

Spring 5-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

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**THE NATURE OF LOVE, LOSS, AND THE PLAGUE: THE REIGN OF FILOSTRATO
IN BOCCACIO'S THE DECAMERON**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Jessica Lynn Perez

May 2015

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Jessica Perez
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05/01/15

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Dr. Kennedy

ENGL-445

25 November 2014

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Introduction

In Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, the *nobile brigata*, a company of seven women and three men, tell each other stories for ten days in an attempt to seek refuge and diversion from plague-ridden Florence. During the plague, which arrived in Florence in 1348, the death toll in the city reached between 60,000 and 100,000 people and was so devastating to the city that for many years, it was referred to as "the plague of Florence" ("The Death Toll"). Because the plague is the contextual frame of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, scholars have debated the role the calamitous event plays in the narrative. Giuseppe Mazzotta, for example, states that "[. . .] thematically, the plague contains and surrounds the text and largely determines its value" (16). Similarly, Susan Barsella argues that *The Decameron* "appears as an allegorical triumph of life, a distant fictional response to the triumph of death left behind in Florence" (234). Indeed, the plague does envelop the entire work as the reason that the *nobile brigata* leave the city, as well as the purpose for their diversionary tales, yet love and desire also play a contextual role throughout the frame narrative.

Many of the stories told by the *brigata* involve love lost or found. Louise George Clubb argues that the possibilities that Boccaccio "decries in love reflect [his] respect for human nature, its diversity" and its "primitive and civilized reactions to the living" (188). To Clubb, Boccaccio uses love themes in his stories to celebrate life. Additionally, Jessica Levenstein states that

Boccaccio connects his “description of plague-ridden Florence and the extended consideration of passionate love that compromises the introduction to and the stories of Filostrato’s reign” (314). Levenstein makes a sound argument about the correlation between the imagery of the plague and the symbolism of gardens in Day Four’s stories as well as the setting in which the *brigata* tell their stories; however, none of these scholars discuss in detail the connections between the plague, love, and nature specifically as illustrated in Day Four of *The Decameron*. Day Four’s new introduction for the text, coupled with Filostrato’s somber theme, combines the imagery of the plague with the imagery of love, especially in Emilia’s story of Simona and Pasquino (IV. VII), to demonstrate a larger theme of *The Decameron*: Nature’s usurping power over man’s law and order, language, morals, and societal constructs.

Day Four plays an important role in *The Decameron*: it has its own introduction, and it is the first day with a sorrowful theme. By centralizing the plague in the introduction of the text, Boccaccio creates the context for the entirety of *The Decameron*. Not only does he use the plague as background of his frame narrative, but his detailed description of the plague’s effect on the city of Florence, as well as on the members of his *nobile brigata*, sets the initial celebratory tone of the brigata’s tales. The first three days consist of themes that end happily, such as misfortune ending happily or finding a lost object. However, this changes on Day Four: First, the introduction’s tale of Filippo Balducci, although humorous, shows the frailty of moral conventions through the arbitrariness of language. Then, the reign of Filostrato, who chooses a much more somber theme—tales of love that end badly—causes a conflict within the *brigata* when Pampinea decides that she will not follow the king’s decree, thereby, breaking the social order that she created at the beginning of the trip to the countryside. Lastly, in Emilia’s story of Simona and Pasquino, the imagery of death in the garden mirrors the plague imagery in the

introduction to *The Decameron*, illustrating the inability of medicine and human ingenuity to hinder nature's power. By drawing a parallel between the plague, love, and loss, and placing them in opposition to human ideologies, Day Four of *The Decameron* actualizes the theme of the entire text: the only way for man to live a meaningful life is to embrace Nature.

The Plague

In the introduction to Day One, Boccaccio describes the plague's wrath on Florence. According to Pier Massimo Forni, "the opening of a story is a privileged space, one that lends itself to a critical discourse which transcends mere questions of narrative sequence and goes to the heart of narrative act," and he argues that Boccaccio uses this "privileged space" to chronicle the plague's devastation (44). In his description of the plague's impact on Florence, Boccaccio states that "its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit" (50). He goes on to describe how the *gavóccioli*, the large swellings, "spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body" (Boccaccio 50). The *gavóccioli* were signs of imminent death to any who displayed them. Not only did the disease rapidly spread on its victim, but it "was of so contagious a nature that very often it visibly did more than simply pass from one person to another;" the disease also killed animals that came in contact with diseased humans (51). The plague was so furious that neither man nor beast were immune; none could escape the plague's destructive path. As Mazzotta states in his book *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*, "Nature's claim, [. . .] is an ironic self-deception for she herself fails to found a rational order and is blind to the destructive impulses that lodge in her vast body" (24). The disease's inability to discern man from beast during its rampage through Florence defies this "rational order;" thus, Florence fell into chaos.

Boccaccio also asserts that man could neither cure nor run from the plague. Doctors and their medicine “were profitless and unavailing” (Boccaccio 51). The remedies suggested by physicians during the plague “are alluded to in Boccaccio’s account but only to dramatize their inefficacy” (Mazzotta 21). There was no antidote, and the illness continued to “rush upon [. . .] with the speed of a fire racing through a dry or oily substance that happened to be placed within its reach” (Boccaccio 51). The ferocity of the plague is only matched by the reaction of the people. Some people “maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against the plague than to run away from it,” leaving the ill behind (53). They isolated themselves in the country or their homes in an attempt to keep the plague at a distance. Others “behaved as though their days were numbered,” losing “all respect for the laws of God and man” (52-53). As the plague raced through the city, disorder befell Florence. The rule of law and social order cannot stand in opposition to Nature; this is the framework for the entirety of *The Decameron*. As the *brigata* travel to the country to flee plague-ridden Florence, Boccaccio ensures that his “charming ladies” are reminded of the horror in which his story is set (46). By describing the plague in great detail, Boccaccio creates the context for his narrative.

Day Four

The introduction to Day Four introduces sexual desire as another force of nature that cannot be controlled by man; the weakness of language is a catalyst to illustrate the weakness of moral conventions. In his defense of the first three stories of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio tells the tale of Filippo Balducci, a widower who raises his son in a cave and renounces secular life. Balducci confines his son to the cave until he is eighteen, and after reasoning that his son would “no longer [. . .] likely be attracted to worldly things” due to his confinement, Balducci allows the young man to accompany him to the city (Boccaccio 327). While the boy is amazed by many

new sights during his trip, one sight in particular takes his attention: women. The boy asks his father “what they were,” to which Balducci replies, ““They are called goslings”” (328). The boy, however, is not deterred by his father’s answer; in fact, he wants to take one home and ““pop things into its bill”” (328). Although amusing, this story demonstrates the power of nature over man, and more specifically language. Even though the young man was isolated in a cave for most of his life, against his father’s wishes, he cannot help but react naturally to the sight of women. His father may call the women by any name, but he cannot hinder his son’s natural desire for them. This brief tale illustrates “[...] the inevitability of nature’s victory over human wisdom” and “[links] the eros depicted in the Fourth Day to the plague portrayed in the introduction” (Levenstein 313). Boccaccio cements this sentiment by saying to the ladies who read his stories that

I and other men who love you are simply doing what is natural. In order to oppose the laws of nature, one has to possess exceptional powers, which often turn out have been used, not only in vain, but to the serious harm of those who employ them. (331)

Man has no more control over his natural desires than the people of Florence had over the plague that ravaged their city; thus, Balducci’s story begins the link between the theme of Day Four and the plague.

The nature of love and of loss is also personified by Filostrato, the first king of *The Decameron* who reigns on Day Four. Unlike the three previous queens, who chose cynical representations of uplifting tales of redemption such as Filomena’s theme of those who suffer misfortune but whose circumstances end in happiness and Neifile’s theme of achieving a desired object or reclaiming a lost possession, Filostrato’s theme is much more somber: “those whose

love ended unhappily” (Boccaccio 326). Filostrato’s chosen topic stands in direct opposition of the purpose for the trip to the country: “to run away from the sorrows of the city” (65). His theme “suggests that the disease that the storytellers flee cannot be eluded” (Levenstein 329). Just as Balducci’s attempt to flee to the cave did not save his son from his natural desires, or the people who fled Florence to find the country as plagued as the city, the *brigata* cannot escape undesired endings, even if they have never been in love. Yet, Filostrato is a man whose love is unrequited: “I die a thousand deaths in the course of every hour that I live, without being granted the tiniest portion of bliss in return” (Boccaccio 342). In his song at the end of the day, Filostrato explains that his own attempt at love ended badly:

All the joy is gone from me,
 No pleasure’s left for me;
 Make then my death content her
 As the new love you sent her. (403)

The one he loves has chosen another. Filostrato’s misfortune in love is further emphasized by the fact that his name means “defeated and cast down by love” (Ascoli); thus, his reign is dictated by his own life experience. Moreover, Filostrato is the only ruler to insert his personal experience directly on to his chosen theme (Sherberg). His experience with love has ended unhappily; therefore, Filostrato’s choice of topic is unavoidable. It is natural that Filostrato would choose such a theme just as love and sorrow are natural to the human condition; both love and loss are out of man’s control.

Pampinea’s rejection of the somber theme is emblematic of the man-versus-nature theme surrounding the text. Pampinea is the architect of the diversionary trip to the countryside to escape plague-ridden Florence. She claims that she is “filled with foreboding as if every hair of

[her] head is standing on end,” and she is “haunted by the shades of the departed” (Boccaccio 60). She makes an impassioned and reasoned plea to the other ladies to leave the city to pursue “whatever pleasures and entertainments the present times will afford” (61). In fact, she reiterates this point upon arrival to the country: “A merry life should be our aim, since it was for no other reason that we were prompted to run away from the sorrows of the city” (65). Pampinea’s determination to be happy and to run from the loss that she suffered in the city inspires her resolution as the first queen of the *brigata* to tell only happy tales (Falvo). Filostrato’s unhappy theme, however, directly opposes Pampinea’s plan. Because Pampinea’s goal is happiness, and because the trip is of her design, she defies Filostrato’s theme, and her rejection only highlights the sorrow surrounding the *nobile brigata*.

After Fiammetta tells the first story of Day Four, which “brought tears to the eyes of the other ladies present,” Filostrato chooses Pampinea to tell the next tale (Boccaccio 342). Pampinea believes that “her own feelings were a better guide than the king’s words” and decides to “amuse them [rather] than to satisfy the king in aught of his actual command” (342-343). Instead of telling a sad tale of love, Pampinea decides to tell the comic tale of Friar Alberto, which defies the king’s chosen theme. Even though Friar Alberto’s love story ends badly, which does fit the theme of Filostrato’s reign, the farcical scenes, such as Friar Alberto covered “with downy feathers from head to foot,” and his tricking Monna Lisetta da Cá Quirino into believing that the Angel Gabriel is making love to her with Alberto’s body, focus the tale more on the humor than the tragic ending (352). Filostrato notes that even though the tale’s ending “was not without a modicum of merit,” he believes that “there was far too much matter of a humorous kind in the part that preceded it,” indicating that Pampinea’s defiance of his theme went too far (353). Yet, it is Pampinea who decrees at the beginning of the trip to the country that the *brigata*

elect a new leader each day who “will be at liberty to make whatever arrangements he likes for the period covered by his rule, and to prescribe the place and the manner in which [they] live” (65). She not only defies the rule of Filostrato, but she also breaks her own created social hierarchy in order to preserve her original purpose for the trip to the countryside: to forget the woes of the city. However, she cannot escape the misery left behind by the plague any more than she can escape Filostrato’s theme, thereby demonstrating that human social hierarchy and the individual desires that exist within such a context are no match for nature.

Emilia’s story on the fourth day, on the other hand, links to the theme of man’s inability to control nature through the love affair of Simona and Pasquino. First, the two lovers fall in love and seek a place to consummate their love. Pasquino contrives for the two to meet in a garden where “they could feel more relaxed together and less apprehensive of discovery” (Boccaccio 379). To Pasquino, the garden will provide safety and security for the lovers, for the garden is “characterized by order [. . .] it is nothing if not controlled” (Levenstein 320). Unlike other natural venues such as a forest or a meadow, gardens are in the care of men; they are man’s attempt to control nature. However, while in the garden, Pasquino “turned to a huge clump of sage and detached one of its leaves,” proceeding to “rub his teeth and gums, claiming that the sage prevented food from sticking to the teeth after a meal” (Boccaccio 380). Soon, Pasquino had “a radical change come over his features” and “he lost all power of sight and speech,” quickly thereafter, he dies “covered in swellings and dark blotches” (380). After being blamed for Pasquino’s death, Simona demonstrates for a judge how Pasquino rubbed the sage on his teeth and gums, and she falls to the same fate. The judge demands the sage’s removal, and “an incredibly large toad, by whose venomous breath they realized that the bush must have been poisoned” was found beneath the plant (382). In this story, “every action a character performs

leads to consequences that he cannot control, and the denomination of an entity, [. . .] has contradictory properties and shifty significance” (Mazzotta 154). Just as Balducci tries to manipulate language to dampen his son’s natural desire, Nature dampens the significance of sage with the toad’s venom. In their attempt to fulfill their natural desires in a controlled natural environment, both Simona’s and Pasquino’s actions have results that neither can control.

In the introduction to *The Decameron* and the tale of Simona and Pasquino, Boccaccio highlights the failure of medicine to stop death, reinforcing the notion that attempts to control nature are ineffectual. In the Middle Ages, sage was thought to be a “wonder drug” that “[restores] the balance of nature” (Usher 6). Yet, in the story, this agent of balance does not overcome the toad’s poison, which results in Pasquino’s death. According to Usher, “the idea that sage is the cause of a man’s death “is a statement of the limitations of therapeutic interventions: there are cures for illness but not for death itself” (6). Just as the doctors could not find a cure for the plague, there is no cure for the toad’s poison because the controlled garden is out of balance; the toad’s poison is not supposed to be overcome by the sage. If sage is nature’s way of creating balance, then Pasquino’s death is symbolic of not only the lack of balance of the garden due to man’s attempt to control it, but also of nature’s preeminence over the dominion of man.

The tale of Simona and Pasquino also draws a parallel between the nature of love and loss through the imagery of the plague and Pasquino’s death. Just like the Florentines, who knew that their death was imminent when the *gavóccioli* appear, Pasquino dies shortly after he is “covered in swellings and dark blotches” (Boccaccio 380). The correlation between the symptoms of the plague and Pasquino’s death is further emphasized with three more descriptions of Pasquino’s dead, swollen body. For example, after Stramba discovers Pasquino’s death, and

the people who live near the garden come to see the reason behind the commotion, Pasquino is described as “dead and swollen” (380). Also, when the judge makes Simona go back to the garden, Pasquino, who is still there, is “still swollen up like a barrel” (381). Lastly, as Emilia ends her story, she describes Pasquino’s “swollen body” once more. In many stories, “Boccaccio [employs] the same imagery to describe the effects of lovesickness and the consequences of the plague” (Levenstein 316). However, in the tale of Simona and Pasquino, by using the same imagery to depict a death in a garden, Boccaccio makes a connection between the plague in Florence and the poison in the garden; both locations are created, controlled, and considered by man to be safe, yet there is no place that is safe from death and disease.

Conclusion

In Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, the theme of nature’s power over man is fully realized in Day Four’s introduction, theme, and stories. The theme begins with Boccaccio’s precise and graphic description of the plague in Florence. He goes to great lengths in the introduction to the text to describe the disease and its effects on those infected, as well as to allude to the inability of doctors, clergy, and the law to protect and control the inhabitants of the city during the height of the disease. Then, he introduces the *nobile brigata*, whose sole purpose is to escape the plague-ridden city and divert themselves with stories and entertainment. Just as Giuseppe Mazzotta argues, the plague surrounds the entirety of *The Decameron*, yet in the first three days, the plague is meant to be forgotten. Because the themes of the first three days are of a more festive nature, the plague remains in the background of the text until Day Four.

The day of Filostrato’s reign provides a new introduction to the text that begins to draw a parallel between the force of nature that brought the plague to Florence and the force of nature that controls man’s desire. In addition, Filostrato’s melancholy theme of lost love further

emphasizes the correlation between love, loss, and nature. Because Pampinea is the architect of the escape from the city, and she defines the stories' purpose to forget the sorrow that the *nobile brigata* left behind in Florence, her rejection of Filostrato's theme only magnifies the plague-nature parallel; just as the man-made city of Florence fell into chaos due to the plague, Filostrato's natural inclination to discuss sorrowful events threatens to end her diversionary purpose for the excursion. This parallel is demonstrated further with Emilia's love story of Simona and Pasquino. The deaths in the garden are emblematic of man's inability to control nature while the death by the use of sage shows nature's domination; men can neither control nor define nature's parameters, only nature can. In addition, Boccaccio draws a clear parallel between the nature of the plague, the nature of love, and the nature of death by utilizing the same imagery to describe Pasquino's dead body that he uses to describe the symptoms of the plague on its victims. It is important to understand who Boccaccio's audience is: people who survived the plague and remember its rampage throughout Florence. Day Four is a reminder of those who were loved and lost in the plague, and through Day Four, Boccaccio reminds his ladies that the world is out of man's control. The only way to live is to embrace the desires that arise from being human. To live any other way is unnatural.

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