

The Decameron

Giovanni Boccaccio

The Decameron (subtitle: *Prencipe Galeotto*) is a collection of 100 novellas by Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio, probably begun in 1350 and finished in 1353. It is a medieval allegorical work best known for its bawdy tales of love, appearing in all its possibilities from the erotic to the tragic. Some believe many parts of the tales are indebted to the influence of *The Book of Good Love*. Many notable writers such as Chaucer are said to have drawn inspiration from *The Decameron*. The title is a portmanteau of two Greek words meaning "ten" (δέκα *déka*) and "day" (ἡμέρα *hēméra*).

Description:

The Decameron is structured in a frame narrative, or frame tale. The Decameron played a part in the history of the novel and was finished by Giovanni Boccaccio in 1351. This work opens with a description of the Bubonic Plague (*Black Death*) and leads into an introduction of a group of seven young women and three young men who fled from Plague ridden Florence for a villa outside of the city walls. To pass the time, each member of the party tells one story for every one of the ten nights spent at the villa. The Decameron is a distinctive work, in that it describes in detail the physical, psychological and social effects that the Bubonic Plague had on that part of Europe. It is also interesting to note that a number of the stories contained within the Decameron would later appear in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. However, it is unclear as to whether or not Chaucer had known of the Decameron.

One of the women, Pampinea, is elected Queen for the first day. Each day the company's previous king/queen elects who shall succeed them and nominates the theme for the current day's storytelling. Each day has a new theme assigned to it except for days 1 and 9: misfortunes that bring a person to a state of unexpected happiness; people who have achieved an object they greatly desired, or recovered a thing previously lost; love stories that ended unhappily; love that survived disaster; those who have avoided danger; tricks women have played on their husbands; tricks both men and women play on each other; those who have given very generously whether for love or another endeavor.

The subtitle is *Prencipe Galeotto*, which derives from the opening material in which Boccaccio dedicates the work to ladies of the day who did not have the diversions of men (hunting, fishing, riding, falconry) who were forced to conceal their amorous passions and stay idle and concealed in their rooms. Thus the book is subtitled *Prencipe Galeotto*, that is Galehaut, the go-between of Lancelot and Guinevere, a nod to Dante's allusion to Galeotto in "Inferno V", who was blamed for the arousal of lust in the episode of Paolo and Francesca.

Boccaccio gives introductions and conclusions to each story which describe the days activities before and after the story-telling. These inserts frequently include transcriptions of Italian folk songs. From the interactions among tales told within a day (or across multiple days), Boccaccio spins variations and reversals of previous material to form a cohesive whole which is more than just a collection of stories.

Analysis:

Beyond the unity provided by the frame narrative, *Decameron* provides a unity in philosophical outlook. Throughout runs the common medieval theme of Lady Fortune, and how quickly one can rise and fall through the external influences of the "Wheel of Fortune". Boccaccio had been educated in the tradition of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which used various levels of allegory to show the connections between the literal events of the story and the Christian message. However *Decameron* uses Dante's model, not to educate the reader but to satirize this method of learning. The Roman Catholic Church, priests, and religious belief become the satirical

source of comedy throughout. This was part of a wider historical trend in the aftermath of the Black Death which saw widespread discontent with the church.

Many details of the *Decameron* are infused with a medieval sense of numerological and mystical significance. For example, it is widely believed that the seven young women are meant to represent the Four Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude) and the Three Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity). It is further supposed that the three men represent the classical Greek tripartite division of the soul (Reason, Spirit, and Lust, see Book IV of *Republic*). Boccaccio himself notes that the names he gives for these ten characters are in fact pseudonyms chosen as "appropriate to the qualities of each". The Italian names of the seven women, in the same (most likely significant) order as given in the text, are: **Pampinea** (the flourishing one), **Fiammetta** (small flame), **Filomena** (faithful in love), **Emilia** (rival), **Lauretta** (wise, crowned with laurels), **Neifile** (cloudy), and **Elissa** (God is my vow). The men, in order, are: **Panfilo** (completely in love), **Filostrato** (overcome by love), and **Dioneo** (lustful).