

Primary Source 2.1 and 4.3

BOCCACCIO, *THE DECAMERON* (ON THE BLACK DEATH)¹

The Black Death, one of the worst pandemics in history, killed 100 million people across Eurasia, including some 30 million in Europe (or one-third of the population in some areas). A high fever, aching limbs, and fatigue marked the early stages of infection; death would follow in less than a week, as the disease (considered to have been the bubonic plague by most scholars) progressed. The plague's effects were devastating on the Asian economies, which fell into a long cyclical decline. Europe's dynamism, by contrast, enabled traders and entrepreneurs to reorient commerce toward the sea, as, new ocean routes opened and navigational technology improved. The continued growth of commerce and the circulation of money undermined feudal economic relations, as did the drastic population losses, which increased the value of labor and enabled millions of serfs to buy their freedom. The landed aristocrats slowly lost power and land to the princes and thriving urban centers, and feudalism started to disintegrate.

*The passages below are taken from *The Decameron*, the masterwork of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), an author, statesman, Renaissance humanist, and the son of a businessman. The book, the first important European work in prose, presents seven young women and three young men who have fled to a country-villa from plague-ridden Florence. For two weeks, the ten companions entertain one another with one hundred stories full of romance and sex and in praise of cleverness and wit. The protagonists are mostly city-dwellers, but elements of aristocratic culture are also present. The tales heap scorn on corrupt priests but also express, earnest piety. The book, in other words, marks a transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.*

The first passage, taken from the Introduction to the first day, describes the ravages of the plague in Florence. The second recounts the story of an honest merchant engaged in overseas trade, who loses everything, then gains more than ever by pure chance. This chain of events exemplifies key elements of the rising commercial, middle-class, post-Black-Death European culture.

*For the full text of *The Decameron*, click [here](#).*

INTRODUCTION.**TO THE LADIES.**

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In the year then of our Lord 1348, there happened at Florence, the finest city in all Italy, a most terrible plague; which, whether owing to the influence of the planets, or that it was sent from God as a just punishment for our sins, had broken

¹ John Payne (ed.), *Stories of Boccaccio (The Decameron)* (London: Published for the Bibliophilist Library, 1903), 1–4, 61–65. For a very recent and more accessible translation, see Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 2013).

out some years before in the Levant,² and after passing from place to place, and making incredible havoc all the way, had now reached the west. There, spite of all the means that art and human foresight could suggest, such as keeping the city clear from filth, the exclusion of all suspected persons, and the publication of copious instructions for the preservation of health; and notwithstanding manifold humble supplications offered to God in processions and otherwise; it began to show itself in the spring of the aforesaid year, in a sad and wonderful manner. Unlike what had been seen in the east, where bleeding from the nose is the fatal prognostic, here there appeared certain tumours in the groin or under the arm-pits, some as big as a small apple, others as an egg; and afterwards purple spots in most parts of the body; in some cases large and but few in number, in others smaller and more numerous—both sorts the usual messengers of death. To the cure of this malady,³ neither medical knowledge nor the power of drugs was of any effect; whether because the disease was in its own nature mortal, or that the physicians (the number of whom, taking quacks and women pretenders into the account, was grown very great) could form no just idea of the cause, nor consequently devise a true method of cure; whichever was the reason, few escaped; but nearly all died the third day from the first appearance of the symptoms, some sooner, some later, without any fever or accessory symptoms. What gave the more virulence to this plague, was that, by being communicated from the sick to the hale,⁴ it spread daily, like fire when it comes in contact with large masses of combustibles. Nor was it caught only by conversing with, or coming near the sick, but even by touching their clothes, or anything that they had before touched. It is wonderful, what I am going to mention; and had I not seen it with my own eyes, and were there not many witnesses to attest it besides myself, I should never venture to relate it, however worthy it were of belief. Such, I say, was the quality of the pestilential⁵ matter, as to pass not only from man to man, but, what is more strange, it has been often known, that anything belonging to the infected, if touched by any other creature, would certainly infect, and even kill that creature in a short space of time. One instance of this kind I took particular notice of: the rags of a poor man just dead had been thrown into the street; two hogs came up, and after rooting amongst the rags, and shaking them about in their mouths, in less than an hour they both turned round and died on the spot.

These facts, and others of the like sort, occasioned various fears and devices amongst those who survived, all tending to the same uncharitable and cruel end; which was, to avoid the sick, and every thing that had been near them, expecting by that means to save themselves. And some holding it best to live temperately, and to avoid excesses of all kinds, made parties, and shut themselves up from the rest of the world; eating and drinking moderately of the best, and diverting themselves with music, and such other entertainments as they might have within doors; never listening to anything from without, to make them uneasy. Others maintained free

² The Eastern Mediterranean.

³ A disease.

⁴ Strong and healthy.

⁵ Destructive to livestock or crops.

living to be a better preservative, and would baulk no passion or appetite they wished to gratify, drinking and revelling incessantly from tavern to tavern, or in private houses (which were frequently found deserted by the owners, and therefore common to every one), yet strenuously avoiding, with all his brutal indulgence, to come near the infected. And such, at that time, was the public distress, that the laws, human and divine, were no more regarded; for the officers, to put them in force, being either dead, sick, or in want of persons to assist them, every one did just as he pleased. A third sort of people chose a method between these two: not confining themselves to rules of diet like the former, and yet avoiding the intemperance⁶ of the latter; but eating and drinking what their appetites required, they walked everywhere with odours and nosegays to smell to; as holding it best to corroborate the brain: for the whole atmosphere seemed to them tainted with the stench of dead bodies, arising partly from the distemper itself, and partly from the fermenting of the medicines within them. Others with less humanity, but perchance, as they supposed, with more security from danger, decided that the only remedy for the pestilence was to avoid it: persuaded, therefore, of this, and taking care for themselves only, men and women in great numbers left the city, their houses, relations, and effects, and fled into the country: as if the wrath of God had been restrained to visit those only within the walls of the city; or else concluding, that none ought to stay in a place thus doomed to destruction.

Thus divided as they were in their views, neither did all die, nor all escape; but falling sick indifferently, as well those of one as of another opinion; they who first set the example by forsaking others, now languished themselves without pity. I pass over the little regard that citizens and relations showed to each other; for their terror was such, that a brother even fled from his brother, a wife from her husband, and, what is more uncommon, a parent from his own child. Hence numbers that fell sick could have no help but what the charity of friends, who were very few, or the avarice⁷ of servants supplied; and even these were scarce and at extravagant wages, and so little used to the business that they were fit only to reach what was called for, and observe when their employer died; and this desire of getting money often cost them their lives. From this desertion of friends, and scarcity of servants, an unheard-of custom prevailed; no lady, however young or handsome, would scruple to be attended by a man-servant, whether young or old it mattered not, and to expose herself naked to him, the necessity of the distemper requiring it, as though it was to a woman; which might make those who recovered, less modest for the time to come. And many lost their lives, who might have escaped, had they been looked after at all. So that, between the scarcity of servants, and the violence of the distemper, such numbers were continually dying, as made it terrible to hear as well as to behold. Whence, from mere necessity, many customs were introduced different from what had been before known in the city.

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⁶ Lack of moderation or restraint.

⁷ Extreme greed for wealth or material gain.

NOVEL IV

Landolfo Ruffolo, falling into poverty, became a pirate, was taken by the Genoese, and suffered shipwreck, but saved himself upon a cask of jewels, was taken out of the sea by a woman at Corfu, and afterwards returned home very rich.

When Pampinea⁸ had finished her tale, Lauretta, who sat next her, at once began thus:—Most kind ladies, there is no greater freak of fortune, in my opinion, than to see one of low condition arrive at princely dignity, as Pampinea has just showed us in the case of Alessandro. Now since it is ruled that each of us is to narrate something having direct reference to the prescribed theme, I shall not scruple to relate a story comprising greater hardships than the former, but not having, indeed, so glorious an end. I am sensible that, in this respect, I shall be listened to with the less interest; but, as I am able to give you no better, I hope you will excuse me.

It is generally admitted, that the seacoast from Reggio to Gaeta is the pleasantest part of Italy; that part of it near Salerno, which the inhabitants call the Coast of Malfi, is full of little towns, gardens, rivulets, and abounds with rich people expert at merchandise. Amongst the rest there is a town called Ravello, in which were many wealthy persons, and one especially, called Landolfo Ruffolo, who, not content with his great store, but willing to make it double, was near losing all he had, and his life also. This man, having settled his affairs, as other merchants are used to do, bought a large ship, and freighting it all on his own account, set sail for the island of Cyprus. He there found many ships laden with the very same commodities as his own, consequently it was necessary for him not only to make a quick market of his goods, but also, if he meant to dispose of them at all, to sell them for a trifle, to his great loss and almost ruin. Grieving much thereat, and hardly knowing what to do, seeing that from great wealth he was reduced almost to poverty, he resolved either to die, or to repair his losses by plunder,⁹ rather than go back a poor man to the home from which he had come away so wealthy. Meeting with a purchaser for his great ship, with the money made of that and his merchandise he bought a light little vessel fit for a pirate, and armed and furnished it with everything suitable, intending to make other people's goods his own, and especially those of the Turks. Fortune was abundantly more favourable to him in this way of life than she had been in trade; for, in the space of a year, he took so many Turkish prizes, that he found he had not only got his own again, but made it more than double.

Being now comforted for his former loss, and thinking he had enough, he resolved, for fear of a second disaster, to make the best of his way home with what he had acquired; and, as he was still fearful of trade, he had no mind to employ any more of his money that way, but set sail in the little vessel in which he had gained it. He was now in the Archipelago, when at nightfall a sirocco, or great south-east wind, arose, directly contrary to their intended course, which made such a sea that the

⁸ Ruler of the first village where they stay.

⁹ The plague had cause great losses in commodities that were used for trade.

ship could not bear up against it, and they were glad to get into a bay under the cover of a little island, to wait for better weather.

Landolfo had just entered the harbour when two Genoese caracks¹⁰ came in from Constantinople to avoid the same storm; and, as soon as the men in them saw the small bark,¹¹ they blocked her in, and on ascertaining that she belonged to an owner whom they knew to be very rich; as men addicted to plunder and rapine, they resolved to make her their prize. Landing some of their men, therefore, well armed with crossbows and other weapons, they posted them so as to prevent any of the crew issuing out of the bark, unless at the cost of their lives; whilst the rest getting into the long-boat, and the sea being favourable, soon boarded Landolfo's vessel, and took all his people, and everything in it, without the loss of a man, leaving him nothing but a waistcoat; and after they had cleared out the vessel, they sank her. The day following, the wind having shifted, they made all sail for the west, and had a good voyage all that day; but night coming on, the wind became boisterous again, and the storm was such that the two caracks were parted, whilst that wherein poor Landolfo was, drove with the utmost violence upon the coast of Cephalonia,¹² and was smashed like a glass flung against a wall. The sea being covered in a moment with all sorts of merchandise, and with chests, tables, and fragments of the wreck, all those of the crew who could swim strove, in spite of the darkness and the fury of the waves, to lay hold of such things as chanced to float near them. Amongst these was the unfortunate Landolfo, who, though he had wished for death a thousand times the day before, rather than return home a beggar, was terrified now that he saw death at hand, and got hold of a plank, like the rest, in hopes that if his fate were delayed, God would send him some means for his escape. Bestriding the plank as well as he could, and driven to and fro by the wind, he supported himself till daylight; and then looking around him he could see nothing but clouds and water, and a chest driving towards him, to his great alarm, for sometimes it came so near that he was afraid it would dash against him, and then he would endeavour, with the little strength he had left, to put it by with his hand; at length a great blast of wind sent it with such violence against the plank on which he floated, as to upset it, and plunge him over head and ears into the water. He rose again, however, and swimming with the strength of fear rather than with his own, he found himself at such a distance from the plank that he was afraid he could not recover it. Getting therefore to the chest, which was nearer, he laid his breast upon it as well as he could, and used his arms for paddles. In this manner was he carried up and down, with nothing to eat, but drinking more than he desired, neither knowing where he was, nor seeing anything but water for a day and a night.

The next morning (whether it was through God or the force of the winds) Landolfo, who was well nigh become a sponge, grappling the chest with both arms, with the usual tenacity of drowning men, drew near to the island of Corfu, at a spot where, by good fortune, a poor woman was scouring her dishes with salt water and sand. When she saw him approach, and could discover in him nothing in the shape

¹⁰ A three-or-four-mast sailing ship developed in the 15th century.

¹¹ A small ship.

¹² The largest of the Ionian Islands in western Greece.

of man, she screamed, and started back in terror. He was too exhausted to be able to speak, and scarcely could he see much; but as the waves carried him towards the shore, the woman could distinguish the shape of the chest. Looking more narrowly, she saw an arm laid over it, and then a face, and knew at once what was the matter. Moved by compassion, she stepped a little way into the sea, which was now calm, and seizing the half drowned wretch by the hair of his head, drew both him and the chest to land, where, with much trouble, she unfolded his arms from the chest, which she set upon the head of her daughter, who was with her. She herself carried Landolfo like a little child to the town, put him on a stove, and chafed and washed him with warm water, by which means the vital warmth began to return, and his strength partially revived. In due time she took him from the stove, comforted him with wine and good cordials,¹³ and kept him some days till he knew where he was; she then restored him his chest, and told him he might now provide for his departure.

He had forgotten all about the chest, but took it from the hands of the woman, supposing that, small as its worth might be, it might serve for his support for a short time. Finding it very light, he was somewhat disheartened; however, whilst the good woman was out of the way, he broke it open, and found a great quantity of precious stones, some of which were polished and set. Having some judgment in such matters, and seeing that these gems were of immense value, he was now thoroughly comforted, and praised God for not having yet forsaken him. However, as he had been twice buffeted by fortune already, and was fearful of a third mishap, he judged that great caution was requisite to bring these things safe home; he wrapped them up, therefore, in old rags, as well as he could, and told the woman that he had no further use for the chest, but that she might keep it if she would give him a sack in its stead, which she was very glad to do. And now, returning her a thousand thanks, he departed with his sack over his shoulder, and passed over in a bark to Brundisi, and thence to Trani, where he met with merchants of his own town, who clothed him out of charity, after he had told them all that had befallen him, only omitting all mention of the cask of jewels. They also lent him a horse, and sent company with him to Ravello, whither he said he wished to return. Arriving there in safety, he gave thanks to God; and now he inquired more narrowly into his sack than he had done before, and found so many valuable jewels, that, rating them at the lowest prices, he was twice as rich as when he left home. Finding means, therefore, to dispose of them, he sent a sum of money to the woman at Corfu, who had taken him out of the sea, and treated him so kindly; and also to the merchants at Trani for clothing him; the remainder he kept, without having any more mind to trade, and lived handsomely upon it the rest of his life.

¹³ Liqueurs.