



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Giovanni Boccaccio, Effects of the Black Death on Florence, in *Decameron* (1350–1353)

Boccaccio's famous *Decameron* is a collection of 100 humorous short stories. In some ways, this anthology is the Italian counterpart to an equally famous collection of vignettes, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, also written during the second half of the fourteenth century. In fact, Chaucer seems to have borrowed some of his stories from the salacious tales of Boccaccio. More than does Chaucer, however, Boccaccio sets the semi-fictional society of the *Decameron* in a world of poetry and music. The importance of these arts in *Decameron* is discussed toward the end of Chapter 14. Moreover, Boccaccio's *Decameron* differs from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in that it came about as a direct response to the horrific events of the Black Plague (1348–1350). According to Boccaccio's narrative, this pestilence compelled a group of young friends, seven women and three men, to flee death-ridden Florence into the salubrious air of the nearby Tuscan hills, where they enjoyed a carefree life, delighting in the arts. Back in Florence, however, people were dying at a terrifying rate, as Boccaccio describes. In reading this passage it becomes apparent that people in Boccaccio's day had little understanding of how disease was spread; the citizens of the day attributed the plague as much to an unfavorable alignment of the planets, or to divine wrath, as to a biological virus.

The following excerpts from the "The First Day" of Boccaccio's *Decameron* have little to do with music but a great deal to do with life. Never in literary history has such a catastrophic event been chronicled more vividly by someone who experienced it firsthand. As you read this, think about the devastating natural disasters that have plagued the world in recent times (the tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina of 2005 and that in Myanmar in 2008, for example). Think about how people reacted, how governments did or did not react, and how you personally might react in the face of a sudden breakdown of all law and order, and all morality. The Black Plague was the low point of what has been called "the calamitous fourteenth century," and it typifies the violent, unpredictable tenor of medieval life.

I say, then, that the years of the beatific incarnation of the Son of God had reached the tale of one thousand three hundred and forty-eight, when in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly pestilence, which, whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities, had its origin some years before in the East, whence, after destroying an innumerable multitude of living beings, it had propagated itself without respite from place to place, and so, calamitously, had spread into the West.

In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble supplications addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise, by the devout; toward the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent by symptoms that showed as if miraculous.

Not such were they as in the East, where an issue of blood from the nose was a manifest sign of inevitable death; but in men and women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less, which the common

folk called *gavoccioli* [tumors]. From the two said parts of the body this deadly *gavocciolo* soon began to propagate and spread itself in all directions indifferently; after which the form of the malady began to change, black spots or livid making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere, now few and large, now minute and numerous. And the *gavocciolo* had been and still was an infallible token of approaching death, such as were these spots on whomsoever they showed themselves. Which maladies seemed to set entirely at naught both the art of the physician and the virtues of physic; indeed, whether it was that the disorder was of a nature to defy such treatment, or that the physicians were at fault—beside the qualified there was now a multitude both of men and of women who practiced without having received the slightest tincture of medical science—and, being in ignorance of its source, failed to apply the proper remedies; in either case, not merely were those that who recovered few, but almost all within three days from the appearance of the said symptoms, sooner or later, died, and in most cases without any fever or other attendant malady. . . .

So marvelous sounds that which I have no to relate, that, had not many, and I among them, observed it with their own eyes, I had hardly dared to credit it, much less to set it down in writing, though I had had it from the lips of a credible witness.

I say, then that such as the energy of the contagion of the said pestilence, that it was not merely propagated from man to man, but, what is much more startling, it was frequently observed, that things which had belonged to one sick or dead of the disease, if touched by some other living creature, not of the human species, were the occasion, not merely of sickening, but of an almost instantaneous death. Whereof my own eyes (as I said a little before) had cognizance, one day among others, but the following experience. The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being strewn about the open street, two hogs came thither, and after, as is their wont, no little trilling with their snouts, took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro about their chaps; whereupon, almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags which in an evil hour they had disturbed.

In which circumstances . . . were engendered in the minds of such as were left alive, linking almost all of them to the same harsh resolution, to wit, to shun and abhor all contact with the sick and all that belonged to them, thinking thereby to make each his own health secure.

Among whom there were those who thought that to live temperately and avoid all excess would count for much as a preservative against seizures of this kind. Wherefore they banded together, and, dissociating themselves from all others, formed communities in houses where there were no sick, and lived a separate and secluded life, which they regulated with the utmost care, avoiding every kind of luxury, but eating and drinking very moderately of the most delicate viands and the finest wines, holding converse with none but one another, lest tidings of sickness or death should reach them, and diverting their minds with music and such other delights as they could devise.

Others, the bias of whose minds was in the opposite direction, maintained, that to drink freely, frequent places of public resort, and take their pleasure with song and revel, sparing to satisfy no appetite, and to laugh and mock at no event, was the sovereign remedy for so great an evil: and that which they affirmed they also put in practice, so far as they were able, resorting day and night, now to this tavern, now to that, drinking with an entire disregard of rule or measure, and by preference making the houses of others, as it were their inns, if they but saw in them anything that was particularly to their taste or liking; which they were readily able to do because the owners, seeing death imminent, had become as reckless of their property as of their lives; so that most of the houses were open to all comers, and no distinction was observed between the stranger who presented himself and the rightful lord. Thus, adhering ever to their inhuman determination to shun the sick, as far as possible, they ordered their life. In this extremity of our city's suffering and tribulation the venerable authority of laws, human and divine, was abased and all but totally dissolved, for lack of those who should have administered

and enforced them, most of whom, like the rest of the citizens, were either dead or sick . . . whereby every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes. . . .

The condition of the lower, and, perhaps, in a great measure of the middle ranks, of the people showed even worse and more deplorable; folk deluded by hope or constrained by poverty, they stayed in their quarters, in their houses, where they sickened by thousands a day, and, being without service or help of any kind, were, so to speak, irredeemably devoted to the death which overtook them. Many died daily or nightly in the public streets; of many others, who died at home, the departure was hardly observed by their neighbors, until the stench of their putrefying bodies carried the tidings; and what with their corpses and the corpses of others who died on every hand the whole place was a sepulcher.

Source: Translated by J. M. Rigg, *Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio* (1903), pp. 5–12.