

DECAMERON

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

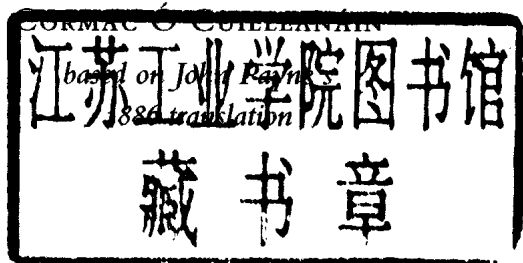


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Giovanni Boccaccio
Decameron



A new English version by



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The Editor's Introduction

The Editor's Introduction offers an account of the *Decameron* and its author, mentioning some salient themes and standard critical perspectives. Secondly, it looks at some ways in which the *Decameron* lives on today, through adaptations and new creative works as well as translations. Thirdly, it pays tribute to the remarkable John Payne, whose 1886 translation has been heavily adapted to produce this new English text. A final section offers some reading suggestions.¹

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THE AUTHOR AND HIS BOOK

The *Decameron* is not only a great book, but a crossroads of world literature. The stories of the Middle Ages, the folk tales and legends of antiquity, the characters and values of early Renaissance culture converge into this collection, and emerge from Boccaccio's masterpiece with immediacy, credibility and the pace and rhythm of modern literature. The hundred tales pick up a great storytelling heritage, remixing it into perennial plots that inspired Chaucer and Shakespeare and are still alive today. Here are the great themes of love and jealousy, passion and pride, the shrewd calculations of profit and loss, heralding the rise of a new dynamic merchant class that was to take over the world. Boccaccio, the medieval master of storytelling, can make even the most incredible plots believable.

1 My thanks are due to several people who have helped in the production and editing of this book, notably Eoin Ó Cuilleánáin, Phyllis Gaffney, Órla Ní Chuilleánáin, Francesca Bernardis and Léan Ní Chuilleánáin. Also to the General Editor of Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, Tom Griffith, for his advice and forbearance.

His *Decameron* hovers between the fading glories of an aristocratic past – the Crusades, the Angevins, the courts of France, the legendary East – and the colourful squalor of contemporary Italian life, where wives deceive husbands, friars and monks devote themselves to fleshly ends, merchants seek compulsively for profit and advantage, and natural instinct searches out the path to satisfaction, with comic or tragic results. By turns bawdy, profound, idealistic and strangely moving, these stories recreate the civilisation of early capitalism during a moment of crisis and revelation.

In an Irish newspaper survey to find the book of the millennium, the supermarket magnate Senator Feargal Quinn replied: 'As a respectable, clean-living pillar of the Establishment, I want to put the cat among the pigeons by nominating Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and our own *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, this rumbustuous saga is sexy, humorous and irreverent. When I was young, both state and church banned this book – and they were both wrong, as I suspected at the time. We always need to be reminded that sex, like business, should be fun.'²

Many readers of the *Decameron* will wish to modify Senator Quinn's statement. Boccaccio's many-faceted book is more than a good-natured romp. And yet we should recognise that he has captured one of its most important aspects. Also, he is entitled to his view. The *Decameron* is not just a book for scholars, some of whom tend to be deafened by the sound of their own solemnity. Of course the book can yield additional intellectual satisfaction and enlightenment to the discerning, well-informed reader, but nobody should feel unqualified to read it. This is a text that can make you feel you are looking straight into the world of people who lived more than six centuries ago, and can make you understand the precarious pleasures of their lives. The first reason to read Boccaccio must be for sheer enjoyment. Then come the other reasons.

The author

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) was probably born in the small Tuscan town of Certaldo, midway between Florence and Siena. In some of his works he dropped coded hints suggesting that he was

2 *The Sunday Tribune*, 24/25/26 December 1999, People & Review, p. 7.

the son of a French princess who had an affair with a Tuscan merchant, but that was too much like one of his own stories, and modern biographers have regarded his Parisian origins as nothing more than fantasy.³

Boccaccio's birth certainly resulted from an extramarital affair, though, and his unmarried mother gave him to the care of his father, who took him home to his wife. The boy grew up in the city of Florence, which at that time was more than twice the size of London, and one of the most important financial and trading cities of the world. It was a place full of political contention and rivalry, with its own rather complicated form of democratic government, often riven by factions jockeying for power. It was also the epicentre of Italian literature, having produced the incomparable Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), whose vernacular *Commedia* rivalled the great works of classical antiquity. Florence would also have been the home of Petrarch (1304–74), the most influential lyric poet of Europe and one of the great shapers of modern sensibility, had Petrarch's parents not been exiled from Florence in the same civil wars that drove Dante out.

Giovanni's father, Boccaccio di Chelino, was involved in banking, and in 1327 he moved to the southern city of Naples as the representative of a great Florentine bank, taking his fourteen-year-old son with him. Naples was enormous, disreputable, dangerous, a centre of exotic trade, and governed by a court with a French-related king (one of the Angevin dynasty, who had been invited into Italy by the Papacy, to combat the Hohenstaufen Empire) and a full-blown aristocratic life, which left a great psychological mark on Boccaccio. Although his father wanted to make a canon lawyer of him, he was determined to be a man of letters, and studied with the greatest scholars at the Neapolitan court of King Robert. This aristocratic life of learning is reflected in many of Boccaccio's writings, including his most famous work. Yet the *Decameron* also captures something of the excitement of a port city teeming with

3 The leading modern authority on the author's life and works is the late Vittore Branca: see his complete edition of Boccaccio in ten volumes, Milan, Mondadori, 1964–2000. Some of Branca's biographical writings are made available in English in his *Boccaccio: the Man and His Works*, translated by Richard Monges, cotranslator and editor Dennis J. McAuliffe, with a foreword by Robert J. Clements, New York, Harvester Press, 1976.

traders and con-men and fascinating women of dubious morality.

The early 1340s saw a great crash of the Florentine banks, which had overstretched themselves in lending money to the English for the Hundred Years' War against France. The collapse of the Bardi Company brought Boccaccio and his father back to Florence, where years of economic recession were followed in 1348 by the worst catastrophe the medieval world had ever known: the Black Death.

The great plague had begun in Turkey a year earlier, and worked its way across Europe all the way to Ireland, killing between one-third and one-half of the entire population.⁴ In the city of Florence alone, Boccaccio estimated that 100,000 people died. This was an overestimate, equivalent to the entire population of the city, but it certainly was an unparalleled disaster. The *Decameron* is, as we shall see, partly a response to the destruction wrought by the bubonic plague.

In the 1350s and 1360s, Giovanni Boccaccio was a prominent citizen of Florence, serving on more than one occasion as an ambassador for the city. He was involved in the early development of the city's university, and imported a teacher of Greek (who may have been something of a charlatan) to help in the rediscovery of the non-Roman ancient world. He became a friend of Petrarch, and an almost idolatrous worshipper of Dante. The city, he argued, had treated its greatest writer disgracefully, and he was determined to make amends. Not only did he organise symbolic acts of reparation, but he instituted the first series of public readings and commentaries on Dante's *Comedy*. He started these himself in 1373, but had to give up halfway through the *Inferno* due to failing health. He had been spending more time in his putative birthplace, Certaldo, and it was here that he died in 1375.

Boccaccio's works

Boccaccio started writing in the 1330s in Naples; his literary output was prodigious, versatile and extraordinarily innovative, as can be seen from some of the 'firsts' claimed on his behalf by the literary historian Ernest Hatch Wilkins: the first Italian hunting poem (*Caccia di Diana*); the first Italian prose romance (*Filocolo*);

4 For a vivid account of this European catastrophe, see Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*, London Collins, 1969, reissued most recently by Sutton Books in 2003.

the first Italian poem written in octaves by a non-minstrel (*Filostrato*); the first Tuscan epic (*Teseida*); the first Italian romance with considerable pastoral elements (*Ameto*); the first Italian psychological romance (*Fiammetta*); the first Italian idyll (*Ninfale fiesolano*).⁵ He was trying his strength in many modes, using both verse and prose, drawing on sources as different as medieval French romance, classical epic, and vernacular Italian verse. But these works also show certain thematic and moral values that will surface again in the *Decameron*. For example, his first work, the *Caccia di Diana*, tells of a company of Neapolitan beauties who go out hunting in the forest under the aegis of Diana, goddess of hunting and chastity. For most of the poem these young women engage in a non-stop massacre of animals. But when they haul their prey through the woods to the meeting-place, a miracle occurs. The slaughtered animals come back to life, in the form of handsome young men, whereupon the young huntresses rededicate themselves to the service not of Diana, goddess of chastity, but Venus, the love goddess. Dead meat gives way to living flesh.

Something of the same process can be discerned in Boccaccio's enormous epic poem, the *Teseida*. Occupying the same number of lines as Dante's *Comedy*, the *Teseida* was taken over, drastically shortened and considerably improved by Chaucer for his 'Knight's Tale'. It tells the story of two young men, Palamone and Arcita, prisoners of war captured by Duke Theseus of Athens, who both fall in love with the same young woman, princess Emilia. They see her through the bars of their prison cell, and although neither can have any realistic hope of winning her, they become deadly rivals. Later in the story, one of the prisoners is set free, the other escapes, and they fight a duel in a forest to decide which of them shall be entitled to the love of Emilia. She, for her part, remains blissfully unaware of their very existence. Their duel is interrupted by Duke Theseus, who seizes the opportunity to organise a proper tournament between the two sides, inviting them to summon champions from many countries. The prize will be Emilia.

The pivotal scene before the final tournament shows the three main characters in the love triangle – Arcita, Palamone and

5 See E. H. Wilkins, *A History of Italian Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1954, p. 102.

Emilia – visiting the temples of the three deities: respectively Mars, god of war; Venus, goddess of love; and Diana, goddess of chastity. Arcita prays to Mars for victory in the tournament, and this is promised to him. Palamone prays to Venus for the love of Emilia, and this is promised to him. (We may wonder how these apparently contradictory promises are to be reconciled; all will be made clear.) Emilia prays to Diana to be left a virgin; and the goddess sadly denies her prayer.

On the day of the tournament, which is lavishly described, victory goes to Arcita, who canters around the stadium in a lap of honour, only to fall from his horse, injuring himself fatally. With his dying breath, he wills the reluctant Emilia to his buddy Palamone. So Mars has kept his promise, and Venus has kept hers, but the true subtext of the story is the defeat of Diana, goddess of chastity, by the far more powerful sex goddess Venus. That same victory will be won many times over in the *Decameron*.

Some of the other early works also show flashes of the genius we will find in Boccaccio's masterpiece. The *Filocolo*, an immensely long prose work modelled on French romance, tells how Florio and Biancifiore, having grown up in the same household, see their youthful love thwarted by parental interference and are forced to undertake endless voyages across the length and breadth of the Mediterranean before they are finally reunited in a romantic clinch.

In the midst of this meandering story we suddenly come on an episode set in a garden by the Bay of Naples, where a group of young people, presided over by a Queen, debate thirteen questions of love. Members of the company recount deeds done by lovers, and the company is asked to decide who acted best, who was right, who deserved most. Some of the tales are extremely well turned.⁶ Their combination of storytelling and judgment in a social setting is strongly reminiscent of the later *Decameron*, which recycled two of them.

The *Filostrato*, written in narrative verse when Boccaccio was in

6 See Giovanni Boccaccio. *Thirteen most pleasant and delectable questions of love*, refashioned and illustrated by Harry Carter, New York, C. N. Potter, distributed by Crown, 1974. In recent years, most of Boccaccio's works, including the *Filocolo*, have been fully translated into English by American scholars, sometimes more than once; I do not propose to list all available editions.

his late twenties, was later imitated by two of the greatest English writers: Chaucer in his narrative poem *Troilus and Criseide*, Shakespeare in his play *Troilus and Cressida*. Set in the midst of the Trojan War, the *Filostrato* tells a personal story of love, seduction, betrayal and death. Parts of the plot were already to be found in the author's French sources. He added his own touch of realism, introducing the go-between character Pandarus (who has given his name to an entire profession, that of pandering or sexual procurement). It is not enough for Boccaccio to say that Troilus and Criseide had an affair; he needs to work it out logistically and convince the reader that this could really happen. Hence the need for the go-between, the negotiator who facilitates the meeting of the lovers.

Boccaccio was much better at writing prose than verse, yet not all of his prose works are particularly readable. He tended to overwrite, and to let his invention get the better of his judgment. One of the last long works that he wrote before tackling the *Decameron* was his *Fiammetta*, the story of a princess abandoned by her handsome lover, and lamenting her sad fate by comparing it, with appallingly comprehensive erudition, to the fate of famous women abandoned by their lovers in antiquity. The great nineteenth-century critic De Sanctis, after ploughing through some dozens of pages of this maudlin stuff, appealed to the departed lover: 'For God's sake, Panfilo, come back soon, so we won't have to listen to her any more!'

The *Decameron* represents, from several points of view, a moment of artistic and moral balance in Boccaccio's literary output. Shortly after its composition, in the 1350s, he let himself go in a rather horrible misogynistic memoir, the *Corbaccio*, which tells of his unrequited love for a beautiful widow. In a dream he meets the ghost of the woman's husband, who holds forth at such length and in such disgusting detail that he is entirely cured of any desire for the woman. This pseudo-autobiographical rant is far from the well-balanced, healthy and amused eroticism of the *Decameron*. Later, in 1362, the author fell prey to religious anxieties, threatening to destroy his entire literary output on the grounds that it was sinful. It took Petrarch's best powers of persuasion to put him off that drastic step.

He wrote two versions of a *Life of Dante*, told almost in the style of a saint's life. And he compiled vast encyclopaedic works in Latin, including a major summary of traditions concerning the gods of

antiquity, and a long series of stories about famous women.⁷ (At the end of the Middle Ages, Latin was still the dominant cultural language, and the spoken languages of Italy often took a secondary role. Dante and Petrarch too had written major works in Latin as well as in the Tuscan vernacular.) It was for his scholarly compilations, rather than his vernacular fiction, that Boccaccio was remembered after his death.

The *Decameron*

To return to what is nowadays seen as his masterpiece: the *Decameron* was written immediately following the Black Death of 1348. From internal evidence (contained in the introduction to Day Four), it would seem that some of its tales had been circulating before the entire book was finished. It is addressed to ladies, offering to comfort them in their pangs of love; yet the early manuscript tradition shows that it was a book collected above all by merchants, for their entertainment, in relatively cheap copies illustrated by simple but wonderfully vivid drawings. In 1414, it was translated into French by Laurent de Premierfait, and became a book to be read in the courts. The French manuscripts were often illustrated with very expensive and beautiful miniatures. By the early 16th century, the *Decameron* was well established as one of the cornerstones of Italian vernacular prose literature. Even in the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, this status protected the *Decameron* from the worst excesses of Church censorship.

Essentially, the *Decameron* is a story about people telling stories, to pass the time and share a social understanding of their world. Seven young women and three young men meet in a church in Florence during the worst outbreak of plague, and decide to withdraw into the country until the danger is past. In villas and gardens close to the plague-infested city of Florence, they live a life

7 The works of scholarship also include many points of literary interest. See Boccaccio on Poetry: being the preface and the fourteenth and fifteenth books of Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium* in an English version, with introductory essay and commentary, by Charles G. Osgood, Princeton University Press, 1930; and Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, translated with an introduction and notes by Guido A. Guarino, London, Allen & Unwin, 1964 (and Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press).

of genteel order, spending their time in blameless pursuits. Among these pursuits is the art of storytelling. They agree to tell one story each every day for ten days, and the hundred stories they tell recreate much of the world that is being destroyed all around them: the stories and traditions of a society full of lively, contentious, ambitious people now reduced to the ranks of the dead. Theirs is a retreat from calamity, a search for salvation through storytelling, but also a reappropriation of what has been lost.

The story of the ten young storytellers is often referred to as the 'frame story', as it provides a predictable, reassuring structure and also serves to contain and distance the riotous diversity of the hundred tales that are told. Early in the book we are given hints that we are going to get to know these ten frame characters, just as we come to know the characters of Chaucer's pilgrims in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. Among the *Decameron* storytellers, for instance, Pampinea emerges as being bossy, while Dioneo has a filthy mind. But little further character development takes place. We know them no better at the end than at the beginning. And when at the end of the book they go back into the city, called to the same church from which they started out, and then return to their own houses, we lose touch with them instantly and completely. They might as well have died.

The same is true of their relationship to the stories they tell. With the exception of the lewd Dioneo, there is no interaction between the storyteller and the story told. Here again, Chaucer provides a striking contrast. Several of the *Canterbury* pilgrims tell their tales as a form of self-projection, and it is possible to read portions of the tales ironically against their narrators. In the *Decameron*, the lack of interaction between the tellers and the tales reinforces the distancing effect of the frame story.

The hundred tales told by the storytellers in the *Decameron* recreate the life of medieval Europe with a vividness hard to find in other texts. As one Renaissance reader remarked, Boccaccio seems not so much to be telling us as showing us what happens, with the thing placed before our very eyes. We can appreciate the motivations of the characters who are driven by simple but powerful wants and needs and aspirations. We empathise with people placed in impossible situations and marvel as they manage to find a clever way out of their difficulties. We mourn the tragedies of those who fail to find a way of escape. And all the time we are painfully

aware of the workings of chance, the need to be alert, the risks that have to be taken in order to seize the opportunities and avoid the dangers that beset us.

These human dramas are played out in different patterns and sequences. During the first day, the storytellers talk about whatever they like. Then, by order of the person presiding over each day, themes are set for the day's proceedings and stories have to conform. We learn in the second and third days of sudden reversals of fortune, then in the fourth day of love stories that came to sad and tragic ends. The fifth day's storytelling varies that theme, telling of stories that could have ended tragically but were salvaged by a last-minute stroke of luck. Days Six, Seven and Eight are given over to tales of cleverness and ingenuity: verbal wit, tricks played by wives on their husbands, tricks played between husbands and wives. Then we are back to a free choice of topic in Day Nine, while the final tenth day rounds off the whole collection with an uplifting but sometimes improbable crescendo of virtuous deeds displaying generosity, magnanimity and in some cases a total disregard of the self.

Out of this thematic diversity, critics have sought to identify greater patterns of meaning. Of course there is the sort of patterned understanding of society which derives from the book's almost sociological illusion: by the time we have read twenty stories of tricks between husbands and wives, we feel that we have almost got a statistical sample of marriage in the fourteenth century, whereas in fact all we have is a fine repertoire of variations on a narrative theme. But apart from understanding how a society works, surely the accumulation of stories and themes also offers us some higher moral or spiritual meaning? This is, after all, a medieval work, written in a tradition which believed that literature had a natural didactic function. Ferdinando Neri, and following him Vittore Branca, wondered if there might not be a deliberate moral progression in the book, from its horrid beginning with the description of the plague in Florence, through the moral depravity of the very first story, continuing with a complete survey of the major motivations of human existence, and ending with the scale of virtue reaching a spiritual level of perfection in the final heroine of Day Ten, Griselda, who has strong overtones of the Virgin Mary and has even been read allegorically as a figure of Christ himself. In short, might we not have in the *Decameron* a redemption narrative

along the lines that we find in Dante's *Comedy*? It is tempting to read Boccaccio this way, as he often hints at deeper levels of meaning. In the end, however, one is forced to conclude that he is not entirely systematic in his belief systems, and likes to suggest more moral significance than he actually delivers.

One effect of the grouping of stories is to draw attention to the virtuosity of the way in which they are told. If we know that the story has to have an unexpected happy ending, and if furthermore we have been given a summary of its main plot points in the introductory paragraph that precedes it, all that is left to the reader is to anticipate and judge the scale of the narration itself. Boccaccio deliberately draws our attention to what he is going to do, like a conjurer laying out his cards before us, and still manages to amaze us almost every time. Rather than being driven by an overarching moral agenda, the focus of the book seems to be very much upon the performance of storytelling.

Major themes: Love

There is widespread agreement with Branca's contention that the great springs of action in the *Decameron* derive from three principal themes, Love, Fortune and Intelligence. The first two, Love and Fortune, are seen as gigantic forces operating independently of the individual's will, while sharp intelligence is the conscious resource we can deploy to resist and shape these elemental influences.

It may seem odd to characterise Love as something almost external to the individual, and there are cases where love, of a sort, is the result of conscious calculation (one thinks of friar Alberto choosing the stupid lady Lisetta as a suitable victim for his seductive powers, in the second story of the fourth day). But there is a long tradition of Love as a lord or a god – whether malicious little Cupid or the solemn Love deity in Dante's *Vita Nuova* – with the individual cast as his helpless victim. And Boccaccio's version of Love sometimes functions as a transpersonal impulse running through society, embodied in individuals but also operating as a universal instinct. Love in the *Decameron* is often expressed in the form of sex, but it has been pointed out that Boccaccio becomes somewhat uninterested and formulaic when describing the psychological and personal experience of sex – everything is always

wonderful – while being passionately concerned with the feelings and manoeuvrings leading up to it, and with the social adjustments that need to take place in order to accommodate it. Society, that is to say, must reckon with the power of love, which is potentially anti-social. Readers cannot avoid noticing that love in the *Decameron* often leads to the breaking of social barriers, structures and taboos. Thus, it is essentially transgressive. However, we must not overlook the second phase of that same process, whereby, at the end of the story, an accommodation is found between the needs of society and the demands of the sexual instinct.⁸ That accommodation can be found through tolerance, through a verbal formula, or through outright lying and concealment. The important thing is that it must be found. Love has always been one of the mainsprings of literature, if only because it alters our consciousness and causes us to question who we are. Boccaccio's version of love plays out the consequences in terms of social pattern.

Major themes: Fortune

Fortune is another sweeping theme of the book, and offers us an alternative vision of human life as adventure. It too is an almost divine force in human affairs, taking its place in a continuum ranging through happenstance, chance, luck, Fortune, Fate, destiny and Divine Providence. We know that however much we try to control our lives, and quite independently of the conscious intentions of those who seek to thwart us, the random interactions of events can sweep away all our plans. It is possible to take a benign view of that process. In canto 7 of his *Inferno*, Dante describes the semi-divine Fortune as a general minister and leader of the changeable physical world that dwells below the level of the moon. She spins her wheel and switches our condition up or down at her will. All we can do is adopt an almost stoic detachment from our precise economic and social circumstances. Fortune may do her worst; we must do our best and not worry too much about the consequences. Such Stoic fortitude helps Dante accept his own unjust exile. At its noblest

8 See T.M. Greene, 'Forms of Accommodation in the *Decameron*,' *Italica* 45 (1968), 297–313; also available in condensed form in the very useful anthology edited by Robert S. Dombroski, *Critical perspectives on the Decameron*, New York, Barnes & Noble Books, 1977 (and London, Hodder).

level, this concept of Fortune is the one promulgated by Lady Philosophy, who appeared in a vision in the prison cell of Boethius, the Christian philosopher and civil servant, shortly before his execution in the year 525. Fortune, in Boethius's version, takes us over after Nature has physically shaped us, and gives us our social identity. But that identity, that social position can never truly be ours, so we can hardly complain if changeable Fortune (change being her peculiar version of constancy) should happen to take everything away again. Boethius was rightly admired in the Middle Ages, not least by Dante.⁹

Equanimity in the face of good and bad fortune is a piece of wisdom that has long been recommended. Rudyard Kipling urged that we should treat triumph and disaster as no more than twin impostors. Is acceptance the only sensible strategy, then? Although many cultures in the world today still believe in a fatalistic approach to life, the dominant strain in Western culture does not. We put our faith in progress and believe that things can be ameliorated; even those westerners who cleave to fundamentalist forms of faith are often devoted to the proposition that their religious allegiance entitles them to a more or less unbroken run of luck. The question is, how can our actions affect what happens to us?

A century and a half after Boccaccio, Machiavelli in *The Prince* urged that we should fight back against Fortune. If our lives were entirely ruled by Fortune, Machiavelli points out, our free will would be entirely destroyed, which would leave us no longer fully human. To avoid this fate, he suggests that we make advance preparations. When she springs into action, Fortune is like a river in full flood, impossible to stop or control. But there is nothing to stop us building dikes and channels when the river is not flooding, so that the floods will run harmlessly by. Secondly, building on the feminine gender of the word in Italian, Machiavelli asserts that 'Fortuna' is a woman, and women respond well to vigorous young

9 See *Paradiso* (x, 124-129). Dante also draws on 'the most excellent Boethius' in his philosophical work, the *Convivio*. Of course the same essential stance in the face of Fortune's blows, the same readiness to bear what must be borne, is demonstrated every day by ordinary people all over the world. Their brave spirit was succinctly and demotically expressed in an admirable maxim propounded by the late English comedian Arthur Marshall, who claimed to have learned it from an elderly aunt: 'Hope for the best, expect the worst, and take whatever comes.'

men who assault them boldly, rather than favouring cautious old graybeards. That latter metaphor may no longer be politically correct, but the image of Fortune as a flood still has resonance. Shakespeare, another hundred years on, has Brutus remark that 'There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to Fortune', while Macbeth's political adventure is seen as metaphorically fording a river of blood: 'I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er'. The water-Fortune nexus¹⁰ works even more easily in Italian, where one of the means of 'fortuna' is a storm at sea, and in the *Decameron*, sea journeys around the Mediterranean are one of the classic settings of unpredictable adventure. The second day, in particular, is much devoted to the seaborne workings of Fortune. In the fourth story, for example, the businessman turned pirate Landolfo Rufolo is cast down by the sea only to be raised up to a doubly fortunate state. In the seventh story the world's most beautiful woman, the Egyptian princess Alatiel, takes ship for the West to be married, and the Mediterranean, as if excited by her beauty, throws up storm after storm, directing her towards a series of terrific disasters. In the final story of that second day, the frustrated young wife of a desiccated old judge persuades him to take her boating, with inevitable consequences. In many tales of Fortune, there comes a moment where the character has the good sense to recognise his or her good luck, and seize it with both hands. That in itself is a form of intelligence.

Major themes: Intelligence

Boccaccio was described by one twentieth-century critic, Umberto Bosco, as 'the poet of intelligence'. And this devotion to necessary ingenuity may in fact be the feature that most strongly marks the *Decameron* as a book ushering in the progressive myth of the modern world. Intelligence, produced under pressure, is the human response to impossible external challenges. In the second story of the seventh day (lifted from *The Golden Ass* by the second-century Roman writer Lucius Apuleius), we find a woman who is bored with the limited horizons offered to her by

10 Cf the Biblical injunction (Ecclesiastes 11.1): 'Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.'