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# The Black Death and Giovanni Boccaccio's The Decameron's Portrayal of Merchant Mentality

Rachel D. Rickel

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THE BLACK DEATH AND GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO'S *THE DECAMERON'S*  
PORTRAYAL OF MERCHANT MENTALITY

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**ABSTRACT**

Giovanni Boccaccio was a contemporary witness to the effects of the Black Death pandemic, the *Yersinia pestis* bacterial pandemic in Europe between the years 1346-53, causing 75 million to 200 million deaths across the continent alone. In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio depicts the outbreak's high-mortality rates and how that was a catalyst for many social and cultural changes within fourteenth-century Europe. He also goes on to portray the devastating effects of death on, not only the physical bodies of people and animals, but also on their mental, emotional, and spiritual states, and how this accelerated their acceptance of the rising merchant mentality of more utilitarian values. While some critics interpret depictions of the plague within *The Decameron*, others argue that Boccaccio's merchant portrayals are more favorable than in previous literature. But overall, critics do little to link the plague to the positive change in society's acceptance of these merchants and tradesmen. *The Decameron*, through its one-hundred tales told over the course of a ten-day adventure, taken by seven young ladies and three young men, presents the reader with examples of pre, during, and post plague societal perceptions and norms. The framework of the *Decameron* serves to show the drastic cultural shifts occurring, in part due to the pestilence, that further spur forward the acceptance of this rising merchant class in society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
SECTIONS	
I. CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. CHAPTER II: PESTILENCE.....	8
III. CHAPTER III: MERCHANTS.....	22
IV. CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION.....	37
V. WORKS CITED.....	38

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Customs now laid aside, and, so far from having a crowd of women to lament over them, that great numbers passed out of the world without a single person: and few had the tears of their friends at their departure; but those friends would laugh, and make themselves merry; for even the women had learned to postpone every Other concern to that of their own lives.

—Giovanni Boccaccio

To escape the changes and ravages of the Black Death, a small Brigata<sup>1</sup> of wealthy young people take a retreat in the country away from their home city-state of Florence. Over a course of ten days, the ten young people - seven ladies and three gentlemen – tell ten stories on every one of those days. The range of topics is vast, but many of the tales depict low ranking characters positively exhibiting new mercantile values of practicality and wit. Both the type of character and the focus on newer values are innovative topics for the time period<sup>2</sup>. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* captures the egalitarian and self-preservation sentiment that accompanies a pivotal and tumultuous

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<sup>1</sup> A small and lively group of Friends

<sup>2</sup> Petrarch and Dante had an influence on Boccaccio's writing something various scholars have researched. Joseph Grossi, "Anti-Petrarchism in the Decameron's Proem an Introduction?" (Quaderni D'italianistica, Volume XXXIII, No. 2, 2012), pp.5-26; Kristina Marie Olson, "Resurrecting Dante's Florence: Figural Realism in the Decameron and the Esposizioni," (MLN, Vol. 124, 2009) , pp. 45-65; Renee Neu Watkins, "Petrarch and the Black Death: From Fear to Monuments," (Studies in the Renaissance, Vol. 19, 1972), pp. 196-223

period in history, that of the Black Plague, as it coursed through early renaissance Europe. Not only does Boccaccio give a contemporary account of the main events of plague, but he also shows the immediate societal consequences as far as values and economics are concerned through his use of language and depictions of different social strata. Although the pestilence is only directly mentioned twenty-one times in the text, as it primarily frames the rest of the narrative, it shows that no matter how much a digression may occur in the middle, there is always a return to the inevitable, whether that be death from plague, or the rise of a new social rank and view.

In his introduction, Boccaccio shows the changes occurring due to the pestilence, and he also states “that the things of this world have no stability, but are subject to constant change...” (802). In support of that notion, the Brigata tells stories that further elaborate upon the idea of varying social strata and changing values. Historians suggest that literature of the time period showcases the inevitable evolution of the new social mindset, a merchant mentality of utilitarianism, and that this change can be attributed to the *Yersinia Pestis* pandemic. This mindset is particularly evident within Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as the socio-economic shift occurred, and innovative, self-made men began to override the previous conventions of the old feudal system. These changes included a loss of social power for the previously elite, the nobility, and high church members, primarily due to a rise of wealth in previously lower status populations, such as laborers, artisans, brokers, bankers, and particularly: merchants. Within this authorial framework of plague also exists a minor framing of the Brigata’s adventures with plague as the reason to begin the said adventures - and also as the inevitable end to them. Overall, a change in mentality begins to surface within Boccaccio’s societal depictions, moving from

frivolous and privileged economic ideas to a more practical and rational monetary and more egalitarian social view<sup>3</sup> in response to the effects of plague mortality.

The *Decameron* has been a source of critical debate for scholars since the time Boccaccio first published it in approximately 1353. Most critics agree that as the *Decameron* was circulated among the slightly wealthier merchant ranks, as well as the upper crusts of society. The text was revolutionary, not only for its frequently controversial subject matter, but also concerning the language, Italian instead of Latin<sup>4</sup>, in which it was written. Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron* in the Italian tongue of the period, which, to appeal only to the elite of society, should have instead been written in either Greek or Latin. This move from a scholarly language to a more common language for a literary work of this large caliber also gives another clue to the changing perceptions of the period<sup>5</sup>. Boccaccio's choice of language broadened his contemporary readership, as the rising mercantile ranks would not necessarily have been educated in Latin or Greek. The choice of using the common Italian tongue also shows Boccaccio's support of social inclusion for these previously lower ranks. Overall, with a wealth of topics, from religion<sup>6</sup> to societal changes, and with sometimes erotic content<sup>7</sup>, the *Decameron* lends itself to a wide range of commentary and criticism. Simone Marchesim explores the intertextuality of Boccaccio's works, while Judith Seronfini-Suili argues that the *Decameron* is little more than a sexually subversive text meant to corrupt young and impressionable female readers. Furthermore, Itala Rutter examines the idea that

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<sup>3</sup>See George Huppert; Lina Insana; Norman Cantor.

<sup>4</sup> See Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, 171-94; Simone Marchesim, 31-50.

<sup>5</sup>See Lauro Martines, 40-42.

<sup>6</sup>See Enrico De'Negri. 166-89; Victor Shklovskij, 61-68

<sup>7</sup> See Alberto Moravia, 134-55; Judith Seronfini-Suili, 29-46; Tobias Foster Gittes, f147-174.



Boccaccio's text is a response to church corruption. Thus, the bulk of existing criticism on the *Decameron* does not focus on plague or merchants, but has ranged from Boccaccio's authorial influences for the text<sup>8</sup> to instances of comedy<sup>9</sup> - to name just a few topics that have been covered by scholars over the years.

However, social influences are often shown to be at the heart of many critical tracts existing concerning the text, since it was written at the height of various changes – economic, religious, social rank-- not only in Italy, but across Europe. In his 1957 “La Piszion del *Decameron*,” Giuseppe Petronio links the social and economic changes<sup>10</sup> occurring at the onset of the Italian Renaissance to their influences in Boccaccio's work. Petronio also gives a brief overview of the change in Italy from a feudal society to a more diverse social structure. He acknowledges that although feudalism was slowly disappearing as a form of government, many of the values of virtue, generosity, valor and excellence, were still the primarily accepted modes of noble behavior. While the new economically rising merchants, bankers and tradesmen appropriated the old values of the prior elites, they also brought their own virtues to add as acceptable modes of behavior. As Petronio states, “this change in the social structure brings about a change in the philosophy of life and in moral judgement” (49). Italian societal changes in power dynamics caused the rising power of the communes, and by using the language of Marxism, Petronio further elucidates how these “bourgeois embraced many of the old feudal values, but they also brought their own ideologies” (50). This atmosphere, of a

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<sup>8</sup> See Erich Auerbach, “Frate Alberto,” Trans. Willard Trask 177-96 ; Guiseppe Mazzotta, 64-81; Marylyn Migiel, 1-30.

<sup>9</sup>See Douglas Radcliff-Umstead; Nancy E.F. Minicozzi, 106-115.

<sup>10</sup>See Lina Insana.

society in flux, affects the arts of the period in different ways. For instance, the hereditary descendants of prior lords and ladies tended to artistically render the past in their work in a nostalgic sense, while artisans arising from the new social classes such as Boccaccio “expressed, more or less consciously, the new social reality of the commune” (Petronio 50). These newer mercantile artisans also realized that while the “world of chivalry belongs to the past,” they could express those sentiments while also applying their own, more common-sense modes of life in society (Petronio 50). According to Petronio, Boccaccio writes of a rising social strata and “brings about a change in the philosophy of life,” putting such values, such as practicality and economic savvy, at the forefront of his art, giving the mercantile concept of what should be the socially accepted norms in a new world. While Petronio acknowledges a change in the portrayal of social values in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, he fails to link those changes to a dwindling population left in the wake of the plague.

Additionally, scholars suggest that Boccaccio’s life itself was influential to his portrayals of the merchant within the *Decameron*. Vittore Branca acknowledges that the effect of rising mercantilism in early renaissance Italy had an impact on the arts. Branca argues, “it is the central position occupied by this (mercantile) society in the *Decameron*’s ideal scheme, its meaning in a humanistic and artistic sense, that makes the presence of the merchant class a characteristic feature, almost essential for the work’s development” (39). The main idea behind Branca’s work is that Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, “gives its preferences to the figures, environment, and concerns of the new ruling class,” which he further describes as being tradesmen and merchants (47). Boccaccio’s personal experience with his family’s involvement with the powerful Bardi

Company in Florence furnished the young author with a worldly perspective, wise beyond his years, and Branca asserts that this was a major influence on the values present within his texts. While Branca goes on to give examples from the text concerning this point of merchant dominance, what he does not do is link this rise in merchant ideals and disposition to the economic and social effects of the Bubonic plague pandemic of the time. Both Petronio and Branca stress the influence of social change upon Boccaccio, and how his textual illustrations appear to have approved of the rise of the mercantile class, but again, what they fail to address is how those changes were put into motion by the onset of plague mortality.

The plague of the fourteenth century has been of great interest to a variety of historians and scholars. While some of them, such as Philip Siegler, Samuel K. Cohn, and Joseph P. Byrne cite Boccaccio as an important primary literary source of the period, they do little to explore the *Decameron* itself. Also, Black Death historians do not directly link Boccaccio's positive portrayals of the rising mercantile ranks to the onset of plague, but merely concentrate upon examining the descriptions of plague itself within the introduction of the *Decameron* in support of the event's existence in history. On the other hand, few literary scholars make mention of the importance plague<sup>11</sup> had to the formation of the text, and while some critics link the importance of Boccaccio's merchant past to his text, they fail to link the rise of new merchant values, such as practicality, to the plague.

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<sup>11</sup> Jessica Levenstien, "Out of Bounds: Passion and the Plague in Boccaccio's *Decameron*." *Italica* 73.3 (1996) ; Jonathan Usher, "Boccaccio's "Ars Moorendi" in the *Decameron*," (*The Modern Language Review*, Modern Humanities Research Association, 1986) pp. 621-32 ; Shona Kelly Wray, "Boccaccio and the Doctors: Medicine and Compassion in the Face of Plague," (*Journal of Medieval History*, 2004) pp.301-22.

Despite the focus on the pestilence references within the framework of the *Decameron*, what other critics ignore is how, even in the absence of actual mention of plague within the stories themselves, Boccaccio depicts influences of the pestilence, not only upon economics, but most importantly, on social aspects, such as the rise of social acceptance of the mercantile ranks -- and a merchant mentality of utilitarianism -- by using complementary language, realistic circumstances and social rank comparisons throughout the *Decameron*. Post-plague change is as inevitable to the late medieval/early renaissance period as death by plague. The young noble lady Pampinea observes that “every person born into this world has a natural right to sustain, preserve, and defend his own life to the best of his ability” (Boccaccio 14). This statement allows Boccaccio to extend rights to life in an egalitarian way, to the rich, the poor, as well as men and women alike. Just as the plague did not discriminate based on economics, race, age, or gender, the author is promoting the idea that despite a person’s original social station, the rights to rise in society should also be available to people of the lower social status. In this manner, Boccaccio is setting up the noble characters for comparison and contrast in their actions and manners with those of lower and mercantile ranks in the stories to be told by the Brigata. Overall, Boccaccio approvingly depicts the mercantile rise while undermining previous social hierarchies by illustrating changes within both the introduction, and by sub-textual allusions throughout the rest of the *Decameron* in response to social issues raised by plague.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **PESTILENCE**

Boccaccio's plague depictions provide a spring board for providing insight to larger cultural shifts that were affecting Italy's social elites. The Great Pestilence of the thirteenth-century, or, as it is now frequently referred to, the Black Death, caused by the bacteria, *Yersinia Pestis*, was the cause of major population shifts, and thus also a catalyst for serious social and economic change across the European continent.

Boccaccio writes about the horrors and the staggering death toll of, "over a hundred thousand human lives," in the city of Florence alone (13), giving reason for his characters journey to begin as well as a serious backdrop to set the tone of change for his readers. In his introduction, Boccaccio also gives a biological description of the effects of the pestilence which mirrors the reality very closely. In her compilation, historian Rosemary Horrox's records and biological data, suggests that the plague bacterium itself, the zoonotic *Yersinia Pestis*, originally spread from the fleas of black rats and manifested itself in humans in three ways (5). The first was bubonic plague, which resembled flu and had an eighty-percent mortality rate. This first type was the most common form and the symptoms of this form are described in Boccaccio's introduction, as "certain swellings in the groin or armpit" (5). David Erickson and Joseph Hinnebusch both state that the

second form was pneumonic plague, which usually resulted in respiratory failure within two days of infection (158). The third - and last version - was the septicemic plague, which would also kill the infected “within three days,” and had a ninety-nine percent death rate (Boccaccio 6). Historians and Scientists have used Boccaccio’s textual descriptions in creating images of the era. Since both the rich and poor alike were greatly affected by the pandemic as it occurred in a series of waves across Europe and other parts of the globe from 1300 to 1390, a variety of social changes occurred. Artists, clergy and officials of the time period documented the changes, creating data which not only scientists and historians can use, but also something literary critics can consider when considering what shaped texts of the period. The *Italian Urban Population* database of Malanima, which has data from 1300-1861 of all major cities in Italy, shows the extreme death tolls across the social strata around the time of pestilence. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio traces these population and social shifts due to high mortality rates, presenting them in the characters of his stories.

Boccaccio presents this melancholy situation of pestilence which connects to his contemporary readers, especially since Boccaccio’s readership would have been experiencing the effects of the plague in their everyday lives at this time. By framing the (sometimes lighthearted) stories of the *Decameron* with this grave situation of the pestilence, the author is setting the expectation that the reader will take the underlying messages of social change just as seriously as they take the Black Death, while also setting the tone for the rest of the narrative. He also goes on to describe the devastating effects and “deadly havoc” of the mortality on, not only the physical bodies of people and animals, but also on the mental, emotional, and spiritual states of people (Boccaccio

4). This allows Boccaccio's original intended audience, those of the nobility and merchant ranks, to draw comparisons between the *Decameron* and scholarly and medicinal journals also circulating at this time. Boccaccio describes the plague, stating that, "the appearance of swellings in the groin or armpit, some of which were egg-shaped whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple," which modern medicine has confirmed is consistent with symptoms of bubonic plague (5). He further describes the horrible symptoms and states, as it is also acknowledged in modern medicine, that most people struck by the pestilence died within three days. By including these references and realistic descriptions of contemporary events, Boccaccio is creating a backdrop in the reasons for his character's choices, showing his readers examples of how to react, or not to react, to those same situations in the face of inescapable change.

The descriptions of a plague-ridden Florence continue as Boccaccio also gives examples of the zoonotic effects of the sickness, which allows modern readers, just as it would have the Fourteenth-Century readers, to also understand the gravity of the situation that Europe was in at the time, and further allow them to appreciate the grave undertone of the *Decameron*. The bacterium *Yersinia Pestis* lives in the flea of the common black rat, however, when the flea's host (the rat) dies, the flea then jumps to the next nearest source of food and warmth, including other animals and humans. While Boccaccio would not have been aware of all the details involved in the spread of the disease, he does show how quickly the pestilence spread. Boccaccio describes a pile of rags that belonged to a pauper who died from the plague that are thrown out into the street and how some pigs "first of all gave the rags a thorough mauling with their snouts.... And within a short time they began to writhe as though they had been poisoned

and dropped dead to the ground” (7). This passage communicates the ease with which the plague spread, as people at the time did understand that the plague could be spread from the items of the dead<sup>12</sup> to both other people and to beasts, although they did not fully understand the whole process from the scientific standpoint available now. The infectious nature of the disease, and how quickly it spread, also mirrors the infectious egalitarian rise of the mercantile ranks within society at the time.

Furthermore, the physicians of the thirteenth-century were at a loss as to what caused people to become sick, and thus a varying degree of preventative advice was given out, none of which worked any more effectively than any other. In her article, “Boccaccio and the Doctors: Medicine and Compassion in the Face of Plague,” Shona Wray argues that Boccaccio’s description of these works is almost taken word for word from the *consilia* of the period. The first preventative advice was that a “sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection” (Boccaccio 7). The second type of advice given - and mode of prevention and coping - was the opposite view and “maintained that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full...and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke” (Boccaccio 7). A third means to coping and preventing infection by Bubonic Plague occupied a middle ground between the two above extremes, neither eating too much or too little, and merely going about their daily business as usual. By using examples within his text that mirror those other relatively reputable medical publications, Boccaccio sets himself on the same upper authorial level as the physicians who wrote the medical *Consilia* (Wray 621). This builds the reliability of the narrator/author and shows

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<sup>12</sup> See Eugenia Tognotti, 254-59; Kira Newman, 809-34; Lawrence Mott, 215-25; Richelle Munkhoff, 1-29.



his readership that his work contains serious commentary upon the current situation Europe finds itself in.

Additionally, Boccaccio states that some “callously maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against the plague than to run away from it” (8). In this passage Boccaccio takes the credibility he has built up by using realistic examples of plague and remedies, and uses this to condemn some of the current advice circulating, particularly that of running away. This could have two reasons, first, Boccaccio recognizes the true futility of attempting to run from the plague, which has struck everywhere, including the country-side and hence alludes to the foolish nature of such activities. Secondly, Boccaccio realizes the economic disparity between those who can afford to run away, such as lords and ladies, and those who cannot, such as servants and workers. Boccaccio also portrays those who may be able to afford to run, but choose not to, and to instead accept the economic opportunities presented while also engaging in charity: such as those of the burgeoning merchant ranks. The narrator is already starting to set up his comparison here between the cowardly and un-laudable actions of aristocracy, with the more compassionate and practical of the previously marginalized middling ranks.

Building up the egalitarian nature of his narrative, Boccaccio relates the inevitable demise of many, no matter what social position they may have, when he writes,

Of all the people who held these various opinions, not all of them died. Nor, however, did they all survive. On the contrary, many of each different persuasion fell ill here, there, and everywhere, and having

themselves, when they were fit and well, set an example to those who were as yet unaffected, they languished away with virtually no one to nurse them (8).

What Boccaccio alludes to, and what is historically accurate is, that people in less privileged positions within society were those who usually cared for the dead. These lower ranking individuals were also able to benefit, not only in how society viewed them - as they were deemed compassionate in their care of the dead and dying - but also to stand in as martyrs in the end, if and when they themselves succumbed to the Great Mortality. Boccaccio also comments upon the lack of adherence to old feudal values, which would have demanded that the aristocracy take care of the populace under them. Instead we see the aristocracy abandon their responsibilities and a new class step in to fill the gap left in the absence of the upper echelon. Boccaccio refers to the aristocracy in a negative tone in the introduction, as well as throughout the rest of the text, further illuminating the demise of their social values and sway over Europe, particularly Italy. As previously mentioned, Boccaccio even admits that it is not just the city alone that is affected, but also the country-side. The location and monetary status of Florence and its country-side inhabitants made no difference, the Black Death still took its toll, just as the narrator/author of the Decameron supposes the socio-economic shifts are also then inevitable and will take their toll upon the current social hierarchy.

Historically, the rich and poor alike were affected, the poor perhaps dropping dead more in the streets, but with even the elite suffering from high mortality rates. The plague thus served as a leveling agent, and Boccaccio acknowledges “how great a number of splendid palaces, fine houses, and noble dwellings, once filled with retainers,

with lords and with ladies, were bereft of all who had lived there, down to the tiniest child” (13). Boccaccio, by indicating that the upper echelon of society was experiencing the same symptoms and demise as the common and vulgar people shows that he suspects that the status quo of his world is changing. This is especially evident when he argues that “it was perhaps inevitable that among the citizens who survived there arose certain customs that were quite contrary to established tradition” (9). Despite position in society, Boccaccio explains that due to such a high traffic of corpses overwhelming the city’s streets, churches, and graveyards, “no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats,” no matter their social station (11). However, in spite of Boccaccio’s horror concerning the deaths of so many, whether rich or poor, he shows more sympathy in the use of his language towards those who are not as privileged as others, particularly lamenting the results self-saving actions, which often resulted in the abandonment of children. By including these passages concerning the dying and the dead, Boccaccio is creating an environment in which his reader can empathize with the dying and the lower ranks of society. Also, Boccaccio uses especially harsh language towards those who have the position within society, as well as the monetary means, to escape the city. He describes those who run away as “callous” and lacking in pity when he states that “to take pity on people in distress is a human quality which every man and women should possess” (1). Again, Boccaccio sets the tone here for the rest of the book and creates a contrast in the depictions of how various levels of society react to the plague in order to make the reader sympathize all the more with the lower ranking characters of the text. Thus, the main characters, Pampinea, Fiammetta, Filomena, Emilia, Lauretta, Neifile, Elissa, Panfilo, Filostrato, and Dioneo, are social

elites fleeing the city in a show of callous self-interest. Yet, Boccaccio plays with these characters and the notion of rank, making these upper class individuals merely the mouthpieces from which he can praise the rising mercantile ranks and values instead. This places the aristocracy in a position that undermines their social value in the scheme of the book while ultimately allowing the aristocratic figures to endorse the utilitarian nature of rising mercantilism.

While the plague is not then mentioned in the remainder of the tales, many of the stories contain characters and values that can be attributed to the rising merchant and banker professions, as well as the change in attitude of society towards people in those professions. Some of the tales also include emblematic plague subtext, especially in relation to death and funerary traditions. While there are some stories of only social elite people in situations only the upper crust can be in, Panfilo, story one, day one, begins a trend of portraying common people in more everyday situations, depicting merchants and clergy, while also including death. Over-all, these tales often point out the common perceptions of common individuals, and then usually also show how society's view of these same individuals has changed, can change, or is changing. Panfilo's first story includes moneylenders acknowledgement of society's dislike for them, yet by the end of the story, in a reversal, they are held instead in high esteem by association with a "saintly" merchant. Many lower ranked individuals are described in a more favorable light, where often more revered individuals –lords and clergy for example - expose their bad sides. These stories allow a continual dialogue between the characters about what has changed, or is changing, due to many varying circumstances, but primarily plague.

Day four has several stories that contain, not only leveling statements and complimentary descriptions of transmen and merchants, but also allusions to plague. The sixth story of the day is told by Panfilo and Boccaccio has him state, early in the introduction to his story, how , “every living being suffers from the common affliction” (330). While the statement may be in reference to the inevitable appearance of dreams, it also has within it a social leveling statement. It does not just state, the upper crust, or, the lowly, the author states that “every” living being is afflicted, indicating that despite social stature, everyone has something in common. Additionally, the use of the word “affliction” is also a prime reminder of the state of the author’s and character’s current world situation, where everyone, all living beings, are being affected and afflicted by the Black Death. While subtle, it is a reminder again, of the same-ness of people, high ranking, low, and middle mercantile, to be affected by this pestilence.

What is also evident in Panfilo’s sixth story is the return of certain plague-related sentiments of Boccaccio, which he ascertains must not be far also from the minds of his Brigata characters since it is the plague they attempt to flee from. There are three allusions to plague within the story, the first in the description of a dream of Andreuola, in which her lover is taken away from her by a “dark and terrible thing issuing from his body” and how it tore him away “despite all she could do to prevent it” (Boccaccio 332). The second allusion is in the dream Gabriotto had of a similar nature, in which a terrifying greyhound rips out his heart and carries it away because he was “powerless to resist” (Boccaccio 333). The last allusion is contained in the death of the character Gabriotto when he dies suddenly in his lovers arms, “but simply lay there gasping for breath and perspiring all over, and shortly thereafter he gave up the ghost” (Boccaccio

333). These three passages all have in common the idea that death, and as the framework of the text mentions, plague, are unstoppable forces in which no one - no matter their social rank - can run from. The use of phrases such as “despite all she could do,” and “powerless” give the reader the sense of futility that society was experiencing at this point in history due to high plague mortality.

Boccaccio also uses this story as a vehicle to restate his disappointment in current funeral arrangements in the wake of the plague, such as those he had stated in his introduction, thus tying back to the serious nature of this piece. At one point in the story, Andreuola picks flowers for her soon to be deceased lover, red and white roses, which were common funerary flowers in the time period. Additionally, Boccaccio has her insist upon making sure that Gabriotto has a proper burial, “buried by his kinsfolk” something which the author mentions as lacking in many instances in his introduction, and which he lamented as being a product of fear and selfishness on the part of the family members and clergy. In his introduction, Boccaccio describes how funeral possessions to honor the dead had diminished, if not altogether vanished in many instances. Thus, in this story Boccaccio gives an example of how a funeral should be conducted, no matter how harrowing the circumstances, even if it was plague that passed on the deceased. The narrator, Panfilo, states;

The body was therefore laid upon Andreuola’s piece of silk cloth in the midst of all her roses and placed in the center of the courtyard, where it publicly received the tears, not only of Andreuola and of Gabriotto’s kinswomen, but of nearly all the women in the city and many of the men. And it was from the palace yard, in the style not of a plebian,

but of a patrician, that his remains were taken with very great reverence to their burial, borne on the shoulders of the highest nobles in the land (Boccaccio 337).

The love of Andreuola and Gabriotto was forbidden and secret, yet despite what could befall her, Andreulo insisting in exposing their love in order to properly honor her secret deceased lover/husband. This shows the respect and family duty that Boccaccio laments as missing in society at the height of plague, and is also a sentiment that would have resonated with his readership. Next, Boccaccio alludes to the presence of plague with the male lover of the story, Pasquino, dying in a most horrible fashion. The narrator states, “not only was Pasquino dead, but his face and body were already covered with swellings and dark splotches” (Boccaccio 340). These symptoms are reminiscent of the buboes and dark splotches that covered those who died from Bubonic Plague. Boccaccio also has the heroine die in the same manner, again suggesting that plague was not far from the mind of the author despite its lack of mention by name through-out these later chapters, as plague still exists in an emblematic fashion, as in the example of funerary flowers. Filomena at the end of day four also makes a minor reference to the events of plague within the world, stating in hope, “that no day other than this will be blighted by your woes,” with the word “blight” serving to not only represent the sorrow of the Brigata at the great loss of life they have left behind them, but also to what the elite would consider the blight of social reform that is inevitably creeping up on them.

Both Guido Alfani and Mavis Mate explore how high plague mortality rates left gaps in society. The fifth day of stories mirrors that reality of how the plague left those gaps in society allowing a different distribution of wealth amongst the populace. In the

wake of the plague were left many widows and widowers, who were often expected to remarry, in which case a redistribution of inheritance, lands, and goods would occur.

Story eight, day five, which the narrator Filomena starts with a referral in the past tense stating, “that there once used to live a great many nobles and men of property,” gives the reader the impression that the story may be based on truth and while also setting a more serious tone for the story (Boccaccio 419). This reference in past tense, to a state of the way things were, would resonate with the readers as they would have been aware, and perhaps even experienced first-hand, such losses due to the extreme mortality of the plague at the time. The author ensures that the somber tone he sets at the beginning of the text is still being properly conveyed through his various narrators. By having his narrator Filomena use past tense, Boccaccio is not only harkening back to his introduction, to ensure his reader had not forgotten the original circumstances, but he also deliberately has his narrator put the nobles and great men of land into the past, thus making room for a new social hierarchy. On the fifth day of tales there are additional examples of deaths allowing lower ranking people to rise economically and thus, socially. The plague left gaps in society that allowed a different distribution of wealth and a rise in lower level factions - such as tradesmen and merchants. In this manner, Boccaccio is following this trend and documenting it in the form of examples within his stories as told by *The Decameron's* Brigata. Historically, social mobility was on the rise in Boccaccio's period directly surrounding the plague. Furthermore, Filomena's story goes on to state that, as was commonly happening due to plague deaths, that Nastagio Delgi Onesti, the hero of her story, “had inherited an incredibly large fortune on the deaths of his father and one of his uncles” (Boccaccio 419). Additionally, story nine, day five, contains deaths and gives



examples of certain social expectations as a result of those deaths. The deaths are those of loved ones, a husband and a child, and the widow's remaining brothers tell her that she must remarry. The readership would understand this expectation as a social norm and, as the bubonic plague in this period did cause a depletion in population, it can be inferred that the pool from which to draw a socially compatible mate would have also been severely drained. This in turn would be helpful to those seeking to rise in social position as they would now be more likely to be included in the marriage pool for those widows and widowers due to less competition.

Day six, story one, contains an additional plague allusion in this story which imitates a common hypothesis in Boccaccio's time as to the cause of the Black Death. In his article, "Medieval Medicine's Response to the Black Death," Geoffrey Marks elaborates upon how court physicians, in one of their theories as to why the pestilence was afflicting the known world, blame the stars and sun for fighting over dominion of the sea (50). Horrax's compilation of primary sources on contemporary responses to the Black Death also contains an example of astrological blame in a letter by Geaoffry de Meux who suggests that "planets and star bring the general mortality" (170). Filomena then blames astrological reasons for death in her introduction, saying, "all the women of our generation were born under an unlucky star, few if any women now remain..." (Boccaccio 446). This is directly in line with beliefs present in Boccaccio's time concerning the pestilence, and also describes how the plague non-discriminately killed people, including many women. While outwardly Filomena is lamenting how few women are left with intelligence, this statement, especially considering the reason given for the

Brigata's removal from the city (plague), can actually be viewed as commentary by Boccaccio on the high mortality rates.

### CHAPTER III

#### MERCHANTS

Boccaccio's language in the *Decameron* depicts the over-all societal change, catalyzed by plague related population depletion, in which the merchant becomes an integral part of society. Merchants, and a practical and economical merchant mindset, were becoming more of a social norm, were perceived more positively, and increasingly accepted by society. Historian E.R. Chamberlain argues how it was becoming increasingly difficult to "distinguish the wealthy merchant from the prince" in fourteenth-century Europe (63). Boccaccio was in a unique position of observing the nobility and of also coming from a higher class merchant family himself. Not only was Boccaccio a contemporary observer of the plague, and affected by the plague's social ramifications, but he had first-hand experience concerning the common prejudices against merchants and bankers. He was also in a privileged enough position to acquire an excellent education for the period while simultaneously interacting and gaining favor with the upper echelon of society. While Boccaccio thus includes informed references to the nobility --such as the story of the morally-righteous King Charles the Old on the tenth day -- a larger percentage of complementary language describes the lower social ranks throughout the text (731). Yet, it is the presence of a certain earthiness -- the portrayal of

everyday figures going about their lives eating, traveling, making love, and trading -- that shines through and illustrates a merchant mentality in which Boccaccio appears to approve.

To fully realize the significance of a piece of work portraying the rising ranks of merchants and tradesmen in a positive light, it is important to understand the various stigmas associated with those trades. Prior to the radical social reforms during and following the Black Death, merchants and tradesmen were viewed in a very negative light. The church aided in this negative perception, spreading the idea that merchants were usurers, looking to profit from the labor of others and were thus considered to be in violation of God's natural laws. In a Franciscan friar's account of the plague, written between 1347 and 1361, the merchants are even blamed by the church officials for the plague. The Franciscan, Michele Da Piazza, states, "They brought with them a plague that they carried down to the very marrow of their bones, so that if anyone so much as spoke to them, he was infected with a mortal sickness which brought on an immediate death that he could in no way avoid (29). This blame shows the popular view that the plague was a punishment from God for humanity's sins. Sins and corruption were considered by Boccaccio's contemporaries as one of the reasons the plague struck Europe, and as merchants, tradesmen, and bankers, were all considered to be of corrupt professions, society at first perceived them as a natural fit for the blame. By also placing that blame and securing the idea that an already marginalized social group was the primary reason, the church in this instance was trying to designate a scape goat<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> (Jews were also scapegoats for some of the blame as well at this time). John Aberth, *The Black Death: The great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston, Bedford/St, Martins, 2005), pp.139-58.

However, the clergy ended up alienating themselves from their congregations due to their hypocritical sins of greedy and lewd natures. Dioneo gives an example of lewdness in story ten, day three, of Rustico, a monk who continually rapes an innocent female after telling her that is how she should pray. Another example of greed could be the friar Cipolla of story ten, day six, who tricks some country folks into buying fake relics. While religious hypocrisy is something which Boccaccio touches upon in many of his stories, it is not something we will focus on, as merchants are the topic at hand here. Viewed as sinners and corrupt men, merchants and tradesmen were also viewed as cheats and trouble-makers. Additionally, interest gain was seen by the church as being particularly sinful, and even the merchants and bankers who gained from interest frequently willed it back to either the person that it was gained from, or to charity, to atone for what was perceived as sin in the hope of saving their eternal souls, if not in life, at least in death.

Pampinea further describes the immoral state of the church as exposed during the plague by stating, “those enclosed in monasteries, who, having convinced themselves that such behavior is suitable for them and is only unbecoming of others, have broken the rules of obedience and given themselves to carnal pleasures, thereby thinking to escape, and have turned lascivious and dissolute” (Boccaccio 15). This mention of the immorality of church officials continues later in various tales throughout the text and allows Boccaccio to reverse the role of sinning merchant to the role of the sinning church official instead. Again allowing for a rise in social acceptance of the merchant and tradesmen, allowing them to fill a moral gap left by these wayward clergymen. This is only fitting as the church originally vilified merchants, bankers, and tradesmen, and thus, this time, Boccaccio, son of a merchant family, gets to vilify those accusers and raise the

marginalized merchant-other to a higher standard within society. We should keep in mind as well that the negative view towards religious professionals in contrast to the rising popularity of rising merchant ideals can also be attributed to the ways in which the plague exposed more of the un-reputable actions and natures of church officials while leaving a void in culture of reputable figures to look up to. The merchants, tradesmen, and bankers begin to fill that void by pushing ideals of practicality that appeal to the masses, and by overall making sure to fund public works and art that everyone can benefit from, a niche that was previously only filled by the social elite and elite church officials. By also attributing richly to the art of the period through patronage, merchants were also able to idealize their own social values and present them to society. This in turn created new social norms an allowed society to further accept merchants as idealized figures in their world.

Despite the previous social disapproval, merchants by this time period had become an integral part of the infrastructure of society, more urban than rural, but still a significant force in both. Not only were the people dependent on merchants for certain goods, they also benefited from the wealth accumulated by merchants, whether they realized it or not. Edelgard E. DuBruck theorizes that “Merchant’s money went into architecture: public buildings, patrician manors... and decorous structures erected for triumphal entries of princes into town” (97). Additionally, as merchants and tradesmen rose socially, they tried to emulate nobility and as a result often commissioned art and music, adding to the cultural richness of the era. Boccaccio’s merchant and trader characters are portrayed as wealthy men with noble attitudes and aspirations, again, much

like the merchant Jehannot de Chegny in the second story of the first day, who uses his influence to try to convert people to Christianity.

Furthermore, when the church needed money it turned to such lenders for assistance and thus begrudgingly changed its attitude towards lenders and merchants. In the thirteenth-century *Manual of Confession*, Thomas of Gobham remarks, “There would be a great indigence in many countries, if merchants would not bring the abundance of one land to another where those things are missing. Therefore, traders should be justly paid for their troubles” (Gobham). With the change of tune on the part of the church’s preaching as far as tradesmen and merchants are concerned, lay literature, by artists such as Petrarch and, of course, Giovanni Boccaccio, followed suit and also portrays the merchant in a different light, and embraces a less romantic, but more practical mentality that frequently places the merchant’s role at the forefront of a contemporary and realistic setting. This practical lifestyle of the merchant concerned itself with everyday economic exchanges and concerns of the body, such as survival in the wake of the Black Death. Instead of merely worrying about partying and manners, the practical nature of preservation took hold and gained favor with even the previously feudal lords and ladies. This is evident in that the Brigata designates a portion of each day to plan for the next in order to ensure that they are safe and have enough clothing and food.

Boccaccio’s portrayal of a rise of merchant practicality and perception of that rank of peoples is also a topic of interest to many scholars<sup>14</sup>. The way in which

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<sup>14</sup> Such as Klaus Desmet and Stephen Parente, in their study of the use of guilds in Europe and Italy starting around this time. The *Corporazioni* database also gives information specifically on Italian guilds from 1300-1850 and its numbers show the rise of certain economic stratas. Further study by Edwin Hunt, Armando Sapori, Ephraim Russel, Georges Yver, and Yves Renouard has also been done concerning Italian

Boccaccio sketches the shifting social values and norms of his time is reflective of the plague's mortality influence. Guido Alfani of the University of Bocconi argues that the extreme mortality rates changed the way property was distributed in the event of death due to the extremely high plague mortality rates in Italy, which may have led to varying levels of social change. Alfani states that "much of the reduction in inequality... was due to deaths from plague and the consequent sharing of wealth among its inheritors" (70). Boccaccio exhibits this in some of the stories in which people either inherit wealth, or marry up -- such as Nastagio De' Onesti in story five, day nine -- into wealth as widows and widowers became more common due to the high mortality rates. But, Alfani focuses more on the economic aspects and not so much on the social aspects due to, not only those high death rates, but also to a rise in economic opportunity, which in turn causes a more positive outlook within society as a whole on those whose livelihoods were synonymous with mercantilism. The unions between people of different ranks are often portrayed as being in favor of the lesser of the two, and the language used in these stories usually refers to the lower ranking individuals in a positive tone indicating the narrators (and authors) support for such equalizing events. Boccaccio portrays these self-made men in his text in complementary language, often referring to merchants or tradesmen as "good," honorable," and "worthy," as well as pointing out the merchants wealth, wealth that previously only the upper echelon of society would have had.

Boccaccio's character comparisons begin as early as his introduction. The *Brigata* first begins its adventures due to the effects of the plague upon the city in which they currently reside, Florence. The main characters relate the events within the city and then

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merchant companies, economics, and guilds, primarily concerning the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteen centuries.



decide to follow a course of action that Boccaccio previously condemns: to run away from the city. Despite the negative attitude Boccaccio takes towards those he deems as callous for their lack of pity, he does allow his characters to argue in their defense of their actions, showing both the aristocratic view as well as the new merchant view. By doing so, Boccaccio suggests to his audience that his assessment of the rank changes is fair.

While Boccaccio may provide these young men and women, the members of the Brigata, some redeeming qualities – such as their socially proper language and fine manners – however, he makes them the speaker of a social rank he clearly has more in common with, and has more respect for: those of the lower and middle trading and mercantile classes. The introduction begins with the changes occurring due to the pestilence, and a reminder from the author in his epilogue also states “that the things of this world have no stability, but are subject to constant change...” ( Boccaccio 802). The stories the Brigata tell of varying social strata and changing values clearly further elaborates upon that idea. Within this authorial framework of plague also exists a minor framing of the Brigata’s adventures with plague as the reason to begin the said adventures, and also as the inevitable end to them. Thus the plague’s contagious nature is used as a metaphor for the contagious nature of socio-economic change.

Furthermore, the passages where Pampinea argues for the Brigata’s removal from the city also include one of the few actual mentions of the plague itself past the author’s introduction, calling it the “cruel pestilence,” and as something that they should try to preserve themselves from (16). Despite his clear disdain for the selfish aristocracy, Boccaccio does not shrink from an opportunity to use the Brigata’s selfish actions to validate the newer merchant idealology of practicality. In his article, Petronio touches

upon practicality as one of the new values materializing in this society, something the Brigata, and many of the characters in their stories, adhere to. It is this new idea of savvy economy, of practicality, that Branca also, and later Insana, describe as making “the presence of the merchant class a characteristic feature, almost essential for the work’s development” (Branca 39). Both of these values, moderation and practicality, are brought into the light by two different passages within the introduction of the first day. First, Pampinea states, “We could go and stay together at one of our various country estates, shunning at all costs the lewd practices of our fellow citizens and feasting and merrymaking as best we may without in any way overstepping the bounds of what is reasonable” (Boccaccio 16). The key word of the passage is “reasonable” indicating an efficient solution to a problem and showing the importance of reasoning and problem solving, something in which the merchant classes excelled. Secondly, another of the noble ladies, Filomena, brings to light the impracticality of women escaping the city alone without the aid of men, and thus, in a very rational way states,

you must remember that we are all women, and every one of us is sufficiently adult enough to acknowledge that women, when left to themselves, are not the most rational of creatures, and that without the supervision of man or other of their capacity for getting things done is somewhat restricted (Boccaccio 17).

In his introduction to the Penguin Classics publication of the *Decameron*, G.H McWilliam considers this statement extremely sexist although he agrees that it is still an excellent example of a merchant utilitarianism in practice. Again, the author presents a problem and has his characters use reason and practicality to find a solution in order to

evolve and adapt to a new situation, and of course the Brigata does not contain the only character comparisons.

In the first story of the first day, Boccaccio shows his reader what it means to be, not only a good man, but a good merchant, and does so through the mouth of what would ironically be a bad man and stereotypical bad merchant. Ciopelletto, the bad merchant, was hired by Musciatto Franzesi, who Boccaccio describes as “a fine gentleman after acquiring enormous wealth and fame as a merchant in France,” giving the reader a positive merchant figure, yet allowing the reader to also indulge in old perceptions of the cheating and evil merchant figure and while simultaneously challenging those old ideas (Boccaccio 24). Boccaccio uses complimentary words to describe the good merchant, which goes to show the reader that there are many good merchants and tradesmen out there, he then goes on to state that the character of Ciopelletto is “the worst man ever born” (Boccaccio 26). In the end of the story, due to the sheer stupidity of a priest, the worst merchant becomes sainted and thus Boccaccio takes the perception of how merchants were perceived to be and turns that around into something extremely good, something that the author sees as the new and necessary position of merchants within society.

The second story on day one, told by Niefile, also portrays a previously marginalized individual in a positive light, while also vilifying members of society who were previously held in high esteem. Boccaccio again uses language that presents the merchant and under-dog characters in a complimentary way. The main character of the story, Jehannot de Chevigny, is described as a “worthy textile manufacturer” which is important because he is a member of a lower social rank and also a

merchant/manufacturer, yet still considered “worthy” (Boccaccio37). The other main character is also of a previously marginalized and scapegoated group, Abraham, who is not only a merchant, but also a Jew. Yet Boccaccio describes him as not only an “upright” man but also as “honest” which is in great contrast to the author’s later statements in the story about church officials. Boccaccio’s characters discuss amongst themselves about “what foul and wicked lives the clergy lead” and also “that they were a collection of rapacious money-grubbers” thus reversing the language used to describe merchants and using it instead to describe the clergy. Clergy were especially greedy when it came to accepting money for prayers for the deceased during the pestilence, giving another example of how the plague was influential in raising the merchant ranks in society’s esteem.

Other stories within the first day also offer examples of practicality, and in particular, a certain egalitarian mode of thought is contained in the fifth story. Fiammetta tells the story of the Marchioness of Montferrat, a lady who stops a king from persisting in a sexual advance upon her through use of her wit and practicality. Boccaccio has the Marchioness give a socially leveling statement by having her say, “Our women, whilst they may differ slightly from each other in their rank and the style of their dress, are made no differently here than they are elsewhere” (51). Here, Boccaccio shows us a rare example of a noble lady portrayed in a positive manner, but also uses her to state that all people (women) are the same, no matter their birth rank. Additionally, the ninth story of the first day highlights the changing ideals within society. Not only does the merchant mentality encompass men in Boccaccio’s text, but also the women characters. Panpinea, although a lady of noble bearing, outwardly condemns noble women, including herself,

for what society has considered the social norm as far as female education and behavior are concerned. Panpinea states,

I am ashamed to say it, since in condemning others, I condemn myself.

But these over-dressed, heavily made-up, excessively ornamented females either stand around like marble statues in an attitude of dumb indifference, or else, on being asked a question, they give such stupid replies that they would have been far better advised to remain silent (Boccaccio 63).

Here the author is lamenting how little wit and education are valued by the upper classes, while women of the mercantile classes had to have some practicality and wit as they often helped their families run their businesses. Boccaccio also has Panpinea further explain that women should learn how to be quick-witted in conversation by having a “quality of mind” (64). There is also the elusion to having common sense and being practical, something the merchant class would appreciate. Previously it was mentioned by Petronio that the merchant ranks also re-appropriated and integrated ideals from the previous feudal values, and it is to be noted that in addition to the newer ideal of practicality and intelligence, Panpinea also suggests that women should have “an excellence of manners,” thus marrying together the old and new worlds (Boccaccio 64). The author also allows his female characters to give more practical advice to at the end of the first day. He does this by having Panpinea state that “we are unlikely to make proper provision for the future unless some thought is devoted beforehand to the matter” (66). This later sentence can be tied back to the original mention of plague where the Brigata originally plans ahead to avoid being exposed to the pestilence. Thus, some thought and practical evaluation as a direct result in an attempt to avoid plague causes

these higher ranking individuals to appropriate the rising ideals of the merchant mentality of utilitarianism for their sustenance and survival.

Story six on day four also contains, as in many previous stories, complementary language in reference to someone of not quite the high rank one would have traditionally applied that language to. Gabriotto, the lower class lover of the higher class Lady Andreuola, is described by the narrator as being “full of admirable qualities, as well as being handsome and pleasing in appearance” (Boccaccio 331). Gabriotto is of a lower state socially than Andreuola, and for the time period it is highly likely that he was of a family tied to something mercantile, but it is not one-hundred percent evident. Day four, story seven also contains socially leveling statements, as well as deaths that can be considered allusions to plague are both evident. The first socially inclusive statement the author has Emilia mention goes as such;

Love readily sets up house in the mansions of aristocracy; this is no reason for concluding that he declines to govern the dwellings of the poor. On the contrary, he sometimes chooses such places for a display of strength no less awe-inspiring than that used by a mighty overlord to intimidate the richest of his subjects (Boccaccio 338).

Already, the start of the story has put those of lower social rank at level with the aristocracy in matters of love, and also alludes to the idea that perhaps the poor are better at loving than those of the highest rank. Day five, story nine ends with the socially lower ranking individual winning by fully assimilating and appropriating both economically and socially into the privileged ranks of society through marriage as the girl Nastagio

marries is of a “ far more noble lineage than his own” (Boccaccio 419). Despite Nostagio’s inferior rank initially, Boccaccio does use complementary language to describe him and thus show his support for this new rising class of peoples and the author also bases on the reality of widow’s situations due to those high mortality rates.

Story nine of day five also contains supporting evidence for all the criteria discussed so far in favor of a rising mercantile rank due to the high mortality rates of pestilence in Boccaccio’s Italy. Fiametta gives the story of “a person worthy of eternal fame, who achieved his position of pre-eminence by dint of his character and abilities rather than by his noble lineage” (Boccaccio 426). This phrase echoes the previous complementary language used to support people rising economically and socially by working their way to the top instead of being born into wealth and privilege. Again, it also references the more favorable manner in which society was starting to view merchants, banks, and tradesmen instead of the previously more negative view society had of people in those professions. There is also an example of the newer value of practicality that was becoming socially favorable in lieu of the extravagance of the old feudal system. In this story, the character Federigo serves his most prized falcon as a meal, highlighting the practical nature of his position, and putting into perspective the petty nature of things previously considered a necessity of privilege by the elite. Furthermore, Monna Giovanna marries Federigo after her husband and son pass, stating that she would, “sooner have a gentleman without riches, than riches without a gentleman, “ allowing a further distribution of wealth as well as a mingling of social rank in favor of the lower level citizens. By having his narrators use welcoming and complementary language to secure a union between the two different ranks, Boccaccio is

demonstrating his support for the rising mercantile ranks and also illustrating how death rates left such gaps in society allowing for some social mobility through marriage.

To also showcase the continuing downward spiral of old feudal values, the first story of day six tells the tale of an incompetent knight, a symbol of the glories of that old feudal world. Boccaccio does not wish to eliminate all the values of the prior social hierarchy, and more than once throughout his text he has explicitly had his characters support the importance of manners in their dialogue, a value the new hierarchy still deemed necessary for proper social conduct. This is in line with what Petronio writes, “the bourgeois embraced many of the old feudal values,” and incorporated them with their own to create an amalgamation of new and old society (50). Additionally, the lady of the story obviously believes herself to be one of the few intelligent females left, and also creates the main character of her story in her likeness. This intelligent women character then gets to politely subdue and insult a bumbling knight escorting her and gets him to desist in his bothersome antics. Thus this knight, first sarcastically referred to as “worthy” is then described in the most unflattering manner with the narrator describing his storytelling tells as being so poor as to cause his escort to have heart palpitations. Furthermore, the statement that his “swordplay was doubtless on a par with his storytelling” solidifies the negative view the reader is supposed to take of this old feudal emblem of a character (Boccaccio 447). So, while Boccaccio regularly depicts the merchants, tradesmen and self-made individuals within his stories in a more flattering manner, supporting their rise in society, he refers to the previous era’s figures and high social rank and authority in negative terms and tones. The author is reflecting the



changing attitude of society and also helping to create an atmosphere of acceptance of these new social ranks of people previously marginalized.

Whereas the knight, that emblem of a pre-plague world is referred to in a negative sense, the following story, story two of day six, instead portrays a self-made man, a baker, in very complementary language. In further support of the industrious individual, the narrator states that “it would never have occurred to him (the baker) to exchange this occupation for any other, for he lived like a lord,” which indicates that these rising professionals were content in their occupations and not striving to be like the prior upper echelon of society (Boccaccio 449). Lastly, this successful commercial baker is referred to in an egalitarian manner as in the end of the story an actual aristocratic lord held the him, “in high esteem and regarded him as a friend of his for life,” indicating a meeting of minds and rank in a more equal way (Boccaccio 451). The diction in this stories furthers the tone of support that the author had for equalizing the status between the various ranks of society. This self-made man, the baker is also referred to in the complementary language that we see repeatedly throughout the text for enterprising individuals. It also levels the upper ranks by putting them on par with those of what could have been deemed the simple and un-aristocratic way of life.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Thus, even in the absence of actual mention of plague within the stories themselves, Boccaccio emphasizes the influences of plague, not only upon religion and economics, but, most importantly, on social shifts, such as the rise of a merchant mentality, as the underlying result. The plague effects are evident throughout the *Decameron* as the whole reason for the Brigata's removal and story-telling in the first place. Also, the vast majority of the stories told by the Brigata contain values of the rising merchants and tradesmen ranks while also containing complimentary language in reference to those previously marginalized individuals. The plague also opened up more space in society for these tradesmen and merchant to fill voids left by dying elites and corrupt church officials, allowing their new practical mentality to flourish as socially acceptable after the high mortality rates of the Black Death. Finally, by framing the narrative with the events of the great pestilence, Boccaccio sets a tone of seriousness for his readers, indicating that they should accept the inescapable societal changes wrought by plague mortality as portrayed throughout the text, and prepare themselves for a new -- and potentially more egalitarian -- world infused with a mercantile practicality.

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