

How Fiction Can Help Us Navigate the Pandemic

The *Decameron* and the Black Death

By Chandra Mukerji

During the Black Plague, Boccaccio's *Decameron* provided readers ways to laugh through the pandemic. A few centuries later, a new kind of pandemic strikes: with Covid-19, the world as we knew it seems forever changed. Can fiction help us imagine new ways of existing together in times of uncertainty?

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It is difficult living with an abiding sense of vulnerability, confronting daily evidence of death, moral weakness, political incompetence, and economic decline. But this is life in a pandemic. It requires not only withdrawing from social life but also managing the sense of dread. Believable knowledge is hard to find; so too is effective leadership. And sectors of the economy collapse, one after the other. Stories matter in these times, holding up the power of imagination and of memory against everyday threats. Laughter matters too: turning human vulnerability into jokes makes the daily indignities less onerous. Jokes are tools for letting go of what has been, and imagination is necessary for facing a future that cannot be predicted. That is why in

the 14th century—on the heels of the Black Death—Giovanni Boccaccio turned to storytelling, in his writing of the *Decameron*.

Laughing Through the Black Plague with Boccaccio

When faced with a pandemic, Boccaccio learned—as we have—that people do not need new moral principles to guide them, but rather means to invent new lives, find inner strength, and laugh off the horror of loss. Boccaccio understood that the plague was a cause and a signal of an old world passing and a new world coming into being. So, in the *Decameron*, he offered one hundred preposterous, often funny, wise, and risqué tales of human vulnerability and strength. Reading the *Decameron* in the 14th century was comparable to binge-watching Netflix during COVID-19, but the earlier collection had a curatorial sense of purpose. More than just an escape, the *Decameron* used the power of fiction to conjure up modern subjects with the freedom and responsibility of self-invention.

Where did this new self that Boccaccio trumpeted in the *Decameron* come from? He was a man of letters and a student of history. He could have written a philosophical tome on death and fate. Instead, he chose to use popular stories to laugh at the social hierarchies that were crumbling and to imagine new ways of being in the world. In much of southern Europe, 50 to 60 percent of the population died from the Black Death. For survivors, there was no chance of picking up old habits and social ties. Families were lost, and so was faith in God. There were few peasants to bring in the harvest, and artisans died with the secrets of their trades. Those who survived found themselves socially untethered and became modern subjects—our forebearers—depending on their wits and imagination to survive.

Boccaccio provided readers ways to think about living without a social fabric, telling stories that revealed and championed a form of individualism that we understand now as modern. He did so by presenting life as a product of personal choices with long-standing consequences, none of which can be fully anticipated. The *Decameron's* characters navigate a world of human venality, duplicity, and stupidity. They can choose to embrace those weaknesses or instead try to create a sense of dignity and self-worth through introspection. Indeed, most of the folk stories Boccaccio employs are cautionary tales rather than exemplary ones. They describe wayward

priests, horny gardeners, enamored kidnappers, hoodwinked travelers, clumsy bandits, clever pirates, virtuous cross-dressers, unfaithful spouses, and stupid monks. They are funny because no one—no matter their station in the old feudal order—is exempted from ridicule.

Moreover, the stories are poignant because they describe a new kind of suffering: the pain of survivors left on their own. Boccaccio avoids talking of the plague but tells tales of those forced to live by their wits as they are drawn from home by travel, trade, war, theft, kidnapping, deception, or marriage. They become modern social subjects, forced to invent new selves and lives.

Boccaccio warns his readers at the start of the *Decameron* that he has to offend their sensibilities by describing terrible scenes of suffering and interpersonal betrayal brought on by the Black Death in Florence. The afflicted were terrified when huge bulbous growths appeared under their arms and in their groins, followed by black marks that spread across their bodies. But although the plague disfigured people before they died, in a sense, it disfigured the social order more. Most of the ill suffered alone. Leaders abandoned them, robbers stole from them, family members withdrew to protect themselves, and clerics fled, revealing their lack of faith and love. The birth of modern individualism began with the dissolution of a feudal order by illness, made more terrible by human weakness.

Social Invention

As we, heirs to Boccaccio's modernity, face a new pandemic today, there is much to learn from the *Decameron*. Fewer people may die from COVID-19 than from the Black Death, but even so—then as now—all the major systems of power (political, economic, and discursive) are failing. We do not know what further changes the disease will bring; we hear lies and contradictory statements from political leaders; and all the efforts to hold the economy together are failing. It is a process of change that we cannot stop.

But it is a transformation requiring social invention too. Unlike Boccaccio's young binge-listening heroes, we face a shared fate to which individualism is *not* the answer, a crisis to which we *cannot* respond alone. Now, in the 21st century, we can clearly see how individualism failed to address the common good, just as, in the 14th

century, Boccaccio saw the failure of the state and Church to define the common good according to principles of moral order. Like the characters in the *Decameron*, we need to reach beyond the limits of our era's common sense to collectively imagine what to do next.

The premise of the *Decameron* is that ten young people—seven women and three men—decide to go and stay alive or die in the countryside, as the Black Death is sweeping through Florence. The women, who are friends, agree to leave together. But, since they want male companionship and protection, they recruit three men to join them. (None of the men has a positive reason to stay in Florence, and all three think the women's invitation is attractively risqué.) These children of privilege know of a country villa where they can live away from the pandemic. They have servants too, to carry their things and tend to their needs. For this group of young, healthy, and beautiful men and women, the move from city to country is a romp. Still, it is a move born of terror: a way to escape a social world collapsing around them, without any assurances about the future.

Once safely in the countryside, in a house amply endowed with rooms and comfortable beds, the young Florentines create their own improvised social fabric. Each day, they playfully crown a queen or king to rule the following day, and to provide servants who offer food and drink at the requisite times and places. Political and economic order thus established, the king or queen chooses a theme for the stories of the day that all must tell. They are instructed to use their imaginations rather than reason, becoming authors of fictions rather than authorities over facts and values. Instead of speaking about the plague or God, they describe personal choices, inventing characters and narratives. In the process, they become modern social subjects.

A World Turned Upside Down

The first day's stories provide a chance to laugh at the Church, whose authority is being destroyed by the pandemic. The tales are biting and hilarious rejections of conventional ideas of moral character, a portrait of a world turned upside down. A story ridiculing sainthood describes a con man's trip to Burgundy to negotiate a deal for a rich and powerful French merchant. This agent is staying at the home of one of the merchant's friends and falls sick. His host becomes uneasy because he does not want to throw out a dying man, but if this disreputable guest dies—and is refused a

grave in the Church—the host's reputation for honesty will be tarnished. The con man reassures him and asks for a monk from a nearby monastery to take his confession. The dying man presents himself as such an honest and worthy Christian that the monastery agrees to bury his body. The con man dies and is buried as promised. And he is venerated as a saint when stories of his virtue begin to circulate. This is only possible, Boccaccio implies, because the Church does not grasp what it means to be holy or virtuous.

In a similar vein, another story questions the sexual purity of allegedly holy men. It is the tale of a monk “whose virility and youth could not be lessened by fasts or by vigils.” Out walking one day, he encounters a beautiful woman and asks her to come to his cell. They make love, but he hears footsteps outside. Worrying that it is the abbot, the young monk sets a trap. He locks the girl in his cell, gives the abbot his keys, and says he has to go fetch firewood. The abbot finds the girl, and wanting to have some fun himself—even though he is an aging and corpulent man—he puts her on top of him to have sex. The young monk watches through a hole in the wall and develops a clever story to protect himself. He tells the abbot that now that he understands that women are supposed to be on top during sex with a monk, he will sin no more and act only as he has seen the abbot act. He ridicules the rule-bound nature of Church ideas of sin this way, and saves himself by doing so.

The stories from the first day all illustrate the stupidity and veniality of people in authority and the practical nature of doing good. Virtue is situational and relational. Desire is a life force that is only *misconstrued* as a sin. Moral decisions are contingent for the storytellers of the *Decameron*: individuals take responsibility for their own morality, just as the people of Florence had to do amid the institutional breakdown caused by the plague.

Shifts of Fate

On the second day, the theme is Fortune, good and bad. If the first day provides means for laughing at the dying social structure, the second day addresses the problem of facing a future without a viable social fabric and moral order. The stories address the terrible or wondrous turns of fate on which the survival of the protagonists depends. Removed by trade and travel from their homes and habits—and without the

protection of the former society—they confront shifts of fate on their own. The world is not kind, and are all tested by what they do next.

In one story, a daughter of the sultan of Babylon is sent by ship to marry the king of Algarve. Her vessel is caught in a tempest, and she is presumed drowned. In fact, the ship is grounded, and she is taken by a gentleman to his estate where they begin a very pleasant affair. But the man's younger brother, smitten by her beauty, captures the lady and takes her away on a ship. She finds solace in his arms, but the two ship owners now want her, so they throw her lover overboard. Then they fight; there are more murders, more lovers, and some war. But the woman maintains a reputation for chastity, since no one ever speaks against her. Finally, when her father finds out she is alive, he sends a ship to take her to the king of Algarve to be married as originally planned. The story ends with a common saying, "A mouth which is kissed does not lose its good fortune; on the contrary, it is renewed like the moon." Here, defiance of the old order—as well as deft decisions about when to tell the truth—protect a woman at the mercy of a changing world.

Fidelity takes another form in the ninth story of Fortune's day. A good woman from Genoa is falsely accused of adultery. Her husband sends her into the woods to be killed, but the servant burdened with the awful task agrees to trade clothes with her instead. She cuts her hair and proceeds to live as a man. After many travels and adventures, she becomes a servant to the sultan. In his court, she encounters the man who falsely accused her. She schemes to have her husband come to court, where she accuses the betrayer publicly. Asked by the sultan how she knows of the woman's fidelity, she reveals herself and shows that she has preserved herself for her husband by living as a man. The sultan has the liar brutally eaten alive by insects, dresses the wife beautifully in women's clothes, and gives her the liar's estate to compensate her. The couple is reunited, and they return to Genoa rich. The woman has lied about her identity, but gains a reputation for moral constancy by enacting the role of a man to protect her chastity. Her strength is a modern one, learning to perform a social identity for advantage.

By the third day of the *Decameron*, whose theme is the flux between gain and loss, new visitors, potentially carrying the plague, are feared to be approaching their villa, so the group decamps for a more remote spot. The new locale is a paradise. The garden has a secluded lawn dotted with wildflowers and a central fountain where wild animals approach humans without fear. It is a Garden of Eden: farther from the plague but closer to the afterlife. This liminal space between earth and heaven is a place to

examine more carefully the social fabric. The apparently holiness of the site does not prevent “low” storytelling; quite the opposite. The world outside their paradise seems all the more a place of tricksters, rapists, kidnappers, and overlords, where human honesty is rare and self-knowledge is key to living well.

The importance of self-knowledge is particularly clear in the story of Masetto, a man who pretends to be a deaf-mute to become the gardener in a convent. He reasons that his affliction will gain him sympathy and he can have sex with the nuns. His desires are almost immediately fulfilled. The nuns think no one will detect their intercourse with a strapping young man who is mute. Even the abbess wants sex with him. He is exhausted by the effort and breaks his silence to confess to the abbess. Being good-hearted as well as sexually satisfied, she puts him on a schedule so he can do the gardening and service them all in a more orderly fashion.

In giving up something valuable—his voice—Masetto has gained much. Moreover, the moral order that the abbess creates is a modern one: the product of balancing the needs and desires of individuals, rather than insisting on moral strictures that no one can obey.

From Modern Individualism to Solidarity

Boccaccio’s book touched people precisely because it addressed the human weaknesses that haunted them: fear, terror, hatred, desire, disillusionment, and grief. He drew many of the stories from old forms of popular culture where the normative order was routinely satirized, but repurposed them to describe possible futures. At the time, he was roundly criticized for his low themes and amoral characters. After all, he was an educated man, a scholar and friend of the great Petrarch.

But stories allowed Boccaccio to present life in motion. Events in the tales were historical and contingent, testing and challenging individuals. Ordinary people in these fictions faced futures they could control but had still to confront. And Boccaccio’s highborn protagonists examined their fates virtually through these stories of others. In the process, they entertained and elaborated a nascent form of modern pragmatism and moral contingency. So Boccaccio’s concerns were worldly and personal, rather than high minded. But this was not because he was a shallow man. It was instead

because—like Petrarch—he wanted to usher in a modernity that he himself did not fully understand.

Today, the world Boccaccio helped invent is under threat from a new pandemic. COVID-19 reveals the dynamics of the global economy and patterns of cosmopolitan travel that have spread disease around the world and tied us to one another in fear. Where the Black Death was reason to cultivate individualism—freeing people to seek their fortunes and suffer their own fates—our own pandemic leads to opposite conclusions—emphasizing our need to help one another.

We may be still modern and place our hopes in modern medicine. But modern individualism—which we owe, in part, to Boccaccio—is not enough to keep us alive. New surveys show that people in the US think health care should be a common good and those who take health risks should be compensated. The principles of profit-seeking in the modern political economy are becoming less important than social responsibility. Our fates are linked through the pandemic; we are part of the same social fabric even if we do not recognize it.

Those who are sewing masks for doctors and neighbors understand that as modern individuals, we are still responsible for our future. But our future depends on what we stitch together.

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