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Community, Survival, and the Arts in the Boccaccian Tradition

SPECIAL COLLECTION: UNMASKING THE RED DEATH

ARTICLES - COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This essay brings Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" into dialogue with Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a fourteenth-century Italian text. Though different in scale, both texts start with an experience of plague and follow a group of people who withdraw into a restricted community to survive the disease through art. The outcomes are wildly different, however: death, for Poe's characters; a return to their homes, for Boccaccio's. Firstly, I consider Boccaccio's text for its justification of the characters' decision to escape the city, their manner of living together, and their stories' content. Crucial here is that the *Decameron* is, in its fuller title, "cognominato Prencipe Galeotto" [*surnamed Prince Galehaut*], an Arthurian and Dantean reference that highlights art's potential to be morally dangerous. Secondly, I examine Poe's story as a kind of tragic, deviant *Decameron*, lacking the reason, order, and constraints that Boccaccio stresses in the construction of his ideal community. I read Poe's Prince as another Galehaut: a seductive intermediary who leads his followers via art to death. Thirdly, I reflect on our experience of a student–staff book club at SELCS in UCL, to consider what sort of story-telling community we created in the time of Covid-19, in the wake of this Boccaccian tradition. Ultimately, I see our activities as having been most similar to a third text, Marguerite de Navarre's Boccaccio-inspired *Heptaméron*, given Marguerite's reflections on the role of art in a crisis and the unfinished nature of her text.

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The ostensible connections between Edgar Allan Poe's mid-nineteenth-century short story "The Masque of the Red Death" and Giovanni Boccaccio's mid-fourteenth-century *Decameron* are striking.[1] Each text narrates a deadly plague from which a select, aristocratic group retreats to a better place in order to devote themselves to music, dancing, and—in Boccaccio's version—storytelling. Yet these evident affinities mask equally significant differences between the two texts, whether on a formal level (Poe's one short story versus Boccaccio's one hundred tales set within a frame narrative focused on the ten narrators of these tales) or in terms of genre. Boccaccio's so-called "human comedy"—definable as such according to the medieval convention that comedy has a "grim opening" (Boccaccio 6) and a "prosperous" end (Dante, "Epistola X", 349)—is starkly opposed to Poe's gothic tale, with its grim, unprosperous conclusion.[2] Both texts start under a similarly pestilential cloud, but the eventual outcome is quite different: "Darkness and Decay and the Red Death" (304) for all Poe's characters; home-coming for Boccaccio's story-tellers. In order to understand these different outcomes for each community, I argue for a more general contrast between, on the one hand, order, moderation, and cooperation in Boccaccio and, on the other hand, disorder, excess, and autocracy in Poe.

In the first part of this essay I analyse the set-up of Boccaccio's frame narrative for its justification of the actions and decisions of the seven ladies and three gentlemen who make up this particular community of story-tellers. Yet, against this impulse to justify, I also interrogate the "surname" of the *Decameron*, "Prencipe Galeotto" or Prince Galehaut, an Arthurian and Dantean figure that casts doubt on the claimed benefits of exposure to literature. The second part of the essay turns to Poe's "Masque", in order to show that Poe's short story is based on opposing principles to that of the *Decameron*. Nonetheless, Poe's own prince, Prospero, does bear a certain relation to the medieval Galehaut, in terms not only of his social status but also of his position as an intermediary to pleasure. Finally, I consider the structure of our SELCS (School of European Languages, Culture and Society) Summer Book Club at UCL in light of these two examples, ultimately turning to a final text in the Boccaccian tradition that lies in between Boccaccio and Poe: Marguerite de Navarre's sixteenth-century *Heptaméron*. Our book club was closer to Boccaccio's ordered structure of shared leadership than to the despotism of Poe's tale, but it is ultimately the unfinished nature of the *Heptaméron* and its presentation of stories as an antidote to *ennui* that I find most compelling as a point of comparison for our project.

1. BOCCACCIO ON THE DEFENSIVE

The stories of the *Decameron* are surrounded by a frame narrative that introduces the ten story-tellers and at points intervenes to justify the stories in terms of their language and content but also with regard to the morality of story-telling during a time of plague (in this case, the year 1348). The first day of the *Decameron* begins with a narrative of the plague that has ravaged Florence and an explanation of the formation of the "happy band" (21) of seven women and three men who decide to retreat together from the city. The *Decameron* opens with a famous assertion of the need for compassion: "It is inherently human to show pity [*compassione*] to those who are afflicted" (3). Yet the description of the plague shows a striking lack of compassion, with the fear of contagion so great that family members abandon one another, mourning customs are suspended, and mass burials become commonplace.

Boccaccio outlines different behavioural decisions during the plague, with some thinking that moderation will save them and others abandoning themselves to excess:

> There were some who inclined to the view that if they followed a temperate life-style and eschewed all extravagance they should be well able to keep such an epidemic at bay. So they would form into a group and withdraw on their own to closet themselves in a house free of all plague-victims; here they would enjoy the good life, partaking of the daintiest fare and the choicest of wines—all in the strictest moderation—and shunning all debauchery; they would refrain from speaking to anyone or from gleaning any news from outside that related to deaths or plague-victims—rather did

1 I do not consider here the more technical question of possible influence and the evidence for this influence, but refer the reader instead to an article on the related question "Did Poe read Dante?" (Mathews). On Boccaccio in English more generally, and especially with attention to translation history, see Armstrong.

2 The attribution of the "Letter to Cangrande", cited here, to Dante is still debated. For further discussion of the term "comedy", see Agamben.

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> they bask in music and such other pleasures as were at their disposal. Others found the contrary view more enticing, that the surest remedy to a disease of this order was to drink their fill, have a good time, sing to their hearts' content, live it up, give free rein to their appetites—and make light of all that was going on. (8–9)

The narrator is most critical, however, of those who, "deserted their city and with it their homes and neighbourhoods, their families and possessions, heedless of anything but their own skins, and made for other people's houses or for their country estates at any rate" (9–10). This is an unsettling backdrop against which to introduce the "happy band", especially in light of our own experience of lockdown during Covid-19, with fears of wealthy city-dwellers fleeing to their second homes in the country and spreading the virus further. Pampinea attempts to ward off accusations of dereliction of duty by noting their lack of familial ties to Florence: "'we're not deserting anybody, if I'm not mistaken; [...] our families have [...] either died or run away from death'" (17). Yet our suspicions and concerns as readers are perhaps not so easily placated, especially since we are likely to question the limitations of this understanding of social bonds and responsibility as based solely on familial connections.

The noble company of ten decide to retreat together to a *locus amoenus*:

> a mansion built round a lovely spacious courtyard; it comprised loggias, public rooms, and bedrooms, each one of which was exquisitely decorated with charming paintings. The house was ringed with splendid gardens and meadows, there were wells of the freshest water and cellars filled with the choicest of wines. (19–20)

The polysyndeton (the repeated conjunction "and", partly lost in translation here) captures the luxury of this situation, although the description also has a sense of structure and order, from the central courtyard to the multiple but seemingly identical rooms—the inspiration for Prospero's suite?—and the balance between inside and outside, water and wine. This same sense of structure and order also reigns in the routine established by the ten storytellers. In inviting the others to leave with her, Pampinea promises that they will act "without overdoing anything" (17), or, more literally: "without exceeding in any act the sign of reason" [*senza trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione*].[3] Once they have arrived, Pampinea seeks to establish rules about how the company will use their time together, on the understanding that—in her words—"'anything that's going to last must have prescribed limits'" (20).

Pampinea's proposal, accepted by the others, is a seemingly egalitarian one according to which each of the ten will be the sovereign for the day and preside over the company:

> "it seems to me that, if we want to prolong our enjoyment, we shall have to appoint one of our number as our leader, someone to honour and obey as our sovereign; that person's entire concern will have to be to assure us of happy days. Now to ensure that each one of us experiences both the cares and the privileges of office, weighing the one against the other, and finding therefore no occasion for envy, I suggest that the burden and the honour be bestowed upon each of us for a day." (20)

Pampinea is crowned queen for the first day, and she reiterates the principles upon which their community is founded: "'I will be the first to set you all an example to ensure that we conduct our affairs in an orderly and agreeable manner, constantly improving our situation and avoiding any taint of scandal'" (21).[4]

The community of the *Decameron* defends itself from potential accusations of scandal by being founded upon reason, shared leadership, and highly regulated pleasure. Yet their actions remain open to scrutiny, especially given the overall framework of the *Decameron*. While Boccaccio is very careful to surround his tales with these justifications, he also brazenly sets himself up to be attacked by his choice of subtitle: "*the book called* Decameron, *known also as the* Book of Prince Galehaut" (more literally, "surnamed Galehaut" [*cognominato Galeotto*]), an identification that is asserted at both the start and the end of the text (3; 686). The term

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3 This "trapassar del segno" ("trespassing the boundary line") is the analysis of the sin of Adam and Eve in *Paradiso* XXVI, v. 117, and is usually read in a Ulyssean light (see Barolini). On Boccaccio's concern with reason see Kirkham.

4 The triadic list of nouns is clearer in the original: "*con ordine e con piacere e senza alcuna vergogna*" (28).

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"Galeotto" reaches Boccaccio via Dante, in particular through the famous story of Paolo and Francesca, who end up murdered and condemned to the circle of the lustful in *Inferno* for their adulterous relationship.[5] Francesca describes how their love was facilitated by reading together the Arthurian tale of Lancelot and Guinevere. In this tale, Galehaut is the character who brings the lovers together. In Francesca's retelling, the enabling intermediary becomes not a character but rather the book in general and also its author; in her words, "A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it" (Dante, *Inferno* V, v. 137). Through this pithy assertion, Francesca blames literature for what happened. Yet Francesca is also a famously unreliable narrator, using all her rhetorical charms to seduce first Dante-pilgrim, who faints out of pity on hearing these words, and then centuries of readers who have wanted to rescue her from Hell.

In light of this Dantean intertext, critics have argued at length over the interpretation of the "Galeotto" in Boccaccio's title.[6] On the one hand, it is feasible that Boccaccio is challenging Dante by seeking to rehabilitate the word through his suggestion of the positive effects of literature.[7] Consonant with this view is Boccaccio's framing of his text in the "Author's Foreword" and "Afterword" as explicitly addressed to ladies who are stuck at home bored and in love, so that they might find distraction and consolation. On the other hand, "Galeotto" cannot but suggest the dangers of reading. As Aldo S. Bernardo writes quite starkly, "one can only conclude from Boccaccio's subtitle that his book, too, may be an instrument of death and destruction if not read with care" (40). Bernardo's caveat points to a crucial part of Boccaccio's presentation: that is, his argument that responsibility lies with the reader rather than with the author. In the words of the *Decameron*'s "Author's Afterword", "whether those stories […] prove wholesome or noxious depends entirely on the hearer" (683).

By citing so overtly from Dante's Francesca, Boccaccio courts controversy and places questions about the morality of reading and literature at the very start (and end) of his work. Poe's story lacks the framing devices and explicit authorial interventions of the *Decameron*, yet it, too, is concerned with art and pleasure in a plague-ridden context.

2. EXCESS IN POE

The opening of Poe's narrative shares with the *Decameron* both gruesome emphasis on the bodily suffering caused by the plague and details of the inevitability and speed of death once symptoms are manifested. Present, too, is a brief reflection on a widespread lack of compassion for anyone infected by the plague, with "the victim" finding himself (the gendered language is Poe's) as a result "shut […] out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men" (299). Poe then introduces Prince Prospero and his selection of "a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court" (300). The prince's company is noble, as in the *Decameron*, but also on a much grander scale. Likewise, the retreat lasts not ten days but rather—with telling vagueness—at least five or six months.

Unlike in Boccaccio, in Poe's short story no attempt is made to justify their decision to leave on moral grounds, such as a lack of any remaining familial ties, as noted by Pampinea in the *Decameron*. Instead, their retreat is founded on an unashamed lack of concern for the outside world: "The external world could take care of itself" (300). Neither is there any sense of restraint within the community, which is characterized in shape and design according to the prince's tastes, described in turn as "eccentric", "*bizarre*" (300), "peculiar", and "barbaric" (301). The courtiers are fashioned in the prince's image, becoming "followers" (301) in quite a cultish sense, so that at the final masquerade they resemble the prince in their grotesqueness: "it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque" (302). Other adjectives follow to complete the picture: "wanton", "*bizarre*" (again), "terrible" (302). The prince, his followers, and their surroundings thus lack the emphasis on reason, order, regulation, and restraint characteristic of Boccaccio's story-telling community.

The prince's followers also lack individuality, as is suggested by their namelessness, in contrast to the ten named and individuated story-tellers of the *Decameron*. In a related fashion, Poe's

5 On *Inferno* V, see for the best and most extended discussion Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves*.

6 See, in particular, Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader*, 188–206, Hollander, 92–116, Ferme, 13–26, and Stillinger.

7 On Boccaccio's complex relationship with Dante see Houston.

courtiers therefore lack the agency and responsibility of Boccaccio's noble men and women. In the *Decameron*, as we have seen, not only does each member of the company tell one story each on each of the ten days, but each story-teller also gets to be the sovereign for one day, which includes choosing the theme for that day's stories. Boccaccio's community is structured as a cooperative upon principles of equality and of shared responsibility and decision-making among the ten members of the company. Poe's community is, in contrast, despotic, led by Prince Prospero's "*bizarre*" tastes.

When the Red Death arrives in the middle of the masquerade, he fits and reflects the spirit of Poe's community in his lack of restraint, albeit with the narrative suggesting that his presence is excessive even by their standards: "In truth the masquerade license of the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum" (303). In this comparison to Herod the Great, an expression borrowed from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (3.2.14), Prince Prospero's despotism is overshadowed and overwhelmed, and, indeed, the prince ends up being the first of the Red Death's victims within the abbey community, with his followers soon afterwards following him to the same death.

As a result of this leadership towards a shared death, the similarity between Prince Prospero and the medieval Prince Galehaut is quite compelling. In Dante's *Inferno*, courtly literature brings Paolo and Francesca together and leads them "'to one death'" (*Inferno* V, v. 106). In Poe's "Masque", the "Galeotto" is not literature but rather both the prince himself and his entertainment of his courtiers through music, dancing, and masquerade. Again, death is a shared, identical, and inescapable experience—not in the general sense that all people die, but more specifically in that each group dies in the same fashion at the same time (the Dantean "'one death'"). This collective outcome calls into question the morality of art and of its creators and purveyors. For Dante and Poe, certain forms of literature and music lead to death. Even if the arts (music, dance) in "The Masque of the Red Death" appear for a while to be a distraction from and potential postponement of death, it is, after all, during the final masquerade that the Red Death infiltrates the company. In between Dante and Poe, Boccaccio's "Galeotto" is more ambiguous, arguing for the value of story-telling as a means of survival—something that is true, from a literary rather than an eschatological perspective, even for Dante's Francesca. The contrast between Poe's "Masque" and Boccaccio's *Decameron* is not primarily one between music and dancing versus story-telling, since Boccaccio's company also sing and dance when they are not telling stories. Rather, as I have suggested, it is a question of fatal excess versus life-preserving order, and of despotism versus communality.

3. STORY-TELLING DURING LOCKDOWN

In light of the two contrasting models of community, survival, and the arts that this essay has explored heretofore, I would like finally to reflect on our own experience of creating a pleasure-seeking literary community through our SELCS Summer Book Club at UCL. In many respects, our book club community was comparable with neither of the communities imagined by Boccaccio and Poe. Membership was open to a similarly restricted group, but that group was defined by its belonging to the rather more heterogeneous SELCS, rather than to a particular court (Poe) or to a particular class and city (Boccaccio). Most of all, our community was scattered in location across several continents (as is made possible by modern technology, in our case Blackboard Collaborate) and also limited in time to two hours on Fridays, plus the time taken to read the text alone in advance. Where the noble characters of Boccaccio and Poe are part of one single community that lives constantly together for a delimited period of time, our book club community was never bound up with cohabitation and always existed alongside all the other communities (local, familial, charitable, professional, etc.) to which its members also belong. Boccaccio's company consider themselves to have no responsibilities because they have no remaining family; they lack interest in their neighbours and the broader Florentine community, and especially in anyone outside their own class. Our participants, naturally, were never required to abandon their existing responsibilities and networks. Finally, our online community had the immeasurable benefit of not being a possible vector of contagion.

At the same time, our book club did resemble Boccaccio's community, especially in its rotating, equitable system of power; in our case, a different person each week who chose the book to be read and then led the online discussion. I also felt that we were in a situation similar to that of the readership of the *Decameron* imagined by Boccaccio in his "Author's Foreword". There,

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Boccaccio presents his own human and humane compassion as taking the form of addressing his book to women in love who are stuck at home and will find "comfort", "entertainment", and "advice" in his pages (4–5). Boccaccio is writing especially to women since he believes that they lack the distractions available to men:

> women [...] spend most of their time within the narrow confines of their bedchambers; here they sit in relative idleness, torn between yes and no as they brood on all manner of things, not all of which can procure them unalloyed happiness. [...] Now we have only to look to see that men in love meet with nothing of this kind. If a man is down in the dumps or out of sorts, he has any number of ways to banish his cares or make them tolerable: he can go out and about at will, he can hear and see all sorts of things, he can go hawking and hunting, he can fish or ride, gamble or pursue his business interests. (4)

Although these gendered lifestyle differences no longer ring true, in lockdown we have all become like Boccaccio's anticipated female readers, not in idleness (working from home alongside home schooling and other cares have banished that possibility) but rather in domestic isolation: "spend[ing] most of [our] time within the narrow confines of [our] bedchambers" (*camere*: also rooms more generally), unable to "go out and about at will".

4. ONE LAST BOCCACCIAN EXAMPLE

The lockdown has transformed us all into Boccaccio's ideal readers, but it is to one of his real and most careful of readers that I wish, in the final analysis, to turn. This reader is not Poe but rather Marguerite de Navarre, who set about the project of reworking the *Decameron* for a sixteenth-century French audience (see Diffley; Schachter). The Boccaccian inspiration of her work is made explicit in the text's prologue, although in her case the catalyst for the gathering together of the story-tellers is not a plague but a flood. In my view, two aspects in particular of the *Heptaméron* resonate with our experience: firstly, the framing of the benefits of story-telling in a time of crisis and isolation; secondly, the unfinished nature of Marguerite's text.

The *Decameron* had already proposed story-telling as a "pleasant distraction" (4) and a "pastime" (685), both for Boccaccio's ideal women readers and for the ten story-tellers within the text. Marguerite's story-tellers are even more specific about this distraction, which they present not just as pleasant but as a means of staying healthy. Parlamente proposes that they find:

> "some pastime to alleviate the boredom [*l'ennui*] and distress that we shall have to bear during our long stay here. Unless we have some amusing and virtuous way of occupying ourselves, we run the risk of falling sick."
>
> Longarine, the young widow, added, "What is worse, we'll all become miserable and disagreeable [*fascheuses*]—and that's an incurable disease. There isn't a man or woman amongst us who hasn't every cause to sink into despair [*extreme tristesse*], if we consider all that we have lost." (de Navarre, *Heptameron*, 66; *L'Heptaméron*, 7)

Illness here is defined as psychological as well as bodily, in recognition of what can happen in isolation and when limited to one place for a period of time. The risk of such an illness is heightened by reference to the loss or *perte* (7) that each character has experienced, including Longarine, whose defining feature is her widowed status. Grief is banished from the communities of the *Decameron* and Poe's "Masque"—explicitly so in the latter, with the statement that "it was folly to grieve" (300)—but openly acknowledged in the community of the *Heptaméron*. In this respect, Marguerite's story-tellers show far more compassion for one another and for themselves than any of Boccaccio's company or Poe's revellers.

Marguerite died in 1549, leaving the *Heptaméron* unfinished, and rather at the mercy of subsequent editors. It is for this reason that her book is a *Heptaméron*, interrupted after the second story of the eighth day, rather than another *Decameron*. The text ends abruptly with Nomerfide's promise of another tale: "'Well, I have a story ready to tell you,' she began, 'and it's a very appropriate one after the one you've told. It's about death, and it's about a monk. So please all listen carefully'" (de Navarre, *Heptameron*, 543). Though unintentionally so, these lines are a superb cliffhanger. If we want to continue this thought experiment of identifying life with art—that is, of imposing our lockdown experiences onto particular literary narratives from

previous centuries—let us at least embrace the text that acknowledges loss, that understands *ennui* as an illness, and, above all, that ends without an ending, as a sign of our own uncertain future. Not for me the bleakness of Poe's "Masque" nor even the apparent return to normality and normativity of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which ends with the men going off to other pleasures ("altri piaceri", 495) and the women returning home. Far better a text that calls for us to strain our ears and our imaginations to catch the echoes of unwritten, future stories: "escoutez le bien, s'il vous plaist" (de Navarre, *L'Heptaméron*, 428).

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