of who the author was in his society. According to historian William Caferro, Giovanni Boccaccio was “a man of substantial political influence and financial means, who was deeply involved in Florentine affairs.”⁵ While he was writing the *Decameron*, Boccaccio was also the chamberlain of the *camera del comune* in Florence, the most prominent financial office in the city.⁶ This office controlled the payment and taxation of many public officials. He also acted as an ambassador to other Italian city-states and oversaw income from public properties in Florence.⁷ Boccaccio’s position of authority indicates his overall relevance and importance in the city-state.

⁵ William Caferro, “The Visconti War and Boccaccio’s Florentine Public Service in Context, 1351-53,” in *Heliotropia* 15 (2018), 112. https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/heliotropia/15/caferro.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 161-178.

This status in conjunction with his employment in several other positions of authority in Florence made him a well-known individual.⁸ Because of this, he possessed a platform from which his works could be disseminated, allowing the *Decameron* a larger audience beyond his contemporaries.

The accessibility of the *Decameron* to those outside of elite positions further suggests that the work was intended to highlight the available opportunity for societal change. Boccaccio made the decision to publish the work in Italian as opposed to the more traditional languages of literary masterpieces of the time, Greek and Latin. As Rachel D. Rickel notes in her thesis on the portrayal of a rising merchant mentality in the *Decameron*, “this move from a scholarly language to a more common language for a literary work of this large caliber also gives another clue to the changing perceptions of the period.”⁹ By writing in a language that was common among several social strata, Boccaccio allowed his work to disseminate to a larger group of readers. Providing access to criticisms of those in positions of authority is akin to the 95 Theses presented to the Catholic Church by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. It makes public the moral shortcomings of those in positions of authority and reveals the degree to which societal change is possible.

Many historians that have addressed how the Black Death affected societal values. Samuel K. Cohn argues that the Black Death changed Italian culture and allowed for the Renaissance psyche of individualism to develop.¹⁰ Citing the last testaments of Italians across six

⁸ For a complete list of Boccaccio’s public service record, see James Hankins, “Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism” in *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*, (Terra Haute, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 10.

⁹ Rickel, Rachel D., "The Black Death and Giovanni Bocaccio's *The Decameron's* Portrayal of Merchant Mentality" (2016). *ETD Archive*. 915.

<https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/915>

¹⁰ Samuel Kline Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 28.

cities from before, during, and after the initial outbreak of the plague, Cohn shows how the Black Death led to a distinct cultural shift. He demonstrates that the Black Death shifted bequeathal trends away from the poor towards the goals of earthly immortality and control over later generations.¹¹ In cities such as Siena, Assisi, and Pisa, continued masses and feasts in an individual's honor became a common method of eternal remembrance.¹² In Arezzo, Florence, and Perugia, testators used their wills to commission large-scale works of art and declare the specific locations at which their remains ought to reside.¹³ Through these findings, Cohn reveals how the plague affected bequests and postmortem donation in Renaissance Italy.

David Herlihy has shown that the Black Death also drastically affected the Italian economy. In his essay titled "The New Economic and Demographic System," he paints the plague as a force that actively changed the economy of Renaissance Italy, thereby affecting the demographic system that was prevalent in Europe during the Middle Ages.¹⁴ Through an analysis of food costs, Herlihy establishes that the quality of life in Europe was greatly improved after stabilization of the population post-plague.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Black Death also caused a breakdown of the social hierarchy, allowing common folk able to acquire goods that had been reserved for the upper echelons of society such as fine garments and foods.¹⁶ As Herlihy notes, "the great population debacle... did redistribute the population between the two tiers of the traditional system."¹⁷ This social restructuring is essential to understanding the context of the *Decameron* as it relates to the plague. Because of the instability caused by the Black Death and the resulting redistribution of land, jobs, and goods, society was primed for further change.

¹¹ Cohn, 282-283.

¹² Ibid., 282.

¹³ Ibid., 283.

¹⁴ Herlihy, 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

Boccaccio used his work as a means of promoting morally just action for the sake of society during this time because change was already occurring. The changes highlighted by Herlihy indicate the degree to which social restructuring was possible as a result of the plague.

Scholars have also examined the influence of the Black Death on artistic development and the reflection of contemporary events in art. In his work, *Painting in Siena and Florence after the Black Death*, Millard Meiss argues that the initial outbreak of the Black Death changed several elements of painting. He establishes that Siennese artists began placing greater emphasis on priests and the Church than in the period before the plague's arrival.¹⁸ Furthermore, the artistic works following the plague had a primary focus on religion and violence that represent greater social reliance on the Catholic Church and the difficulties of life that Italians faced.¹⁹ While Meiss' argument has been challenged by the work of other historians who note that his claims only hold true within the region of Tuscany and that he misdated several pieces of art in his analysis.²⁰ The changes in style that Meiss describes are limited to Tuscany and did not gain a general foothold in Italy, and can be more generally explained as a product of a larger market for devotional works.²¹ While this does alter the understanding of the art styles that Meiss claimed were representative of the Black Death's influence, the greater integration of these works still highlights a change brought by the plague. Though the art style may not indicate themes present in Italian society, it does reveal that there was a desire for greater numbers of devotional works in the wake of the plague.

¹⁸ Millard Meiss, *Painting in Siena and Florence after the Black Death*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951), 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁰ William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, 47.

²¹ Evelyn S. Welch, *Art and Society in Italy, 1350-1500*, Oxford History of Art, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

While Meiss' argument has been challenged by historians due to the misdating of specific works and the lack of footing outside of Tuscany, it still provides one clear truth about art and the Black Death. Historian Diana Norman addresses the modern value of Meiss' work in her essay "Art and Religion After the Black Death." She argues that Meiss establishes the importance of how art and experience interact, noting that, "The thesis as a whole insists upon the vital importance of the relationship between artistic practice and concrete experience."²² Though Meiss did not offer a complete understanding of the relationship between the plague and artistic changes thereafter, he did establish the importance of the connection. He connects the living experiences of artists to their surrounding circumstances, indicating that change in art can be a result of important societal changes. Norman uses Meiss' argument to establish the importance of this change, acknowledging that the exact nature of the change in artistic expression requires further analysis.²³ Through this, she further indicates the importance of the Black Death as a force that brought about societal change throughout Europe, highlighting the value of art as a means of addressing a changing world.

The first analysis of the *Decameron* that attempted to address the meaning of the work as a whole was drafted in the late 19th century by Francesco De Sanctis, the great Italian literary critic. In his essay titled, "Boccaccio and the Human Comedy," De Sanctis establishes the text as a representation of the shift in the collective Italian identity. His argument places the *Decameron* into the role of "the Human Comedy," a counter to Dante's "Divine Comedy" that represents a shift towards a more secular, humanist mindset in Italy.²⁴ This analysis of the work explains the

²² Diana Norman, "Art and Religion After the Black Death" in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, vol. 1, *Interpretative Essays*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1995), 195.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Francesco De Sanctis, "Boccaccio and the Human Comedy," In *The Decameron: A New Translation: 21 Novelle, Contemporary Reactions, Modern Criticism*, 1st ed., (A Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1977), 216-217.

relationship between the plague and a changing mindset in Italy prior to the Renaissance. By doing so, it places the work into the context in which it was written, establishing Boccaccio as an early humanist. The *Decameron* maintains an exclusive focus on worldly issues and avoids issues of religious belief, primarily using Catholicism to highlight the wrongdoings of the clergy. This argument articulates a shift towards a more worldly mindset in Italy that is representative of the shift discussed by Cohn as noted above.

One of the more influential arguments on the complete meaning of the work is seen in Charles S. Singleton's "On the Meaning of the Decameron." In this article, Singleton argues that the *Decameron* is intended to provide Boccaccio with creative license to draft a literary work that represents a new form of art that lacks greater meaning beyond entertainment.²⁵ This has a similar value to the work of Jacob Burkhardt, the first historian to craft a complete argument about the definition of the Renaissance and its importance. Burkhardt established the terms of Renaissance history through his argument that the Renaissance was an era of progress as a product of individualism.²⁶ Like the work of Burkhardt, Singleton's thesis served to generate further discussion of the topic that it addressed. Another essential argument for meaning within the *Decameron* is presented by Vittore Branca in his "Boccaccio medievale." He argues that the central themes of Boccaccio's *Decameron* correspond with the goals of the rising merchant class of Florence at the time of its publication.²⁷ The scholarship surrounding the text has approached it in several distinct ways. However, there is a void when discussing the work as an attempt to create societal change within the context of the Black Death.

²⁵ Charles S. Singleton, "On Meaning in the Decameron." *Italica* 21, no. 3 (September 1944): 117. <https://doi.org/10.2307/475259>, 117.

²⁶ Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance*, 3.

²⁷ Due to a lack of translation, I was unable to obtain a copy of Branca's work. As a result, my understanding of his central argument comes from Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella's article "The Meaning of *The Decameron*." Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella, "The Meaning of The Decameron," In *The Decameron: A New Translation: 21 Novelle, Contemporary Reactions, Modern Criticism*, 1st ed., (A Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1977), 323.

Understanding that the work is layered with different rhetorical devices, one of the most complete analyses of the *Decameron* can be found in Joy Hambuechen Potter's "Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the *Cornice*." In this book, Potter argues that the *Decameron* maintains five frames that are essential to understand the meaning of the work as a whole and offer Boccaccio degrees of protection for the controversial discussions presented within.²⁸ According to Potter, each frame responds to an observation that Boccaccio addresses within the work. These five frames are as follows:

1. Boccaccio and the audience of the work, representing the value of the work to society.
2. The ladies that Boccaccio claims to be writing for in the introduction, representing assistance to a restrained social class of women.
3. Florentine society amidst the plague, representing the disintegration of a developed society.
4. The specific circle of the ten storytellers within the body of the work, countering the third frame with a clearly defined functional society that is still working.
5. The world of the stories themselves, representing the complex and human nature of social interactions.

While Potter does address the work in a fleshed out and multifaceted manner through these frames, there are two points on which my analysis differs. First, in the second chapter of her work, she claims that the *Decameron* attacks both the institution of the Church and its clergy.²⁹

While I agree that the work does condemn the practices of the clergy, it does not attack the institution itself. Boccaccio avoided attacking the roots of Catholic faith and tradition, instead focusing his critiques on the clergy and their failure to act morally. Second, Potter limits the scope of Boccaccio's critiques to his attacks on the clergy without addressing the broader criticisms he puts forward regarding authority figures. My analysis expands upon the criticisms

²⁸ Joy Hambuechen Potter, "Introduction," In *Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the Cornice*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1982), 8.

²⁹ Joy Hambuechen Potter, "God, the Church, and Society in the *Decameron*," In *Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the Cornice*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1982), 42.

of the clergy that Potter addressed to include other individuals in positions of authority in Boccaccio's society.³⁰

The relationship between the *Decameron* and the shift in societal values is clearly shown in the work of Dr. David J. Rosner. In his essay titled, "Civilizational Trauma and Value Nihilism in Boccaccio's Decameron," Rosner argues that the Black Death fundamentally altered civilizational values, and that the *Decameron* reveals a societal shift towards nihilism.³¹ Through an analysis of Boccaccio's work, Rosner makes the claim that the plague created a moral void in Italian society. This analysis establishes an important reality of the plague's effects, revealing the opportunity for a shift in societal norms. The pestilence left Italian society decimated and without clear guidance. In the immediate aftermath, authority figures did not have the agency and control that they once did. Rosner explains the result of this, arguing that, "A spiritual void or aporia is thus what is revealed during moments of moral crisis, and as this aporia becomes more widespread and more pervasive in the collective consciousness of a civilization, it increasingly becomes a relevant factor in the process of this civilization's gradual disintegration- -until which time a new moral paradigm is somehow eventually put in its place."³² This quote establishes the destructive nature of calamities such as the Black Death as well as their aftereffects. It is also particularly indicative of the nature of post-plague society in Italy, highlighting the necessity for a shift in morality. Through the criticisms presented in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio presents an alternate form of morality that capitalizes on the instability caused by the plague by offering a more sustainable method of using authority.

³⁰ Potter, "God, the Church, and Society in the *Decameron*," 41-67.

³¹ Rosner, D. J. (2015). Civilizational Trauma and Value Nihilism in Boccaccio's Decameron. *Comparative Civilizations Review*, 73, 27.

³² *Ibid.*, 38.

My research builds upon the existing scholarship by establishing the *Decameron* as a criticism of authority written during a time of social disruption caused by the Black Death. Singleton and De Sanctis both fail to address the importance of the plague in understanding the *Decameron* which limits the validity of their work. Times of drastic societal change such as after the 1348 outbreak of the Black Death offer the opportunity for change. The *Decameron* capitalizes on this opportunity, critiquing the failures of authority figures and appealing to nostalgia for former practices as a means of improvement. Potter limits Boccaccio's commentary to the clergy however it applies to any member of society that had authority over others. The *Decameron* as a product of the Black Death serves to attack the failures of the elite at a point in history that offered the chance for change. Furthermore, this research is meant to expand upon the argument that is set forward by Rosner. His argument that the plague established a sense of moral nihilism in Italy is important to understanding the value of the *Decameron*. My research expands upon this idea to argue that Boccaccio uses this period of moral ambiguity as an opportunity to initiate societal reform through his criticism of those in positions of authority written in the *Decameron*. By doing so, he fills this moral void and argues for a moral reformation within society, beginning with the need for societal authorities to act more justly.

To protect himself from criticism and attack from the authorities that he criticized, Boccaccio establishes the *Decameron* as a piece of little importance. In the preface to the work, he declares that it is meant for a specific audience and to serve a singular purpose. Boccaccio writes, "I intend to provide succour and diversion for the ladies, but only for those who are in love."³³ By declaring the intent of the work as trifling and specific, Boccaccio avoids readily declaring war against those he criticizes. Instead, he disarms those reading it in search of heresies

³³ Giovanni Boccaccio and G. H. McWilliam. *The Decameron*. 2nd ed. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2003, 3.

or defamations, presenting the work as a simple distraction. However, as he notes in the final paragraph of the preface, there is meaning to be derived from the work. He writes, “the aforesaid ladies... will learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued, and these things can only lead, in my opinion, to the removal of their affliction.”³⁴ In this line, Boccaccio reveals that the *Decameron* holds meaning beyond a simple distraction. It is meant to act as a moral compass, to show others how to act and how not to act. Within his conceit of writing specifically for women, Boccaccio makes his writing shield him from the criticisms of those targeted in the stories. However, this is not his only attempt to distance himself from the denunciations made within the work.

To further separate himself from the critiques presented in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio frames the critiques as satirical tales told to help the characters escape the reality of the plague. Instead of simply collecting the one hundred stories and presenting them with his own voice, Boccaccio assigns ten characters the role of presenter. Furthermore, he distances these speakers from the stories by assigning the tales little importance. Pampinea, one of the ten storytellers, says, “telling stories... may afford some amusement both to the narrator and to the company at large.”³⁵ By establishing the tales within the work as mere distractions meant to provide entertainment, Boccaccio again protects himself from attacks that could be leveled against him by those whom are criticized within the work. It is portrayed as lighthearted and satirical, a casual work that provides light entertainment. Through this, his own criticisms are masked within entertaining anecdotes and the voices of characters that speak only for entertainment’s sake.

³⁴ Boccaccio, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

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

The primary effect of the plague that aided in the development of Boccaccio's social commentary was the loss of class distinction. The Black Death did not discriminate in its effects, affecting people from every walk of life. Boccaccio notes this mortal equality, citing the results of the practice of self-isolation that was common in Florence. He states, "as for the common people and a large proportion of the bourgeoisie, they... were constrained, either by their poverty or the hope for survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they... inevitably perished almost without exception."³⁶ Both those with means and those without took to the same course of action with the same result. Establishing this lack of separation between the rich and the impoverished gives Boccaccio license to critique the immoral habits and actions of authority figures in Italian society. By clearly showing how every

³⁶ Boccaccio, 10-11.

person was made equal by the plague, he removes any distinctions of class or wealth that prevent criticism. Equating the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is essential to his criticisms, as noted by the character of Tedaldo later in the work. When offering criticisms of the clergy, he pretends to be a friar saying, “I myself am a friar... therefore familiar with all their ways, and it is not unfitting for me, as it would be for a layman, to express myself somewhat freely about them for your benefit.”³⁷ Those who lack authority in society are not in the position to criticize those above them. However, by stepping into the same role as those who he condemns, Tedaldo can address their moral shortcomings without retribution. This conceit represents the social commentary of the *Decameron* in the context of the Black Death. With all traditional social structure cast aside by the plague, Boccaccio can address the immoral actions of those who had authority as they were made equals.

This loss of class distinction can also be seen in the breakdown of relationships between citizens and its economic outcomes. The broken state of relationships between Florentine denizens highlights the degree to which the city was affected by the plague. Much like Agnolo di Tura’s observations in his account of the plague, Boccaccio notes these casualties, stating that, “this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands.”³⁸ The fundamental relationships that were central to the function of Florentine society were cast aside as citizens resorted to self-preservation as their guiding force. The fall of these relationships marked a prominent break in the structure of society, as the connections that governed the lives of every individual no longer mattered. As Herlihy notes, “an

³⁷ Boccaccio, 242.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

organized economy... was not maintained... workers either died or fled their posts.”³⁹ Any economic structure that had been in place was temporarily broken apart, with the wealthy lacking means by which to perpetuate their wealth. Paid gravediggers allowed members of the lowest rank in society to earn wages, pulling them upwards on the economic ladder.⁴⁰ Through this widespread change in wealth distribution, class distinction was further ruptured, giving Boccaccio license to criticize the immoral actions of those in positions of authority.

The loss of traditional practices also led to the demotion of both administrators of the law and the clergy by eliminating their value to society. Due to the high death rate in the city of Florence, those who enforced laws were unable to extend their jurisdiction. Boccaccio notes this, stating that, “those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties.”⁴¹ This lack of power left officials with nothing more than empty titles, leveling them with the general population. Similarly, clergymen of the Catholic Church were left without the secular authority that had been granted by their religious positions. With the only service offered being last rites, the clergy lacked the influence they had previously had. Even their control of the final sacrament was limited, with a lack of numbers preventing the administering to the multitude of the dead.⁴² Both legal officials and the clergy were left with limited numbers and too large a city to control in their original capacity. As a result of these handicaps on authority and the destruction of the social hierarchy, Boccaccio offers a scathing social commentary on those who had been in positions of authority.

³⁹ Herlihy, 40.

⁴⁰ Boccaccio, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² Herlihy, 41; Boccaccio, 10.

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

One of the most prominent critiques that Boccaccio puts forward against the clergy is against their continued greed. There were several practices that members of the Church instituted to line their pockets. The clergy could leverage their positions of religious authority to tax laypeople for seemingly holy purposes. For example, the practice of simony allowed clergymen the ability to sell indulgences that would save the souls of family, friends, and loved ones. By convincing people that their donations would save the souls of those who died before them or came after them, the clergy could gain massive amounts of wealth. Greedy practices such as these are one of Boccaccio's central critiques of the clergy. By misusing their authority to rob the laity of their money, they fail to make the world more just. Through his satirical commentary in several stories in the *Decameron*, he calls out the immorality of their actions as a call to just action from authorities for the betterment of Italian society.

One of the stories in which Boccaccio's criticism of clerical greed is most visible is that of Jehannot and Abraham on the first day of storytelling. The story centers around Jehannot's attempts to convert Abraham, a practicing Jew, to Catholicism. Jehannot despairs internally, noting that "if he goes to the court of Rome and sees what foul and wicked lives the clergy lead,

not only will he not become a Christian, but, if he had already turned Christian, he would become a Jew again without fail.”⁴³ Abraham goes to Rome, observes the immorality of the Christian leaders, and returns home. The observations that Abraham makes regarding the practices of the clergy in Rome condemn them in several ways, with greed being one of the most prominent. The priests of Rome were misusing their positions of authority to acquire copious amounts of wealth, robbing the laity of their money. He notes that, “they had applied the name of ‘procuration’ to their unconcealed simony... (as if) God were ignorant of the intentions of their wicked minds and would allow Himself to be deceived, as men are, by the mere names of things.”⁴⁴ The priests that engaged in the practice of simony are called out through Abraham’s observations for their violation of their oaths of poverty and the greed that guided them. The continued taxation of everyone in society by the clergy removed money from the economy and harmed those that could not afford the extra expenditure. Boccaccio uses the malpractice of these storied clergymen to address real members of the clergy that acted in the same manner. By noting their failures in this story, he condemns the effects of the immoral actions of the clergy in a publicly accessible manner.

The criticism that Boccaccio puts forward against the clergy for the societal impact of their greed is further revealed through the story of the Franciscan inquisitor on the first day. In this story, the inquisitor has a reputation as being “no less expert at tracking down people with bulging purses than at seeking out those... lacking in faith.”⁴⁵ Within the story the inquisitor finds a man who committed a minor offense and, recognizing his wealth, blows the crime out of proportion to acquire some of his wealth as recompense. Boccaccio notes...

⁴³ Boccaccio, 39.

⁴⁴Ibid., 40.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 51-52.

“he struck such terror into him, that the poor man arranged for certain go-betweens to grease the friar’s palm with a goodly amount of Saint John Golden-Mouth’s ointment (a highly effective remedy against the disease of galloping greed common among the clergy, and especially among Franciscans, who look upon money with distaste), so that the inquisitor would deal leniently with him.”⁴⁶

The colloquialism used by Boccaccio in this passage, “Saint John Golden-Mouth’s ointment,” highlights the degree to which the greed of the clergy is a commonly understood phenomenon. It is similar to “snake oil,” a remedy that makes fraudulent claims of an individual’s power to strip gullible individuals of their wealth. The money that the man gives the Franciscan is a false spiritual cure that is assured to benefit the giver. The term is satirical in nature and was used by medieval writers to refer to the greed of the clergy.⁴⁷ Through this tale, Boccaccio calls out the clergy for the impacts of their greed on society by citing the practice of doling out fines for any passing excuse to line their pockets.

Though Boccaccio frequently condemns the greed of the clergy, it is not the only vice that he critiques. In the introduction to the third story of the third day, the storyteller Filomena attacks the hubris of the clergy. She notes:

The priesthood consists for the most part of extremely stupid men, inscrutable in their ways, who consider themselves in all respects more worthy and knowledgeable than other people, whereas they are decidedly inferior. They resemble pigs, in fact, for they are too feeble-minded to earn an honest living like everybody else, and so they installed themselves wherever they can fill their stomachs.⁴⁸

This passage highlights both the simony and the nepotism that can be found within the clergy at the time in which Boccaccio writes. Though the clergy are in positions of authority, they act in such a way that misleads others. This is because they occupy positions of authority based on monetary contribution and social standing rather than individual merit. Furthermore, they do not serve the Church with the aim of helping others to be more holy. Instead, they choose a form of

⁴⁶ Boccaccio, 52.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 808.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 205-206.

employment that guarantees continued access to food for little effort. Boccaccio cites their continued hubris and lack of intelligence as a failure within the authoritative position that they hold. By holding themselves above others, the clergy misuse their authority and fail to provide the spiritual aid that their role entails. Boccaccio attacks the clergy for the continued inability to morally serve in the position of authority they have been granted.

This failure to aid others through continued immorality is further addressed in the introduction to the second story on the fourth day. The storyteller Pampinea provides a scathing attack that indicates the continued abuse of authority by the clergy. She says, “when they are reproaching you with their own vices, or showing how the laity achieve salvation by almsgiving and the clerics by almsgiving, they positively deafen you with their loud and arrogant voices... one would think they were excused... from working their way to heaven on their merits, for they behave as though they actually own and govern the place.”⁴⁹ The clergy act as complete hypocrites through their prescriptions of lessons and penances to ordinary laypeople. The vices that they indulge themselves in are far greater than their followers, yet they are the people that are given the role of guide. The actions of those in positions of authority serve as an example to the people whom they are supposed to serve. Due to the authority granted to them by their positions, the immoral choices that they make have a greater impact on those around them. The *Decameron* calls out the practices of those in control and challenges them to aid society through morally upright action. By calling out the hypocrisy and hubris of the clergy, Boccaccio affects change in those who have greater outreach in society.

In the seventh story of the third day of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio further attacks the hypocrisy of the clergy to establish their unjust governing of society. The story follows the

⁴⁹ Boccaccio, 302.

character of Tedaldo following a rebuke from his lover Ermellina. When a man resembling him is found murdered, Tedaldo disguises himself in the garb of a pilgrim and visits her to determine the cause of this spurning, discovering that it was the advice of a friar that guided Ermellina to do so. Upon this discovery, Tedaldo offers an in-depth criticism of the selfish nature of the clergy and the resulting actions that damage society. He says, “they denounce men’s lust, so that when the denounced are out of the way, their women will be left to the denouncers... let them set an example, before they start preaching to the rest of us.”⁵⁰ This critique, especially the final part, “let them set an example,” represents a key element of Boccaccio’s social commentary. Friars are given authority by the religious position in which they reside and the ability that they wield is clearly shown in their influence over Ermellina. However, they use this for their own personal gain as opposed to the morals established in their vows. This is the element of the clergy that the *Decameron* is most concerned with addressing. Immoral actions are wrong, but their impact outside of the individual that commits them is far more important. Boccaccio seeks to make those in positions of authority act more justly to the benefit of all in society. Because of this effect on others, he calls out their immoral practices with the goal of capitalizing on the instability caused by the Black Death. The plague was viewed by many as an act of God against the immoral actions of many within society. Boccaccio offers a solution to this divine punishment through the *Decameron*, stating the effects of unjust authorities within society to call for a moral revolution in positions of societal importance.

Both the elevated status and the prideful nature of the clergy is further critiqued by the storyteller Panfilo on the eighth day. In the introduction to his story of the day, he expresses distaste and frustration with the status of individuals within the Catholic Church. Panfilo notes:

⁵⁰ Boccaccio, 244.

it behoves [sic] me to relate a little story against a class of persons who keep on offending us without our being able to retaliate. I am referring to the priests, who have proclaimed a Crusade against our wives, and who seemed to think, when they succeed in laying one of them on her back, that they have earned full remission of all their sins... Whereas we poor dupes who belong to the laity cannot do the same to them.⁵¹

This quote represents the cause of Boccaccio's attack on the misuse of authority in his society.

Because of the positions that they hold, authority figures such as clergymen damaged society without repercussions. They sated their own desires and relied on their office to grant immunity, engaging in sexual trysts and greed that affected other members of society. Boccaccio criticizes this inability to exact justice upon those who have been harming society with their unjust actions. The frustration of the characters within the *Decameron* is indicative of a shared Florentine anger towards the clergy. Continued abuse of authority allowed the clergy to take what they wanted from laypeople without consent. However, because of their exalted position within society, they were left unpunished for their actions. Presenting this collection of overt criticisms in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio went against the restriction noted by his own character. By layering his criticisms within the framework of fictional characters telling stories within a story and casting it as simple entertainment, Boccaccio distanced himself from his critiques. Establishing these barriers between the fiction and the author allowed him to vent the frustrations of Florentine citizens with the misuse of authority without the fear of repercussions from the people he criticized.

Boccaccio not only criticizes the clergy in the *Decameron*, he does so without attacking the institution of Catholicism. This critical distinction stresses the nature of the work as a commentary on the failures of individuals within the existing system of the Church as opposed to the system itself. His clear distinction between the institution of Catholicism and the clergymen themselves is essential to the meaning of his social commentary. This directly contrasts the

⁵¹ Boccaccio, 554-555.

assertion put forward by Potter that the *Decameron* does not value the institution of the Church.⁵² As Abraham notes in his criticisms of the papal office in Rome, “being a more holy and genuine religion than any of the others, it deservedly has the Holy Ghost as its foundation and support.”⁵³ Boccaccio clearly presents the value of the religion itself as important while still providing social commentary meant to correct the immoral behaviors of the clergy. The *Decameron* as a piece of plague literature offers its social commentary on the human failures within the clergy while continuing to tout the importance of the religion. This clearly fits within Meiss’ argument that art in the period immediately following the initial outbreak of the Black Death elevated the Christian religion.⁵⁴ The *Decameron* portrays the Catholic religion as a fundamental truth and as a moral guide, regardless of those who act immorally in its name.

The *Decameron* also addresses secular authorities, criticizing them for a similar misuse of the power granted to them by their positions. The story of Tedaldo offers criticisms of both, addressing the failures of the clergy while also presenting a criticism of those that enforce the law. When Tedaldo discovers that the husband of his lover had been falsely arrested for killing him, he reflects upon the law process and its failures. He notes, “the blind severity of the law and its administrators, who in order to convey the impression that they are zealously seeking the truth, often have recourse to cruelty and cause falsehood to be accepted as proven fact, hence demonstrating... that their true allegiance is to the devil and his iniquities.”⁵⁵ Again Boccaccio uses the word “iniquities” to express his criticisms of people in positions of authority. The enforcers of the law are acting in a manner that is immoral and directly impacts others, limiting their ability to function in society. He calls them out for failing to use their positions as they

⁵² Potter, “God, the Church, and Society in the *Decameron*,” 42.

⁵³ Boccaccio, 41.

⁵⁴ Boase, 98-99.

⁵⁵ Boase, 240.

ought to be and harming those that the laws are supposed to protect. Their authority lands an innocent man the penalty of death and fails to bring the true perpetrators to justice, revealing its misuse. As a result of the societal disruption caused by the plague, Boccaccio argued for a more just society. Through his attacks on the administrators for their immoral action in a time of drastic change, he establishes the need for morality within the justice system.

Another prominent criticism that Boccaccio puts forward in the *Decameron* is directed at the courtiers of Italy for their self-centered habits. These people served as advisors or companions to royalty, giving them a higher degree of agency than many others possessed. When describing the character of Guiglielmo, Boccaccio notes that he is a courtier. However, instead of continuing with the story, he pauses to reflect on the failures of contemporary courtiers. He says, “our modern courtiers are better described as asses, brought up, not in any court, but on the dungheap of all the scum of the earth’s iniquities.”⁵⁶ The greatest affront to Boccaccio by these courtiers is their perpetuation of immoral acts in contrast to the efforts of those in the past. He idolizes the past as a means of looking forward, indicative of the humanist mindset that modernity could improve from understanding the past. The men of his time committed scandalous and vile acts, treating vice as first nature and acting in a wholly self-centered manner. This is in direct contrast with the actions of past courtiers, Boccaccio notes, “[whose] efforts were expended, in making peace whenever disputes or conflicts arose between two nobles, negotiating treaties of marriage... and censuring the failures of miscreants.”⁵⁷ By appealing to a mythical past in which people were more morally upright and just, Boccaccio advocates for social change in a way that had been done. Instead of suggesting social changes that are new and uncharted, he cites an idealized past that had stability. For a group of people

⁵⁶ Boccaccio, 60.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

that have lost all normalcy to the effects of the plague, the idea of returning to the past establishes a stable structure. The position of authority that the courtiers hold is not the issue that Boccaccio raises, but rather their inability to act beyond themselves. By appealing to past glory, he offers Italian society a way to improve that has been achieved and promotes stability in a world that lacks order. He appeals to their past morality as the future of a better, more just society.

Further arguments for societal justice are found in Boccaccio's criticisms of the misuse of authority in the introduction to the story of the judge and his breeches on the eighth day. The storyteller Filostrato begins with a brief aside that expresses the downfall of the individuals in charge of the justice system in Florence. He notes, "the chief magistrates of our city... tend as a rule to be mean-hearted men, who lead such a frugal and beggarly sort of life that anyone would think they hadn't a penny to bless themselves with."⁵⁸ Once again, those in positions of authority misuse them to feed their own selfish desires. Though these men are meant to rule fairly on cases of law, they act without virtue and focus on their own gain. By doing so, they devalue the system in which they reside. Throughout the course of the *Decameron*, a large portion of Boccaccio's critiques follow the core theme of selfishness in authority figures. Whether it is the continued pursuit of gluttonous wealth or the refusal to spend any of their money for others, the selfish nature of influential individuals is called out. Boccaccio introduces these overt criticisms to change the abuse of power in Italian society, targeting those with the greatest influence.

When discussing the failures of those in positions of authority to act with virtue, Boccaccio establishes his preferred model for just government. In the first story of the fourth day, the storyteller Fiammetta compares a virtuous individual of lesser means to the nobles of a

⁵⁸ Boccaccio, 575.

king's court. She notes, "Any man whose conduct is virtuous proclaims himself a noble, and those who call him by any other name are in error. Consider each of your nobles in turn, compare their lives, their customs and their manners with those of Guiscardo, and if you judge the matter impartially, you will conclude that he alone is a patrician whilst all these nobles of yours are plebeians."⁵⁹ Here, Boccaccio reveals one of the fundamental flaws of his society and a root of its continued immorality. Nobles in Italian society were often awarded positions of importance based on their family heritage and social status. Because of this, moral merit was less valuable to gaining a position of authority than individual status. While there may have been more virtuous and qualified candidates for any given position, people of higher social standing were often given priority. This lack of quality in high-ranking positions is a prominent target of Boccaccio's criticisms of the elite. Because of their immoral actions in positions of authority, they aided in the decline of society. Upon the arrival of a plague characterized as the wrath of God, Boccaccio called out these failures to reform immoral actions of the nobility that damaged society.

Not only does Boccaccio seek to criticize the individual actions of authority figures, he also expresses the consequences of their actions on society as a whole. In the introduction to the ninth story on the sixth day, he writes on the prevalence of immoral behavior in Florence. Through the character of Emilia, he reveals that, "our city was noted for certain excellent and commendable customs, all of which have now disappeared, thanks to the avarice which, increasing as it does with the growing prosperity of the city, has driven them all away."⁶⁰ The city has been corrupted by the continued greed of those who are in control. As more people prospered, Florence transitioned into the state which Boccaccio laments. Through a continued critique of those who have assisted in this loss of virtue in the city, the *Decameron* establishes

⁵⁹ Boccaccio, 297-298.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 466.

the need for reform. Boccaccio argues for a reformation that restores morality to the influential groups of the city, thereby improving the state of Florence as a whole. He seeks to change the character of those in positions of authority to aid the overall state of his society.

A recurring theme throughout the course of the work is a change in character following a critique of the individual's actions. In the story of Guiglielmo mentioned earlier, the gentleman Ermino de' Grimaldi is criticized for his continued avarice and miserliness, causing him to change his ways and spend his money on those who need it.⁶¹ By directly criticizing the miserly tendencies of Ermino, Guiglielmo causes the man to reflect on his actions and realize the error of his ways, thereby enacting a change of heart in him. This change in habits is the desired result of the *Decameron* as a whole. The continued abuse of authority by the clergy, the chief magistrates, and other authority figures led to distorted desires within Italian society. However, with the arrival of the Black Death, grievances against their immoral actions are more easily aired, thereby offering the opportunity to challenge the existing practices. By calling out the authority figures that abuse their positions of power directly, Boccaccio forces this change of heart in his own society.

The *Decameron* presents a moral standard for those in positions of authority and immediately expresses that contemporary position-holders fail to live up to it. On the final day of storytelling, the character of Filomena discusses the virtue of kings. She says, "Those people do well, then, who possess ample means and do all that is expected of them; but we ought neither to marvel thereat, nor laud them to the skies, as we should the person who is equally munificent but of whom, his means being slender, less is expected."⁶² In this statement, Boccaccio establishes the degree to which authority figures ought to be held accountable. Because the clergy and

⁶¹ Boccaccio, 59-61.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 746.

secular authorities fail to act with the best interest of the state in mind, they condemn Italian society. As a result of their immoral actions, God punishes them with the plague. Through this, Boccaccio makes the case that it should not be rare for those with power to use it for the good of others; rather, it should be so common that it need not be mentioned. The standardization of morally upright behavior for those in positions of authority is an end goal of the change that the *Decameron* attempts to induce.

Though Boccaccio attempted to capitalize on the opportunity for societal change, the *Decameron* did not cause an immediate moral reformation. The opportunity to change society was clearly present, and change did occur in several facets of life. However, the elite quickly reasserted itself over society, thereby limiting dramatic change to the justice of those in positions of authority. The city of Siena provides an excellent example of this lack of change. Historian William M. Bowsky argues that Sieneese government was not particularly affected by the plague. He states, “governmental machinery was rapidly re-assembled and was manned by the same type personnel as before the epidemic.”⁶³ Not only did the government fail to change, the clergy also maintained their immoral practices. Members of the Catholic Church continued to sell indulgences and act without virtue prior to the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century.⁶⁴ The *Decameron* was meant to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the Black Death. However, the rapid reconstruction of governing structures stopped the moral reformation that Boccaccio desired from occurring.

Though the *Decameron* did not immediately reform Italian society, it was not a failure; rather, it became part of a large-scale shift towards humanism. In his essay, “Boccaccio and the

⁶³ William M. Bowsky, “The Impact of the Black Death upon Sieneese Government and Society” in *Speculum*, Vol. 39 (January 1964), 20.

⁶⁴ Brad Franco, “The Protestant Reformation,” Powerpoint presentation, November 25, 2019.

Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism,” James Hankins establishes the effects of Boccaccio’s work on Italian society. He argues that Boccaccio is a critical example of the Renaissance humanism that came to fruition during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy. The clearest evidence of this is a statement on the nature of this school of thought. Hankins notes, “the humanists saw virtue in the ruling class as the key to better government and the cure for corruption. In other words, they cared more about governors than governments, more about the morality of rulers than the legality of regimes.”⁶⁵ In this statement, Hankins essentially provides a summary of the message within the *Decameron*. The critique presented by Boccaccio attempted to capitalize on the opportunity of civil and social unrest caused by the Black Death to call out the lack of virtue in the ruling class. The moral failures of the clergy and other authority figures are publicly attacked to draw attention to the importance of virtuous action in positions that dictate how society functions. Though this had little immediate impact on Italian society, it helped to develop the viewpoint of Renaissance humanism towards those in positions of authority.

Not only did the *Decameron* develop the idea of Renaissance humanism, but it also indicated a larger movement towards anticlericalism in Europe as a result of the plague. In his work, “Anticlericalism in Late Medieval German Verse,” historian Albrecht Classen argues that this phenomenon was not unique to one specific region within Europe. He says, “almost all major and minor poets of the fifteenth century deliberately make an attempt to incorporate the topic of anticlericalism... and the poets of that time provided the spark which was to explode the

⁶⁵ James Hankins, “Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism” in *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*, (Terra Haute, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 6.

whole church structure.”⁶⁶ Because the clergy continued to abuse the laity through immoral actions without repercussions, they were not viewed in a positive light in much of Europe. The call for moral action from the clergy came from a population that was frustrated with the continued misuse of authority and its effects on people throughout the continent. As a result of this dissatisfaction, writers and poets turned to their written mediums to challenge the Church. Boccaccio clearly represented similar themes within the *Decameron*, incorporating anticlerical sentiment throughout the work as a prime example of the lack of morality in his society. His work indicates the growing resentment towards the clergy for their continued inability to act morally and its effect on society.

Through the understanding of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as an attempt to generate active societal change within the context of the Black Death, this paper contributes to the existing literature surrounding the work. By engaging with historians such as Cohn and Herlihy, the argument presented marks a unique element of change caused by the plague. Instead of arguing for changes that occurred because of the Black Death, this research defines an intentional attempt to change society because of the opportunity provided. It is an active choice by Boccaccio as opposed to a reaction from artists and merchants. Furthermore, this work addresses the scholarly analyses of the *Decameron* by academics such as Potter and Rosner. It approaches the work from a historical perspective that accounts for the circumstances in which the *Decameron* was written. Instead of interpreting the text from a purely literary understanding, this paper considers the societal changes that occurred as a result of the plague and connects the overall message to the opportunity presented to Boccaccio. This paper makes a significant contribution to existing

⁶⁶ Albrecht Classen, “Anticlericalism in Late Medieval German Verse,” in *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, v. 51., ed. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), 114.

scholarship by bridging the gap between historiography and literary analysis to offer a more contextualized understanding of the work.

Though this contribution to scholarship is meaningful, the application of the meaning within the *Decameron* to the current situation of the world and Covid-19 makes the work even more relevant. Boccaccio condemns the lack of accountability for the immoral actions of those in positions of authority and their continued abuse of their roles. This message is as important today as it was in 1353. In the United States, there are calls for accountability from Donald Trump for his continued misuse of authority. To quote the Los Angeles Times, “Trump has cheapened his office, instilled distrust in essential institutions of justice and democracy and replaced knowledge and professionalism with ignorance and amateurism.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, as Covid-19 began spreading rapidly, he refused to rely on medical experts and failed to alert the public to the danger that the virus posed. The immoral actions that the President has continued to take throughout the course of his presidency have critically damaged the lives of millions of people living around the world. His continued abuse of authority represents the exact problem that the *Decameron* criticizes; the abuse of authority that damages the lives of those subjugated to the abuser.

Further criticisms of authority are also being leveled against police departments across the country because of continued racist action against Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement represents a call for a change in leadership that is representative of the people whom the police are sworn to protect. Immoral is not condemning enough to describe the continued abuse of authority of which many police officers are guilty. Because of their actions, many Americans are calling for a complete restructuring of law enforcement. Much as Boccaccio

⁶⁷ “Trump’s Presidency Is a Train Wreck. Let Us Count the Ways,” Los Angeles Times, October 20, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-10-20/trump-failures-outrages>.

presented his criticisms of the actions of authorities, many Americans are speaking out against the injustice and inequality that pervade the existing system.

The calls for authority figures to be held accountable and for a change in the existing system have been aided by the circumstances provided by Covid-19. In an article published by the Washington Post, assistant professor Maneesh Arora noted the relationship between the pandemic and societal change. She writes, “Most people say they have gone to protests because they believe in racial justice and support the Black Lives Matter movement. But for many, particularly those who had never before turned out for a BLM protest, what pushed them into the streets was being hurt by pandemic public health measures.”⁶⁸ As a result of the pandemic, the opportunity for change is being capitalized on by millions of Americans. Many of the people that Arora interviewed expressed that the pandemic had given them more time to protest.⁶⁹ As a result of the pandemic, protesters are challenging the existing structure of society with the goal of creating positive change. As the initial outbreak of the Black Death presented the opportunity for social change in Europe in the 14th century, Covid-19 has done the same in the United States today. Both pandemics have presented their respective societies with the opportunity to generate societal change.

The *Decameron* presents Giovanni Boccaccio’s critique on authority figures and seeks to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the Black Death to generate societal change. This can be seen in his continued condemnation of the immoral actions taken by the clergy as well as important laypeople. These people possess the power to govern and shape society yet squander it to pursue their own selfish actions. This message is as relevant now as it was over 650 years ago.

⁶⁸ Maneesh Arora, “Analysis | How the Coronavirus Pandemic Helped the Floyd Protests Become the Biggest in U.S. History,” (Washington Post, August 5, 2020) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/05/how-coronavirus-pandemic-helped-floyd-protests-become-biggest-us-history/>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

There is widespread inequality, climate change has accelerated, and the existing system continues to fail millions of people. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these issues, much like the Black Death did in Italy. Now is the opportunity to fix the existing system and promote morality in a world corrupted by greed, pride, and power. The Black Lives Matter movement and the push for greater voter participation across the United States are a good start. Change must continue when given such an opportunity.

Bibliography

- Albrecht Classen, "Anticlericalism in Late Medieval German Verse," in *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, v. 51., ed. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), 114.
- Arora, Maneesh. "Analysis | How the Coronavirus Pandemic Helped the Floyd Protests Become the Biggest in U.S. History." *Washington Post*, August 5, 2020.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/05/how-coronavirus-pandemic-helped-floyd-protests-become-biggest-us-history/>.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni and G. H. McWilliam. *The Decameron*. 2nd ed. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Bowsky, William M. "The Impact of the Black Death upon Sieneese Government and Society" in *Speculum*, Vol. 39 (January 1964).
- Caferro, William. *Contesting the Renaissance*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Caferro, William. "The Visconti War and Boccaccio's Florentine Public Service in Context, 1351-53" in *Heliotropia* 15 (2018).
https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/heliotropia/15/caferro.pdf
- Cohn, Samuel Kline. *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Da Piazza, Michele. "Chronicle." In *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* by John Aberth, 29–30. The Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005.

- De Sanctis, Francesco. "Boccaccio and the Human Comedy," In *The Decameron: A New Translation: 21 Novelle, Contemporary Reactions, Modern Criticism*, 1st ed., (A Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1977), 216-217.
- Di Tura, Agnolo. "Sienese Chronicle." In *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* by John Aberth, 80–82. The Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005.
- Franco, Brad. "The Protestant Reformation," Powerpoint presentation, November 25, 2019.
- Hankins, James. "Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism" in *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and His Works*. Terra Haute, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019.
- Herlihy, David and Samuel Kline Cohn. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Meiss, Millard. *Painting in Siena and Florence after the Black Death*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951.
- Musa, Mark and Peter Bondanella. "The Meaning of The Decameron." in *The Decameron: A New Translation: 21 Novelle, Contemporary Reactions, Modern Criticism*, 1st ed. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Norman, Diana. "Art and Religion After the Black Death" in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, vol. 1, *Interpretative Essays*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1995.
- NPR.org. "Forecasting The Long-Term Effects of The Coronavirus On American Society." Accessed November 7, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/27/822728341/forecasting-the-long-term-effects-of-the-coronavirus-on-american-society>.

- Potter, Joy Hambuechen. "Introduction." In *Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the Cornice*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Potter, Joy Hambuechen. "God, the Church, and Society in the *Decameron*." In *Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the Cornice*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Rickel, Rachel D., "The Black Death and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron's* Portrayal of Merchant Mentality" (2016). *ETD Archive*. 915.
<https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/915>
- Rosner, D. J. (2015). Civilizational Trauma and Value Nihilism in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. *Comparative Civilizations Review*, 73.
- Singleton, Charles S. "On Meaning in the *Decameron*." *Italica* 21, no. 3 (September 1944): 117.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/475259>, 117.
- "Trump's Presidency Is a Train Wreck. Let Us Count the Ways," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-10-20/trump-failures-outrages>.
- Welch, Evelyn S. *Art and Society in Italy, 1350-1500*. Oxford History of Art. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.