

BOCCACCIO ON STAGE

I

Ever since I first read *The Decameron* in my youth, I thought the opening scene in the book, before the stories begin, was essentially theatrical: trapped in a city afflicted by the plague from which there is no escape, a group of young people manage to flee to the imaginary, taking refuge in a villa to tell stories. Faced with an intolerable reality, seven young women and three young men succeed in escaping through fantasy, transporting themselves to a world made up of the stories they tell to one another and that take them from that wretched reality to another, of words and dreams, where they become immune to the pestilence.

Is this situation not the veritable symbol of the *raison d'être* of literature? Have we human beings not lived since the beginning of time inventing stories to combat, often unconsciously, a reality that overwhelms us and is insufficient for fulfilling our desires?

The circumstance serving as the framework for the tales in *The Decameron* perfectly expresses the nature of the theatrical: to perform on a stage something which, while it lasts, is life replacing real life, at the same time reflecting it in all of its failings and enhancing it with what our needs and urgencies would have liked to have had to fulfill us and enable us to enjoy it fully.

Ever since, the idea of a play inspired by *The Decameron* has appeared among those projects that usually accompany me, coming and going with the passing years until, one day, I finally decide to try to make them materialize.

The time it has taken me to write this play has been one of the most stimulating I have experienced, thanks to Giovanni Boccaccio. Reading and re-reading him, trying to

rediscover him by reading his books and visiting the places in the world where he lived and wrote, has been a gratifying venture. In the Florence of the autumn of the Middle Ages, the first lights of the Renaissance were already apparent. Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, the three literary stars of that transition, were the nourishing sources of the best that Western civilization has produced. With them were born aesthetic forms, models, ideas and values that have endured until our time and spread throughout the world.

Giovanni Boccaccio was in Florence when the Black Death invaded the city in March of 1348. The epidemic appeared to have come from the south of Italy, where ships loaded with spices from the Far East had brought it. Rats carried it to Tuscany. The writer and poet was about 35 years old at the time. Without that terrible experience –the plague allegedly killed a third of Florence’s 120,000 inhabitants– he would not have written *The Decameron*, an absolute masterpiece, a pillar of Western narrative prose. He would no doubt have continued as an intellectual writer for the elite, as he had been until then, a man who preferred Latin to the vernacular and who was more concerned with theological, classical and erudite discourse than with a genuine literary creation within the reach of the general public. The experience of the Bubonic Plague transformed him into another man and was decisive for the birth of the great narrator whose stories would be celebrated by innumerable readers the world over throughout the centuries. In one sense, the plague –the nearness of a horrible death– humanized him, bringing him closer to the lives of the common people, with whom he would have been only faintly familiar until then as he belonged to a wealthy merchant family.

The desire for pleasure and amusement of the ten young people sheltered in Villa Palmiera emerges as an antidote to the horror provoked by the spectacle of the plague,

which transformed the streets of Florence into a quotidian apocalypse, according to the poem. A similar thing happened to Boccaccio, who was until then a man more devoted to study –mythology, geography, religion, history, the Latin masters– in other words, to the life of the intellect rather than of the senses. The plague –death in its cruelest manifestation– led him to discover the wonderful life of the body, of instincts, of sex, and of food and drink. *The Decameron* is testimony to this conversion. It did not last very long. A few years after his passion for the spirit will return, he would be reclaimed by knowledge and religion and would again distance himself from the street, from his contemporaries, from what Montaigne called “the common people,” and return to libraries, theology, the encyclopedia, the world of the classics. His continual, growing fondness for Greek culture is one of the first signs of the admiration that Renaissance humanism would profess for the Hellenic past: its history, philosophy, art, literature and theater.

Boccaccio’s early works –*Filocolo*, *Filostrato*, *Teseida*, *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine*, *Amorosa Visione*, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, *Ninfale Fiesolano*– are inspired by books, not by life lived but rather read and written in Latin or in the vernacular. They do not transmit direct experiences of life, but rather of culture, in other words, of life as philosophical or theological theory, literary myth, forms of social, amorous, polite and chivalrous usage transformed into literature. Their greater or lesser value has a conventional framework, one largely derived from models, among them Dante’s poetry. *The Decameron* –a work about the plague, a brutal reminder that spiritual life is only one dimension of life and that there is another, associated not with the mind, with knowledge, but with the body, with desires, passions and organic functions– was revolutionary because the stories relate that direct, material life, not of the elite, not of ideas, but rather shared by

all –artisans, farmers, merchants, swashbucklers, monks, kings, noblemen, adventurers, etc.– plays a starring role without the theoretical mediation of literature. *The Decameron* is the spectacular beginning of realism in European literature. This is one reason it was extraordinarily popular, as *Don Quixote* would be centuries later.

From the beginning, *The Decameron* circulated in manuscript copies and achieved enormous prestige and distribution. The first printed edition appeared nearly a century and a half later in Venice, in 1492, the year of the discovery of America. Queen Isabel the Catholic was rumored to have been one of the book's most enthusiastic readers.

Without that experience of 1348, Boccaccio would never have managed to write the masterful proem that begins *The Decameron*, which describes the ravages caused by the plague, the horrifying scenario of a city with dead bodies piled high because there was no time to give a Christian burial to those who fell victim to the relentless mortality manifested by bulges on the thighs and armpits, high fever and violent convulsions. Curiously, after those fascinating, macabre initial pages replete with illness and death, the plague disappears from the book. It is hardly mentioned in the hundred tales (other than some furtive appearances of a few lines), as if eliminated by the exorcism that led those seven young women and three young men to tell only stories extolling pleasure, deviousness and diversion (although sometimes obtained through crime or cruelty). Excepting the pages of that portico starring the plague, a jubilant, irreverent, lewd and mocking spirit prevails in the rest of the book, which views life as an adventure whose chief aim is sexual pleasure and men's entertainment, and, under certain circumstances, also that of women.

In *The Decameron*, telling stories is not a spontaneous activity liberated by the initiative of each storyteller, but rather a ritual following a strict protocol. There is a

temporary king or a queen –because they are one for a single day–, but during their reign, their authority is real; no one can dispute their power. Their small court obeys them without resistance. He or she determines the entertainment and establishes the order of the storytellers. The story sessions take place in the afternoon –the *hora nona*– five days a week, excluding Fridays for liturgical reasons, and Saturdays, to respect the day of Biblical rest. Before they begin, the ten young people stroll around the gardens of Villa Palmieri, enjoying the fragrant flowers and the birdsong. They eat, drink, sing and dance, preparing the body and the spirit for the immersion into the imaginary, the world of fiction.

The normally brief tales begin with a preamble of a philosophical, abstract nature, but then, with few exceptions, they are adapted to a system whose first and most notorious characteristic is realism: almost all feign a recognizable reality through experience rather than simulate an unreality as fantastic stories do. (Only a handful are of a fantastic nature). The characters of the stories, cultured or primitive, rich or poor, noblemen or commoners, engage in all sorts of adventures and all seek carnal pleasure in the first place, and financial gratification in the second –and nearly always achieve their goal. *The Decameron* is a monument to hedonism. Enjoyment, in a more material than spiritual sense, is the objective par excellence of men and women. They jubilantly devote themselves to it, without prejudice, breaking taboos and moral or religious prohibitions, without the least bit of fear of convention or of what people will say. The characters in *The Decameron* celebrate and worship sensuality, the body and appetites. The proximity of the plague –of imminent death– affords these storytellers a freedom of the word and of invention that would not have been permitted otherwise. Likewise the disregard for morality to achieve their desires. In that industrious, almost desperate search for pleasure, the characters of *The Decameron*

usually get what they want, as if rewarded by a secret order that concedes an ontological value to the satisfaction of appetites: the justification for life.

In the proem of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio writes that one effect of the plague was the collapse of the morality prevailing in Florence, and that in those days of pestilence and mortality, Florentines devoted themselves to lechery and fornication, violating norms, conventions and behaviors which until then subjected sexual relations to certain limitations.

In the case of the ten young people sheltered in Villa Palmieri, those sexual scandals are purely verbal, occurring only in the tales told. During those ten days (which are actually fourteen), their conduct could not have been more judicious and restrained, even though the narrator of *The Decameron* says at the beginning that the three men are in love with three of the women, without identifying them. They sing, dance, eat and drink, yes, but afterward retire to their chambers. No sexual immoderation exists between them. None of them make love or engage in amorous flings. The excesses occur in the stories; they are exclusively attributes of fiction.

Have they fled Florence simply to save themselves from the spectacle of the ill and the dead? The inspired Pampinea, who came up with the idea to retreat to Villa Palmieri, pronounces a phrase that reveals a more ambitious intention than simply getting away from the city for a bit of fun. She refers to that flight as a redemption, an initiative that would save the group from death: “that wrong is done to none by whoso but honestly uses his reason... be in taking such means as we may for the preservation of our life?”

Pampinea believes that fiction is much more than a diversion: it is a potential vaccine against the ravages of the epidemic. In *Tales of the Plague*, this clever young woman’s reflection is the source of the idea attributed to Giovanni Boccaccio that telling

stories can create a labyrinth where the plague becomes lost and does not reach the storytellers.

In *The Decameron*, pleasure, the supreme value, justifies the worst deceptions and hoaxes, as demonstrated in –one example among dozens– the wonderful tale of Ricciardo Minutolo (the sixth of the third day) who, to possess Catella, the wife of Filippello Fighinolfi, perversely makes her believe that her husband is being unfaithful to her with his own wife. The cynical reasoning persuades Catella, who, from that point on, shares the morality of Ricciardo, her seducer.

Cynicism, irreverence and lewdness, seasoned with a boorish humor, are the moral of almost every story. Anything goes to achieve pleasure, especially when attempting to obtain the desired woman (and, sometimes, the desired man). Women easily give in to these temptations, for power, money as well as for mere desire. For example, in the story of the libidinous abbot and Ferondo's wife (eighth story of the third day), the woman is seduced by the jewels the monk promises her, as well as by the enjoyment of a bit of freedom while the lustful abbot makes the farmer believe he has died and is in purgatory. But there are some exceptions of heroic women who defend their virtue to untold extremes, such as Griselda in the very last story, who, without complaint, puts up with all of the outrageous tests Galtiere, her husband, subjects her to in an effort to assess her loyalty and capacity for sacrifice (or perhaps just to entertain himself).

In some ways, this Griselda is an exception because in terms of desire, there is sexual equality in the world of *The Decameron*. Women, like men, experience it and act with abandon in an attempt to satisfy it. For example, in the tenth story of the second day, the wife of Judge Ricciardio de Chinzica, carried off by the Pirate Paganino, refuses to be

rescued by her husband because –as the judge is told to his face– he never makes love to her whereas the pirate does, and frequently. This of course does not mean that men and women are absolute equals. The book sends a contradictory message in this respect. In the ninth tale of the ninth day, King Salomon advises the young Giosefo, who consulted him on how to make his unruly wife obey him, to imitate what he will see at the Bridge of Geese. There, Giosefo observes a muleteer beat one of his mules, which refuses to cross the bridge. Giosefo copies the idea, and after beating her with a stick, his wife becomes passive and loving. Nevertheless, in the set of stories, women are far from always being subject to men's whims and abuses. In most of the tales, quite the opposite occurs. Women appear as free beings, full of initiative and, like the men, use their wit to achieve pleasure by being unfaithful to their husbands. The stories celebrate the victories of women who act with the same audacity, imprudence and temerity as men do to cheat on their wives. Both sexes have an unlimited capacity for these ploys. Although, in that story, Giosefo mistreats his spouse to tame her, in many others it is the men who are deceived and humiliated by their wives, who seek pleasure outside of the marriage bed. In the world of *The Decameron*, the routine of marriage quickly extinguishes sexual pleasure. Spouses enjoy making love only at the beginning of the marriage. Later, the sexual fire goes out and both seek pleasure outside the home, to the extent that in the vast majority of the stories, adultery is an indispensable requisite for sexual gratification.

In *The Decameron*, there is no pride taken in concealing the defects and vices inherent in the human condition. To the contrary, many of these stories have the purpose of describing man consumed by his vilest passions, which are uncontrollable. Revenge plays an important role in the book. The narrator of the stories exercises no censure nor makes

the slightest effort to disguise, justify or stop the vengeful spirit that dominates some characters. It is only humor that occasionally plays a mitigating role in the cruel, even sadistic acts of revenge committed. In the seventh story of the eighth day, the young Riniere takes brutal revenge on the widow Elena for the misery to which she subjected him. No less cruel –and this is not retaliation but rather gratuitous cruelty– is the ninth story of the eighth day, where Master Simone is mercilessly abused by the cunning Bruno and Buffalmacco simply for the crime of being naive and gullible. In *The Decameron*, having fun justifies evil. The devious Bruno and Buffalmacco play another dirty trick on the poor Calandrino, making him believe he is pregnant to get a good banquet out of him (third story of the ninth day). A similar event occurs in the fourth story of the ninth day, when the cunning Fortarrigo robs the poor Angiulieri and then abandons him half-naked in a field, making it look like Angiulieri was the victim of a thief. In this way, the abuser achieves his aim at the same time he entertains himself and his readers. The moral of these stories is clear: everything is game for obtaining sexual or ventral pleasure and having a good time. Deceit, farce, lies, stealing, anything goes if the goal is to take a woman to bed, take someone else's money or enjoy a copious banquet. Human beings, slaves to their instincts, exist to placate them.

This harsh realism is even more extraordinary considering that Boccaccio did not create many of the characters in these tales. They were real people, sometimes contemporaries of the author. The stories, according to research done by scholars such as Vittore Branca (I take much of this information from his *Boccaccio Medievale* and his critical edition of *The Decameron*), are apparently based on real events and situations,

which Boccaccio probably retouched and adulterated to give them more literary persuasion. He did not bother to disguise their protagonists, however.

Extreme liberties are taken when criticizing the religious –priests, monks and nuns– whom *The Decameron* describes as a corrupt fauna (the clergy in general), sensual and voracious, at odds with all forms of spirituality. They are avid, unchaste and simoniac and take advantage of the gullible faithful to exploit them in unscrupulous ways. Considering the enormous temporal power of the Catholic church at the time and its absolute authority to fight its enemies, it is surprising that this feature is repeated frequently in the stories of *The Decameron*: a ruthless criticism, at times a caricature, of the scandals and vile acts that the pastors of the Catholic Church everywhere commit.

In this sense, it is difficult to imagine two more contrasting works than *The Decameron* and the *Divine Comedy* by Dante, of which Boccaccio was a passionate reader and scholar. He was the first to write a *Life of Dante* and qualified the *Comedy* with the adjective “divine,” which has accompanied it ever since. Dante’s epic poem first became known in 1312 (*The Inferno*), *Purgatory* in 1315 and *Paradise* shortly after the author’s death in 1321. Although Dante included many religious sinners in *The Inferno*, religiosity permeates his work and is the literary *summum* of the Christian conception of faith, of the world, of the hereafter. He was a defender of the strictest orthodoxy. In the history of literature, there is no more ambitious and brilliant testimony inspired by the Christian doctrine than the *Divine Comedy*. *The Decameron*, by contrast, written just a half-century after Dante’s masterpiece, is far from expressing a similar identification with Christian theology and philosophy. It keeps them at a distance, and although without proclaiming atheism, it could be considered secular and indifferent to theological concerns, as it is with

respect to politics. While Boccaccio's stories live under the spiritual authority of Christianity, which no one questions, this power is more appearance than fact. At any rate, it is rhetorical and lacking in spiritual content, since the characters of the stories practice a morality that radically contradicts church precepts, which they continuously and shamelessly violate.

This means that the enormous admiration Boccaccio professed for Dante had a more literary than religious character. We do not know when Boccaccio first read the *Divine Comedy*, but he must have been very young since already in his first novel, *Filocolo*, which describes Naples in about 1336, when he was an indifferent law student, he paid homage to Dante, especially his poetry, which he always admired and even imitated. During his lifetime, Boccaccio copied the *Divine Comedy* three times and *Vita Nuova* once to contribute to their dissemination. This admiration was perhaps the subject of keen discussions with the scholar Petrarch, whom Boccaccio met in 1350 in Florence after returning from Ravenna. Boccaccio would become his faithful reader and friend. Over the next twenty-four years, the two writers maintained a rich correspondence that testifies to their deep relationship and is an extremely valuable source of information on the history and culture of their time. According to Amedeo Quondam, this friendship was frequently confrontational because, unlike Boccaccio, who always claimed to be a loyal and admiring disciple of Petrarch, Petrarch was merely indulgent and at times even disparaging of what his friend wrote.

Petrarch was born in Arezzo in 1304, but had lived since his youth in Avignon, where he met Laura, the inspiration for hundreds of his famous sonnets. Laura died in 1348, a probable victim of the Florentine plague. One of Petrarch's illegitimate sons also

succumbed to the epidemic. Boccaccio became closer to Petrarch when he settled in Florence after leaving his provincial retreat. There the two shared readings and discussions on Seneca, Cicerone, Tito Livio and the Fathers of the Church. Years later, after learning that Boccaccio was living in economic and physical ruin in Certaldo, Petrarch, before his death in Padua, bequeathed him 50 gold florins in his will to buy a good winter coat. We do not know whether Boccaccio did so as he died the following year (1375).

The secular, popular and realistic vein of *The Decameron* weakened in Boccaccio's later works, when he began to make official administrative trips within Italy or to France in the late fourteenth century. (He was probably more content to take a gift of ten gold florins to Sor Beatrice, Dante's daughter, who was a cloistered nun at the Convent of Santa Stefania dell' Uliva in Ravenna). During this time, his youthful inclination for classic Greco-Latin culture and religion re-emerged. He began to write books of historical, cartographic and theological erudition, such as *Genealogía decorum gentilium*, which he worked on from his fifties until his death, and *De casibus virorum illustrium* and *De mulieribus claris* (1361). The first is a confusing, encyclopedic and mythological treatise on a variety of subjects, whereas the other two are moralistic reference works on prose and verse classics. *De mulieribus claris* is a diatribe against women. In 1360, Boccaccio abandoned Latin to return to the vernacular in his study on Dante: *Trattatello in laude di Dante*. This is a time of reconciliation with the Church since in that same year, Pope Innocent VI conferred on him minor orders and cleric benefits. At that time, he apparently intended to burn *The Decameron*, as he regretted the libidinous, anti-clerical nature of the stories, but Petrarch, among others, dissuaded him. At any rate, it would have been impossible to make it disappear since manuscript versions of the book circulated

throughout Europe, were imitated and were read not only in private but in public, on street corners and in taverns, by minstrels and itinerant storytellers.

1360 was a year of ups and downs in his life since he was ostracized after becoming involved in a plot with several of his friends. He lived his last years in poverty and isolation. He spent them in his hometown, Certaldo, where he was struck with the illness that would embitter his old age: hydropsy. He lived alone with an old servant, Bruna, and spent his time revising the Latin translation of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, done by his friend, the Greek scholar Leonzio Pilato.

His last intellectual enterprise was devoted to his master, Dante. Florentine officials hired him to give lessons to promote the poet's work among the local public. Boccaccio gave his first lesson on October 23, 1373 in the Santo Stefano di Badia Church, a few steps from the house where the author of the *Divine Comedy* was born. According to witnesses, the audience was a varied lot: common folk, clergymen, authorities, intellectuals and high-ranking individuals. The lessons, for which he was paid one hundred florins, lasted for several months but were abruptly interrupted, no doubt due to his ill health.

On his desk in Certaldo, he left the fifty-nine lessons he gave on Dante and a final one – the sixtieth – which he never finished.

II

Like the Homeric poems, *Don Quixote* and the novels of Victor Hugo and Dickens, for centuries, the stories of *The Decameron* have been adapted to all genres to reach a wider audience than that of readers of the literary text: simplified children's versions, theatrical, radio, television and movie versions, as well as comic strips, dramas and series. *Tales from the Plague* draws its inspiration from the immortal stories of that universal Florentine. It

does not attempt to be a theatrical adaptation of *The Decameron* because the dramatic production of the hundred stories of Boccaccio's book would be an impossible task and at any rate, could not be staged. It is a very free, smaller-format version of that work. Using a key event of *The Decameron* as the starting point –the flight of a group of people to the imaginary to escape the plague that devastated their milieu– the play develops a story made up of stories that smuggle a fictitious reality into the real world which, at the same time it supplants the real lives of its protagonists, redeems them from the greater misfortune of the human condition: demise or extinction. Real life becomes diluted during the course of the play until it disappears completely in the labyrinth of inventions that the five characters narrate and perform, a process where they themselves disappear and reappear while their real lives –of which we know practically nothing– are substituted by the fantasized lives they successively recount and embody. This is no fantastic operation but rather fantastic realism –they are two different things– since it is what actors do when they perform a play on stage and what all we mortals do when we imagine ourselves living adventures or situations distinct from those of our daily existence. We usually do this alone, secretly. The five characters of *Tales of the Plague* do so publicly, through brief performances they hope will serve as exorcisms against the pestilence. For them, acting is a matter of life or death, a struggle for survival.

Does the play have five characters, or just four? Aminta, the countess of Santa Croce, is unlike the other fugitives from reality. She is a citizen of the kingdom of fantasy, a creation of Duke Ugolino of whom the others are unaware, a being that does not have the same consistency as the others, that is *only* a character of the story. The other four aspire to be so, of course, which is why they went to Villa Palmieri; however, only Aminta achieves

this in the strictest sense. The distinct nature of the countess of Santa Croce –a ghost of truth among four characters that are ghosts of lies– should be suggested by her acting, her way of moving, of speaking and reacting to the events the other characters in the play experience or recount.

Among these four, only Panfilo and Filomena are part of the original cast of *The Decameron*. Boccaccio does not give us much information about the ten young people ensconced in Villa Palmieri to tell stories, except that they were lively, twenty-somethings from good families. Panfilo and Filomena have several identities during the course of the play. Are any of them the real one? There is no way to know; the audience can decide or else accept that the true identity of these young people is not to have one, which is the same as saying that they have fragile, elusive identities, which shift according to the circumstances and the stories they star in, as occurs in actors' real lives.

The same goes for Duke Ugolino and Boccaccio. In the case of the latter, as the character in the play, he is inspired by an historical figure. Clearly, there is a real identity underneath the many disguises with which he conceals and transforms himself throughout *Tales of the Plague*. A clarification: although the real Boccaccio experienced the plague when he was a relatively young man –35 years old– in the play he appears as he was in his old age, according to testimonies: obese and lethargic, although with an agile spirit and perhaps rejuvenated by the plague which, although it terrifies him due to the proximity of death, also revitalizes him since it has led him to experience the raw material of the stories he will immortalize. The Boccaccio of *Tales of the Plague* is an imaginary, sensual being; he loves the flesh and fantasy and sees no incompatibility between material pleasures and

spiritual life, which for him is literary invention and intellectual knowledge more than religious piety.

Duke Ugolino, the oldest character, a bachelor nobleman, fond of hunting and adventure, has developed a lifelong, impossible love for a woman he certainly invented and with whom he had and still has a licentious, truculent and sometimes sadistic, sometimes masochistic, passion. She is the woman on whom he bestows the recondite fantasies and appetites with which he never stops playing. How much of what he experiences and recounts in the scene is true or false? There is no way to know this either: as one of the characters, the changing personalities he adopts while he narrates and performs are the only thing we know about him with undeniable certainty. Duke Ugolino, Boccaccio, Panfilo, Filomena and Aminta are fictions, beings of pure invention, actors who, in their total dedication to the performance, transubstantiate into the beings they are playing. They became unreal to save themselves from the plague and remained there, in that deleterious and fleeting land that is the theater and literature.

Music, dance, pantomime and mimicry are central to the performance. The characters not only narrate and perform the stories; they also mime and parody them, in silence, when Duke Ugolino and the Countess of Santa Croce talk in private or when, in one episode, two characters go off by themselves and the others are excluded from the action. This never stops; in the last case, the others continue the stories, in silence, gesturing, grimacing and moving about.

The music serves to place us in that remote time and to create a pleasing, festive and intense environment of expectation, where in their seclusion at Villa Palmieri, the five characters devote themselves to the task of inventing and living fiction.

In this sense, *Tales of the Plague* is faithful to Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, although in all other aspects it distances itself from his model. Few plays have exalted literary invention as much as this one has, to the extreme of conferring on the stories not only the task of entertaining and enriching what has been lived with imaginary experiences, but also the more definitive one of immunizing human beings against death. Of course, we must understand it in the symbolic sense: no one can stop time from eventually conquering humanity. To be saved from the plague by literary illusion should also be understood as a metaphor: the ten young people who take refuge in Villa Palmieri leave their seclusion with a larger dose of vitality than they had when they began their retreat. They are more aware of the richness and joy of life, and at the same time, more conscious of the need to provide a design and creativity to that life where no one is eternal and which in some way prolong it beyond death, leave a mark when the body has ceased to exist. This is how literature, the theater and the arts defend a human being against the demoralization provoked by threats such as the Black Death.

All humans are actors, although most of us are unaware of it. During our lives, we often abandon spontaneity and introduce someone who says and does on our behalf what we think should be said and done in that circumstance. We all have different personalities without realizing it, galvanized by an awareness that determines what, in a specific context, in a particular situation, is advisable to say or do. This is not hypocrisy, but rather theater, an upholding of convention, civilization.

The theater is not fortuitous; it originates from that deep-seated tendency in all of us to want to escape from ourselves in certain situations, to flee that jail that is us and to become others. The actors are those "others," whom we would all like to be, those whom,

while continuing to be who they are, are also many, according to the roles they embody in each performance. Actors do so professionally, while the rest of us common mortals do so without fanfare, when we “act” to maintain appearances and social conventions, when we superimpose a social self over our authentic self. In the secrecy of our intimacy, we abandon ourselves to the fantasy of being others, of doing something we have never done nor would ever do in reality. In some ways, the young women and men of *The Decameron* who flee from Florence to escape the plague and seclude themselves to tell stories –to be others– symbolize that central feature of the human condition. That is also, comparisons aside, the story that the characters of *Tales of the Plague* experience (and narrate).

Boccaccio’s stories transport readers (and their listeners) to a world of fantasy, but that world has some deep roots in the reality of experience. Thus, in addition to allowing them to share a dream, it educates and instructs them to better understand the real world, daily life, in all of its adversity and magnificence, on what goes badly or very badly in it and especially on what could and should be better. Seven centuries before the discourse on the commitment of the writer and committed literature appeared, Giovanni Boccaccio practiced it. He did so guided not by ideological reasons but rather by his keen intuition and forward-thinking sensibility.