

世界经典文学名著原版库

# THE DECAMERON

《十日谈》

北京师联教育科学研究所 编



学苑音像出版社

图书在版编目( CIP )数据

世界经典文学名著原版库/北京师联教育科学研究所编. —北京 :学苑音像出版社 2005. 3

ISBN 7 - 88050 - 270 - X

I. 世... II. 北... III. 世界文学—文学—名著 :英文 IV. I299 - 3

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字( 2005 )第 187966 号

世界经典文学名著原版库  
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出 版 :学苑音像出版社

印 刷 :北京密云红光印刷厂

开 本 850mmx1168mm 1/16

印 张 2800

字 数 43 000 千字

版 次 2005 年 4 月第 1 版

印 数 1 - 5 000

书 号 :ISBN 7 - 88050 - 270 - X

定 价 5800.00 元( 全 290 册 )

THE DECAMERON

by Boccaccio Giovanni

THE INDUCTION OF THE AUTHOR TO THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSES

Gracious Ladies, so often as I consider with my selfe, and observe respectively, how naturally you are enclined to compassion; as many times doe I acknowledge, that this present worke of mine, will (in your judgement) appeare to have but a harsh and offensive beginning, in regard of the mournfull remembrance it beareth at the verie entrance of the last Pestilentiall mortality, universally hurtfull to all that beheld it, or otherwise came to knowledge of it. But for all that, I desire it may not be so dreadfull to you, to hinder your further proceeding in reading, as if none were to looke thereon, but with sighes and teares. For, I could rather wish, that so fearefull a beginning, should seeme but as an high and steepy hil appeares to them, that attempt to travell farre on foote, and ascending the same with some difficulty, come afterward to walk upon a goodly even plaine, which causeth the more contentment in them, because the attayning thereto was hard and painfull. For even as pleasures are cut off by grieffe and anguish; so sorrowes cease by joyes most sweete and happie arriving.

After this briefe mollestation; briefe I say, because it is contained within small compasse of Writing; immediatly followeth the most sweete and pleasant taste of pleasure, whereof (before) I made promise to you. Which (peradventure) could not bee expected by such a beginning, if promise stood not thereunto engaged. And indeed, if I could well have conveyed you to the center of my desire, by any other way, then so rude and rocky a passage as this is, I would gladly have done it. But because without this Narration, we could not demonstrate the occasion how and wherefore the matters hapned, which you shall reade in the ensuing Discourses: I must set

them downe (even as constrained thereto by meere necessity) in writing after this manner.

The yeare of our blessed Saviours incarnation, 1348, that memorable mortality happened in the excellent City, farre beyond all the rest in Italy; which plague, by operation of the superiour bodies, or rather for our enormous iniquities, by the just anger of God was sent upon us mortals. Some few yeeres before, it tooke beginning in the Easterne partes, sweeping thence an innumerable quantity of living soules: extending it selfe afterward from place to place Westward, until it seized on the said City. Where neither humane skill or providence, could use any prevention, notwithstanding it was cleansed of many annoyances, by diligent Officers thereto deputed: besides prohibition of all sickly persons enterance, and all possible provision dayly used for conservation of such as were in health, with incessant prayers and supplications of devoute people, for the asswaging of so dangerous a sicknesse.

About the beginning of the yeare, it also began in very strange manner, as appeared by divers admirable effects; yet not as it had done in the East Countries, where Lord or Lady being touched therewith, manifest signes of inevitable death followed thereon, by bleeding at the nose. But here it began with yong children, male and female, either under the armpits, or in the groine by certaine swellings, in some to the bignesse of an Apple, in others like an Egge, and so in divers greater or lesser, which (in their vulgar Language) they termed to be a Botch or Byle. In very short time after, those two infected parts were growne mortiferous, and would disperse abroad indifferently, to all parts of the body; whereupon, such was the quality of the disease, to shew it selfe by blacke or blew spottes, which would appeare on the armes of many, others on their thighes, and every part else of the body: in some great and few, in others small and thicke.

Now, as the Byle (at the beginning) was an assured signe of neere approaching death; so proved the spots likewise to such as had

them: for the curing of which sicknesse it seemed, that the Physitians counsell, the vertue of Medicines, or any application else, could not yeeld any remedy: but rather it plainely appeared, that either the nature of the disease would not endure it, or ignorance in the Physitians could not comprehend from whence the cause proceeded, and so by consequent, no resolution was to be determined. Moreover, beside the number of such as were skilfull in Art, many more both women and men, without ever having any knowledge in Physicke, became Physitians: so that not onely few were healed, but (well-neere) all dyed, within three dayes after the saide signes were seene; some sooner, and others later, commonly without either Feaver, or any other accident.

And this pestilence was yet of farre greater power or violence; for, not onely healthfull persons speaking to the sicke, comming to see them, or ayring cloathes in kindnesse to comfort them, was an occasion of ensuing death: but touching their garments, or any foode whereon the sicke person fed, or any thing else used in his service, seemed to transferre the disease from the sicke to the sound, in very rare and miraculous manner. Among which matter of marvell, let me tell you one thing, which if the eyes of many (as well as mine owne) had not seene, hardly could I be perswaded to write it, much lesse to beleve it, albeit a man of good credit should report it. I say, that the quality of this contagious pestilence was not onely of such efficacy, in taking and catching it one of another, either men or women: but it extended further, even in the apparent view of many, that the cloathes, or anything else, wherein one died of that disease, being toucht, or lyen on by any beast, farre from the kind or quality of man, they did not onely contaminate and infect the said beast, were it Dogge, Cat, or any other; but also it died very soone after.

Mine owne eyes (as formerly I have said) among divers other, one day had evident experience heereof: for some poore ragged cloathes of linnen and wollen, torne from a wretched body dead of that disease, and hurled in the open streete; two Swine going by, and (according

to their naturall inclination) seeking for foode on every dunghill, tossed and tumbled the cloaths with their snouts, rubbing their heads likewise upon them; and immediately, each turning twice or thrice about, they both fell downe dead on the saide cloathes, as being fully infected with the contagion of them: which accident, and other the like, if not far greater, begat divers feares and imaginations in them that beheld them, all tending to a most inhumane and uncharitable end; namely, to flie thence from the sicke, and touching any thing of theirs, by which meanes they thought their health should be safely warranted.

Some there were, who considered with themselves, that living soberly, with abstinence from all superfluity; it would be a sufficient resistance against all hurtfull accidents. So combining themselves in a sociable manner, they lived as separatists from all other company, being shut up in such houses, where no sicke body should be neere them. And there, for their more security, they used delicate viands and excellent wines, avoiding luxurie, and refusing speech to one another, not looking forth at the windowes, to heare no cries of dying people, or see any coarses carried to buriall; but having musicall instruments, lived there in all possible pleasure. Others, were of a contrary opinion, who avouched, that there was no other physicke more certaine, for a disease so desperate, then to drinke hard, be merry among themselves, singing continually, walking every where, and satisfying their appetites with whatsoever they desired, laughing, and mocking at every mournfull accident, and so they vowed to spend day and night: for now they would goe to one Taverne, then to another, living without any rule or measure; which they might very easily doe, because every one of them, (as if he were to live no longer in this World) had even forsaken all things that hee had. By meanes whereof, the most part of the houses were become common, and all strangers, might do the like (if they pleased to adventure it) even as boldly as the Lord or owner, without any let or contradiction.

Yet in all this their beastly behaviour, they were wise enough, to shun (so much as they might) the weake and sickly: In misery and affliction of our City, the venerable authority of the Lawes, as well divine as humane, was even destroyed, as it were, through want of the lawfull Ministers of them. For they being all dead, or lying sicke with the rest, or else lived so solitary, in such great necessity of servants and attendants, as they could not execute any office, whereby it was lawfull for every one to do as he listed.

Betweene these two rehearsed extremities of life, there were other of a more moderate temper, not being so daintily dieted as the first, nor drinking so dissolutely as the second; but used all things sufficient for their appetites, and without shutting up themselves, walked abroad, some carrying sweete nosegayes of flowers in their hands; others odoriferous herbes, and others divers kinds of spiceries, holding them to their noses, and thinking them most comfortable for the braine, because the ayre seemed to be much infected by the noysome smell of dead carkases, and other hurtfull savours. Some other there were also of more inhumane minde (howbeit peradventure it might be the surest) saying, that there was no better physicke against the pestilence, nor yet so good, as to flie away from it, which argument mainely moving them, and caring for nobody but themselves, very many, both men and women, forsooke the City, their owne houses, their Parents, Kindred, Friends, and Goods, flying to other mens dwellings else-where. As if the wrath of God, in punnishing the sinnes of men with this plague, would fall heavily upon none, but such as were enclosed within the City wals; or else perswading themselves, that not any should there bee left alive, but that the finall ending of all things was come.

Now albeit these persons in their diversity of opinions died not all, so undoubtedly they did not all escape; but many among them becomming sicke, and making a generall example of their flight and folly, among them that could not stirre out of their beds, they languished more perplexedly then the other did. Let us omit, that

one Citizen fled after another, and one neighbour had not any care of another, Parents nor kinred never visiting them, but utterly they were forsaken on all sides: this tribulation pierced into the hearts of men, and with such a dreadfull terrour, that one Brother forsooke another, the Unkle the Nephew, the Sister the Brother, and the Wife her Husband: nay, a matter much greater, and almost incredible; Fathers and Mothers fled away from their owne Children, even as if they had no way appertained to them. In regard whereof, it could be no otherwise, but that a countlesse multitude of men and women fell sicke; finding no charity among their friends, except a very few, and subject to the avarice of servants, who attended them constrainedly, (for great and unreasonable wages) yet few of those attendants to be found any where too. And they were men or women but of base condition, as also of groser understanding, who never before had served in any such necessities, nor indeed were any way else to be employed; but to give the sicke person such things as hee called for, or to awaite the houre of his death; in the performance of which service, oftentimes for gaine, they lost their owne lives.

In this extreame calamity, the sicke being thus forsaken of neighbors, kinred, and friends, standing also in such need of servants; a custome came up among them, never heard of before, that there was not any woman, how noble, young, or faire soever shee was, but falling sicke, shee must of necessity have a man to attend her, were hee young or otherwise, respect of shame or modesty no way prevailing, but all parts of her body must be discovered to him, which (in the like urgency) was not to be seene by any but women: whereon ensued afterward, that upon the parties healing and recovery, it was the occasion of further dishonesty, which many being more modestly curious of, refused such disgracefull attending, chusing rather to die, then by such helpe to bee healed. In regard whereof, as well through the want of convenient remedies, (which the sicke by no meanes could attaine unto) as also the violence of the contagion, the multitude of them that died night and day, was so great, that it was a

dreadfull sight to behold, and as much to heare spoken of. So that meere necessity (among them that remained living) begat new behaviours, quite contrary to all which had beene in former times, and frequently used among the City Inhabitants.

The custome of precedent dayes (as now againe it is) was, that women, kinred, neighbours, and friends, would meete together at the deceased parties house, and there, with them that were of neerest alliance, expresse their hearts sorrow for their friends losse. If not thus, they would assemble before the doore, with many of the best Cittizens and kindred, and (according to the quality of the deceased) the Cleargy met there likewise, and the dead body was carried (in comely manner) on mens shoulders, with funerall pompe of Torch light, and singing, to the Church appointed by the deceased. But these seemely orders, after that the fury of the pestilence began to encrease, they in like manner altogether ceased, and other new customes came in their place; because not onely people died, without having any women about them, but infinites also past out of this life, not having any witsnesse, how, when, or in what manner they departed. So that few or none there were, to deliver outward shew of sorrow and grieving: but instead thereof, divers declared idle joy and rejoycing, a use soone learned of immodest women, having put off all feminine compassion, yea, or regard of their owne welfare.

Very few also would accompany the body to the grave, and they not any of the Neighbours, although it had beene an honourable Citizen, but onely the meanest kinde of people, such as were grave-makers, coffin-bearers, or the like, that did these services onely for money, and the beere being mounted on their shoulders, in all hast they would runne away with it, not perhaps to the Church appointed by the dead, but to the neerest at hand, having some foure or sixe poore Priests following, with lights or no lights, and those of the silliest; short service being said at the buriall, and the body unreverently throwne into the first open grave they found. Such was the pittifull misery of poore people, and divers, who were of better

condition, as it was most lamentable to behold; because the greater number of them, under hope of healing, or compelled by poverty, kept still within their house weake and faint, thousands falling sicke daily, and having no helpe, or being succoured any way with foode or physicke, all of them died, few or none escaping.

Great store there were, that died in the streetes by day or night, and many more beside, although they died in their houses; yet first they made it knowne to their neighbours, that their lives perished, rather by the noysome smell of dead and putrified bodies, then by any violence of the disease in themselves. So that of these and the rest, dying in this manner every where, the neighbours observed one course of behaviour, (moved thereto no lesse by feare, that the smell and corruption of dead bodies should harme them, then charitable respect of the dead) that themselves when they could, or being assisted by some bearers of coarses, when they were able to procure them, would hale the bodies (already dead) out of their houses, laying them before their doores, where such as passed by, especially in the mornings, might see them lying in no meane numbers. Afterward, Bieres were brought thither, and such as might not have the helpe of Bieres, were glad to lay them on tables; and Bieres have bin observed, not onely to be charged with two or three dead bodies at once, but many times it was seene also, that the wife with the husband, two or three Brethren together; yea, the Father and the Mother, have thus beene carried along to the grave upon one Biere.

Moreover, oftentimes it hath beene seene, that when two Priests went with one Crosse to fetch the body; there would follow (behind) three or foure bearers with their Bieres, and when the Priests intended the buriall but of one body, sixe or eight more have made up the advantage, and yet none of them being attended by any seemly company, lights, teares, or the very least decencie, but it plainly appeared, that the very like account was then made of Men or Women, as if they had bene Dogges or Swine. Wherein might manifestly bee noted, that that which the naturall course of things could not shew to

the wise, with rare and little losse, to wit, the patient support of miseries and misfortunes, even in their greatest height: not onely the wise might now learne, but also the very simplest people; and in such sort, that they should alwaies bee prepared against all infelicities whatsoever.

Hallowed ground could not now suffice, for the great multitude of dead bodies, which were daily brought to every Church in the City, and every houre in the day; neither could the bodies have proper place of buriall, according to our ancient custome: wherefore, after that the Churches and Church-yards were filled, they were constrained to make use of great deepe ditches, wherein they were buried by hundreds at once, ranking dead bodies along in graves, as Merchandizes are laide along in ships, covering each after other with a small quantity of earth, and so they filled at last up the whole ditch to the brim.

Now, because I would wander no further in everie particularity, concerning the miseries happening in our Citie: I tell you, that extremities running on in such manner as you have heard, little lesse spare was made in the Villages round about; wherein (setting aside enclosed Castles which were now filled like to small Cities) poore Labourers and Husband-men, with their whole Families, dyed most miserably in outhouses, yea, and in the open fieldes also; without any assistance of physicke, or helpe of servants; and likewise in the high-ways, or their ploughed landes, by day or night indifferently, yet not as men, but like brute beasts.

By meanes whereof, they became lazie and slothfull in their dayly endeavours, even like to our Citizens; not minding or meddling with their wonted affaires: but, as a waiting for death every houre, imployed all their paines, not in caring any way for themselves, their cattle, or gathering the fruits of the earth, or any of their accustomed labours; but rather wasted and consumed, even such as were for their instant sustenance. Whereupon, it fell so out, that their Oxen, Asses, Sheepe, and Goates, their Swine, Pullen, yea

their verie Dogges, the truest and faithfullest servants to men, being beaten and banished from their houses, went wildly wandring abroad in the fields, where the Corne grew still on the ground without gathering, or being so much as reapt or cut. Many of the foresaid beasts (as endued with reason) after they had pastured themselves in the day time, would returne full fed at night home to their houses, without any government of Heardsmen, or any other.

How many faire Palaces! How many goodly Houses! How many noble habitations, filled before with families of Lords and Ladies, were then to be seene emptie, without any one there dwelling, except some silly servant? How many Kindreds, worthy of memory! How many great inheritances! And what plenty of riches; were left without any true successours? How many good men! How many woorthy Women! How many valiant and comely young men, whom none but Galen, Hippocrates, and Aeesculapius (if they were living) could have bene reputed any way unhealthfull; were seene to dine at morning with their Parents, Friends, and familiar confederates, and went to sup in another world with their Predecessors?

It is no meane breach to my braine, to make repetition of so many miseries; wherefore, being willing to part with them as easily as I may: I say that our Citie being in this case, voide of inhabitants, it came to passe (as afterward I understoode by some of good credite) that in the venerable Church of S. Marie la Neufue, on a Tuesday morning, there being then no other person, after the hearing of divine Service, in mourning habits (as the season required) returned thence seven discrete young Gentlewomen, all allyed together, either by friendship, neighbor-hood, or parentage. She among them that was most entred into yeares, exceeded not eight and twenty; and the yongest was no lesse then eighteene; being of Noble descent, faire forme, adorned with exquisite behaviour, and gracious modesty.

Their names I could report, if just occasion did not forbid it, in regard of the occasions following by them related, and because times heereafter shall not taxe them with reproofe; the lawes of pleasure

being more straited now adays (for the matters before revealed) then at that time they were, not onely to their yeares but to many much riper. Neither will I likewise minister matter to rash heades (over-readie in censuring commendable life) any way to impaire the honestie of Ladies, by their idle detracting speeches. And therefore, to the end that what each of them saith, may be comprehended without confusion; I purpose to stile them by names, wholly agreeing, or (in part) conformable to their qualities. The first and most aged, we will name Pampinea; the second Fiametta; the third Philamena; the fourth Aemilia; the fift Lauretta; the sixt Neiphila; and the last we terme (not without occasion) Elissa, or Eliza. All of them being assembled at a corner of the Church, not by any deliberation formerly appointed, but meerely by accident, and sitting, as it were in a round ring: after divers sighs severelly delivered, they conferred on sundry matters answerable to the sad qualitie of the time, and within a while after, Madam Pampinea began in this manner.

Faire Ladies, you may (no doubt as well as I) have often heard, that no injury is offered to any one, by such as make use but of their owne right. It is a thing naturall for everie one which is borne in this World, to aide, conserve, and defend her life so long as shee can; and this right hath bene so powerfully permitted, that although it hath sometimes happened, that (to defend themselves) men have beene slaine without any offence: yet Lawes have allowed it to be so, in whose sollicitude lieth the best living of all mortals. How much more honest and just is it then for us, and for every other well-disposed person, to seeke for (without wronging any) and to practise all remedies that wee can, for the conservation of our lives? When I well consider, what we have heere done this morning, and many other already past (remembring (withall) what likewise is proper and convenient for us:) I conceive (as all you may do the like) that everie one of us hath a due respect of her selfe, and then I mervaile not, but rather am much amazed (knowing none of us to be

deprived of a Womans best judgement) that wee seeke not after some remedies for our selves, against that, which everie one among us, ought (in reason) to feare.

Heere we meete and remaine (as it seemeth to mee) in no other manner, then as if we would or should be witnesses, to all the dead bodies at rest in their grave; or else to listen, when the religious Sisters heere dwelling (whose number now are well-neere come to bee none at all) sing Service at such houres as they ought to doe; or else to acquaint all commers hither (by our mourning habits) with the quality and quantitie of our hearts miseries. And when we part hence, we meete with none but dead bodies; or sicke persons transported from one place to another; or else we see running thorow the City (in most offensive fury) such as (by authoritie of publike Lawes) were banished hence, onely for their bad and brutish behaviour in contempt of those Lawes, because now they know, that the executors of them are dead and sicke. And if not these, more lamentable spectacles present themselves to us, by the base rascality of the City; who being fatted with our blood, tearme themselves Grave-makers, and in meere contemptible mockeries of us, are mounted on horsebacke, gallopping every where, reproaching us with our losses and misfortunes, with lewd and dishonest songs: so that we can heare nothing else but such and such are dead, and such and such lie a dying: here hands wringing, and every where most pittifull complaining.

If we returne home to our houses (I know not whether your case be answerable to mine) when I can finde none of all my Family, but onely my poore waiting Chamber-maide; so great are my feares, that the very haire on my head declareth my amazement, and wheresoever I go or sit downe, methinkes I see the ghostes and shadowes of deceased friends, not with such lovely lookes as I was wont to behold them, but with most horrid and dreadfull regards, newly stolne upon them I know not how. In these respects, both heere, else-where, and at home in my house, methinkes I am alwaies ill, and much more (in mine owne

opinion) then any other body, not having meanes or place of retirement, as all we have, and none to remaine heere but onely we.

Moreover, I have often heard it said, that in tarrying or departing, no distinction is made in things honest or dishonest; onely appetite will be served; and be they alone or in company, by day or night, they do whatsoever their appetite desireth: not secular persons onely, but such as are recluses, and shut up within Monasteries, breaking the Lawes of obedience, and being addicted to pleasures of the flesh, are become lascivious and dissolute, making the world beleieve, that whatsoever is convenient for other women, is no way unbeseeming them, as thinking in that manner to escape.

If it be so, as manifestly it maketh shew of it selfe; What do we here? What stay we for? And whereon do we dreame? Why are we more respectlesse of our health, then all the rest of the Citizens? Repute we our selves lesse precious then all the other? Or do we beleieve, that life is linked to our bodies with stronger chaines, then to others, and that therefore we should not feare any thing that hath power to offend us? Wee erre therein, and are deceived. What brutishnesse were it in us, if we should urge any such beleefe? So often as we call to minde, what and how many gallant yong men and women, have beene devoured by this cruell pestilence; we may evidently observe a contrary argument.

Wherefore, to the end, that by being over-scrupulous and carelesse, we fall not into such danger, whence when we would (perhaps) we cannot recover our selves by any meanes: I thinke it meete (if your judgement therein shall jumpe with mine) that all of us as we are (at least, if we will doe as divers before us have done, and yet dally endeavour to doe) shunning death by the honest example of other, make our retreate to our Country houses, wherewith all of us are sufficiently furnished, and there to delight our selves as best we may, yet without transgressing (in any act) the limits of reason. There shall we heare the pretty birds sweetly singing, see the hilles and plaines verdantly flourishing; the Corne waving in the field

like the billowes of the Sea, infinite store of goodly trees, and the Heavens more fairely open to us, then here we can behold them. And although they are justly displeased, yet will they not there deny us better beauties to gaze on, then the walles in our City (emptied of Inhabitants) can afford us.

Moreover, the Ayre is much fresh and cleere, and generally, there is farre greater abundance of all things whatsoever, needfull at this time for preservation of our health, and lesse offence or mollestation then we find here.

And although Country people die, as well as heere our Citizens doe, the grieffe notwithstanding is so much the lesse, as the houses and dwellers there are rare, in comparison of them in our City. And beside, if we well observe it, here we forsake no particular person, but rather we may tearme our selves forsaken; in regard that our Husbands, Kinred, and Friends, either dying, or flying from the dead, have left us alone in this great affliction, even as if we were no way belonging unto them. And therefore, by following this counsell, we cannot fall into any reprehension; whereas if we neglect and refuse it, danger, distresse, and death (perhaps) may ensue thereon.

Wherefore, if you thinke good, I would allow it for well done, to take our waiting women, with all such things as are needfull for us, and (as this day) betake our selves to one place, to morrow to another, taking there such pleasure and recreation, as so sweete a season liberally bestoweth on us. In which manner we may remaine, till we see (if death otherwise prevent us not) what end the gracious Heavens have reserved for us. I would have you also to consider, that it is no lesse seemely for us to part hence honestly, then a great number of other Women to remaine here immodestly.

The other Ladies and Gentlewomen, having heard Madam Pampinea, not onely commended her counsell, but desiring also to put it in execution; had already particularly consulted with themselves, by what meanes they might instantly depart from thence. Neverthelesse, Madam

Philomena, who was very wise, spake thus.

Albeit faire Ladies, the case propounded by Madam Pampinea hath beene very well delivered; yet (for all that) it is against reason for us to rush on, as we are overready to doe. Remember that we are all women, and no one among us is so childish, but may consider, that when wee shall be so assembled together, without providence or conduct of some man, we can hardly governe our selves. Wee are fraile, offensive, suspitious, weake spirited, and fearefull: in regard of which imperfections, I greatly doubt (if we have no better direction then our owne) this society will sooner dissolve it selfe, and (perchance) with lesse honour to us, then if we never had begunne it. And therefore it shall bee expedient for us, to provide before we proceede any further. Madam Eliza hereon thus replied.

Most true it is, that men are the chiefe or head of women, and without their order, sildome times do any matters of ours sort to recommendable end. But what meanes shal we make for men? We all know well enough, that the most part of our friends are dead, and such as are living, some be dispersed heere, others there, into divers places and companies, where we have no knowledge of their being; and to accept of strangers, would seeme very inconvenient: wherefore as we have such care of our health, so should we bee as respective withall, in ordering our intention, that wheresoever we ayme at our pleasure and contentment, reproofe and scandall may by no meanes pursue us.

While this discourse thus held among the Ladies, three young Gentlemen came foorth of the Church (yet not so young, but the youngest had attained to five and twenty yeares:) in whom neyther malice of the time, losse of friends or kindred, nor any fearefull conceit in themselves, had the power to quench affection, but (perhaps) might a little coole it, in regard of the queazie season. One of them called himselfe Pamphilus, the second Philostratus, and the last Dioneus. Each of them was very affable and well conditioned, and walked abroad (for their greater comfort in such a