Making of the Western Mind
Institute for the Study of Western Civilization
Week 18. Boccaccio
Contessa Matilda resides in the Florence for long periods
The Baptistry Doors
South Doors
Stories of John the Baptist
Andrea Pisano (1290-1348)
Project Super: Giovanni Villani

Thursday February 27, 2020
The word quatrefoil means "four leaves", from Latin *quattuor*, four, plus *folium*, a leaf) and applies to general four-lobed shapes in various contexts.
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The Baptistry Doors
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Thursday February 27, 2020
Florence signs contracts for new cathedral:
Santa Maria del Fiore
Architect: Arnolfo di Cambio
1240-1310
1300 Santa Maria del Fiore biggest cathedral in world
Santa Maria Novella
expansion of original church
1290's
Palazzo dei Priori (now Palazzo Vecchio)
Architect: Arnolfo di Cambio
Construction: 1299
Santa Croce
Architect: Arnolfo di Cambio
Begin construction: 1294
1300, Medieval Walls of Florence
Biggest architectural project in all of Europe
1348 The Black Death
1313-1375

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

Thursday February 27, 2020
1313 born in Certaldo
1315 father marries noblewoman
1315 father successful merchant
1313-1320 Gio gets very good education in Flo
1327 father goes Naples for business
takes Giovanni (big city, big commerce, big world)
1332 father and son goes Paris, edu, lectures
1333 Gio writing, reads Petrarch
1340 writes publishes Filocolo (romance)
1340 Gio back in Florence, writing
1347 in Ravenna visits Dante tomb
1348 back in Flo to witness Black Death
father dies serving city in crisis
1350 meets Petrarch in Florence
1351 begins Decameron (collecting for years)
1352 Decameron published, immediate hit
1357 several meetings with Petrarch
1360s active in Flo politics (like Dante)
1365 travels to Avignon, Pope, as Flo amb.
1373 delivers first annual "Lectura Dantis"
1374 Chaucer meets Boccaccio in Flo
1373-75 retire to Certaldo
1375 dies at Certaldo
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John Freccero from Stanford delivers the Lectura Dantis in Palazzo Vecchio 700 year tradition

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1373-75 retire to Certaldo
1375 dies at Certaldo
1348, Black Death the most important experience of his life
Decameron
Florence
1352
Earliest printed edition,
Venice, 1492
Decameron Vaticano, 14th Century illustrated Ms.
La dimostrazione che una cosa così importante come il consiglio o la visione è un pericolo che segue non potrebbe né potere né potere né potere per se medesimo in nuovi ragionamenti non e rimossa senza chelle torno molto meno se gli uomini ad esserne il ille degli uomini siano uomini non avviene se come noi posiamo apertamente mettere esti se alcuna malinconia o grandezza.
Luoghi nel volo ad népphino comandò che alle future novelle có una tale prudenza locus senz'alcun farà favoreli era cominciò ad parlare.

O Martellino insignorito attirato sopra luogo arrivo fa uscita di guerra, e onofrante il suo inganno e battuto e poi preso in perico voluto telegrafi in piccato per laggiù ultima mente scampa. 88 88 88 88

Rubrica:

Nesser dolce

Carissimo tuo

Che valore

Se obtiessi

Mezzo a

Marinato
Decameron
Florence
1352
Earliest printed edition,
Venice, 1492
I say, then, that in the year 1348 after the Son of God's fruitful incarnation, into the distinguished city of Florence, that most beautiful of Italian cities, there entered a deadly pestilence. Whether one believes that it came through the influence of the heavenly bodies or that God, justly angered by our iniquities, sent it for our correction, in any case it had begun several years earlier in the east and killed an innumerable mass of people, spreading steadily from place to place and growing as it moved west.
No human wisdom or provision was of any help. Huge amounts of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with that task; sick people were forbidden to enter the city; advice was given on how to stay healthy; devout persons made humble supplication to God not once but many times, in processions and by other means; but in the spring of that year the sad effects of the plague nonetheless began to appear in an almost miraculous manner. It was not as it had been in the east, where nosebleeds had signaled that death was inevitable. Here the sickness began in both men and women with swelling in the groin and armpits.
The lumps varied in size, some reaching the size of an ordinary apple and others that of an egg, and the people commonly called them gavoccioli. Having begun in these two parts of the body, the gavoccioli soon began to appear at random all over the body. After this point the disease started to alter in nature, with black or livid spots appearing on the arms, the thighs, everywhere. Sometimes they were large and well spaced, other times small and numerous. These were a certain sign of impending death, but so was the swelling. No doctor's advice, no medicine seemed to be of any help.
Either the disease was incurable or the doctors simply didn't know how to cure it. Many tried, though. The number of doctors became huge as a multitude of people, male and female, with no medical training whatsoever took their place alongside those who were properly educated. But no one knew the cause of the pestilence and thus no one could do much about curing it, so not only were few people healed but most of them died by the third day after the aforementioned signs appeared, some a bit sooner or a bit later. Most of them died without any fever or other symptoms.
This pestilence was so powerful that it spread from the ill to the healthy like fire among dry or oily materials. It was so bad that it could be communicated not only through speaking or associating with the sick, but even by touching their clothing or anything else they had touched. What I must say here is so strange that if I and others had not seen it with our own eyes I would hesitate to believe it, let alone write about it, even if I had heard it from trustworthy people. The pestilence spread so efficiently that, not only did it pass from person to person, but if an animal touched the belongings of some sick or dead person it contracted the pestilence and died of it in a short time.
I myself witnessed this with my own eyes, as I said earlier. One day when a poor man had died and his rags had been thrown out in the street, two pigs came along and, as pigs do, they pushed the rags about with their snouts and then seized them with their teeth. Both soon fell down dead on the rags, as if they had taken poison. Such experiences or others like them gave birth to a variety of fears and misconceptions among the living, and the cruel strategy they pursued was to avoid, even flee the sick and their belongings. They thought that by doing so they could stay healthy themselves.
There were some who thought moderate living and the avoidance of excess had a great deal to do with avoiding illness, so they lived apart from others in small groups. They congregated and shut themselves up in houses where no one had been sick, partaking moderately of the best food and the finest wine, avoiding excess in other ways as well, trying their best not speak of or hear any news about the death and illness outside, occupying themselves with music and whatever other pleasures they had available.
Others were of the opposite opinion. They believed that drinking a good deal, enjoying themselves, going about singing and having fun, satisfying all their appetites as much as they could, laughing and joking was sure medicine for any illness. Thus, doing exactly as they prescribed, they spent day and night moving from one tavern to the next, drinking without mode or measure, or doing the same thing in other people's homes, engaging only in those activities that gave them pleasure. They found this easy to do because people had abandoned their possessions as if they no longer had to cope with the problem of living, and most of the houses had become common property with complete strangers making use of whatever homes they arrived at as if they owned them. And they combined this bestial behavior with as complete an avoidance of the sick as they could manage.
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The idea of "youthful indiscretion" has its origins right in the first generation of critics and beginning with Petrarch. See his letter to Boccaccio about Decameron. (Thompson, p. 233)

Humanists

The Petrarchian take on Decameron was continued in the writings of the Humanists who all admired Boccaccio as an active Florentine citizen but all believed that Antique Latin studies were the most important intellectual activity thus they admired Boccaccio's Latin & Greek works and discounted his vernacular works.

Ex: Giannozzo Manetti wrote a joint biog of all three, Three Illustrious Florentine Poets in his section on Boccaccio never mentions the Decameron!
The tradition begun by Petrarch and the 15th C Humanists was followed uncritically by later critics for 600 years. Thomas Bergin, Charles Singleton, Vittore Branca all accept the youthful indiscretion approach.
Boccaccio's Decameron, "A youthful Indiscretion"

The "youthful indiscretion" argument suffers on its face right from the start.

Was he "youthful" when he wrote it? Boccaccio was 35 when he started. (1348) Did he or anyone else consider that "youthful?"
Dante considered it in the middle of one's life.
Boccaccio loved Dante. Therefore we face problem: was not the youthful part of his life.
Idea that it was "youthful" indiscretion came from idea that he wrote it while young and never went back to it.

Thursday February 27, 2020
Hamilton Autograph
Discovery of the Hamilton Autograph in Berlin by Michele Barbi one of the great experts on 14thC Italian literature in the 1930s.

The Hamilton Autograph is an entire MS, of the Decamerion in Boccaccio's own hand.

The Autograph was brought to Laurenziana Library in Florence where Barbi looked it over and exclaimed "E Lui!" but took the secret to his grave. Autograph sent back to Berlin and Barbi never said another thing about it. Later another expert Petrucci went, and examined the Hamilton Autograph and concluded: "E lui!" There was no doubt.

Why did Barbi hide it?
Because Barbi knew that this discovery changed every single article written about the Decameron and its being a youthful indiscretion.
Hamilton Autograph 1948

This all came to light in 1948 when his assistant Alberto Chiari revealed the secret and Charles Singleton went to Berlin to confirm the news.

The discovery of the Hamilton autograph was so shocking to Barbi that he sent the Hamilton autograph back to Berlin and never published a word about his find. Never told anyone about it. The only way we know is that his assistant, Alberto Chiari, told later....in 1948 seven years after the death of Barbi. Barbi couldn't face the meaning of the autograph.

At that time, in 1948, the great American expert Charles Singleton was preparing a new edition of the Decameron so he asked the world's expert on Boccaccio, Armando Petrucci, to come with him to Berlin.

Petrucci went, and examined the Hamilton Autograph and concluded: "E lui!" There was no doubt.

Why did Barbi hide it?
Because Barbi knew that this discovery changed every single article written about the Decameron and its being a youthful indiscretion.
Boccaccio's Decameron, "A youthful Indiscretion"

The Hamilton Autograph Ms. showed that in the last years of his life as he lectured on Dante he went back to work to produce his own definitive edition, an incredible labor for this man approaching 70, and in bad health, and already committed to lecturing on Dante. He copied a whole new edition of his great work himself in his last two years of life.

The most important book of his life.

Thursday February 27, 2020
Seriousness of Decameron

In addition to the history of criticism and the Hamilton Autograph there are other reasons to treat the Decameron as serious work with serious purpose.

1. **the warning at the beginning that like Galeotto**, the book may be tricky.

If it is tricky how could it be so?

Well it would seem other than it is.

And it seems simple: funny stories, diversions, which are presented to us as such by their tellers...stories for ladies.

So if the book is other than what it seems it would be other than a mere set of funny stories to divert silly ladies.
Appearances and Reality

Why so much confusion about the Decameron?
If I am right then there has been a 600 year misunderstanding.

Why this confusion?
It is built into the project right from the start and Boccaccio knew it.

1. Galeotto.
Who was Galeotto?

Divine Comedy,
Canto 5, lines 136-138.

Francesca and Paolo.

la bocca mi bació tutto tremente
Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse:
quel giorno piú non vi leggemo avante.

Who is Galeotto?

A trickster.
A fooler.

The book was a Galeotto that fooled them and led them down the path.
Boccaccio warns us:

Decameron is tricky.
Be careful!
Does anyone believe that the Decameron was really written for the Ladies? only for the ladies? only for ladies in love? (p. 3) especially when we read the stories about the ladies and their stupidity and thick headedness.....their vanity which they themselves reveal to us?(see end of first day).

No one in the 14th Century believed it. We have ample letters of young men writing to friends to get them a copy.

and not ever has anyone thought this was just a book for the ladies. But if not what is the whole Prologue/Intro. about and why there? Is it a trick? A game?

An ironic statement to create a chuckle and or to throw us off our assumptions about books and about serious books or especially about the great big serious book he admired so much that he knew he could not write 1348?

Irony
American Heritage Dictionary: Irony

1. "The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning."

2. "An expression or utterance marked by such a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning."

Boccaccio and Irony

Given what we know about Boccaccio and the D. and Galeotto and his statement that book only for ladies which is hard to believe, is it possible that this is all the opposite of his intention and that the whole of the Decameron is constructed on the basis of Irony?

That nothing is as it seems?

That the statement it is all for the ladies is the opposite of what he intended and that his intention is signaled in his warning to you with the reference to Galeotto?

If so, WHY ?????????????????????????
Why Irony?

Because preaching was all wrong for 1348.

This was a world turned upside down.

Can't use the usual procedures.

Dante's long sermon would have been laughed out of the drawing room in the aftermath of 1348.

Thus the author has to adopt the appearance of play, of sweet unimportant stories that all the time mask his true very serious purpose.
Decameron and Black Death

Everything we say and write about the Decameron must begin with the Black Death and its total transformation of the European world in 1348.

Everything had been turned upside down. (Example: Church and death and burial)

Nothing was ever the same; all the pieties were now suspect. all categories were now rejected. (Categories that Dante could depend upon)

What worked for Dante in 1300 could not work for Boccaccio in 1348.

And it is this "Ironic" structure that most distinguished the DC from the Decameron.

Just as DC is DIRECT so the Decameron is INDIRECT/IRONIC.

Thus it is possible that Boccaccio deliberate chose an "Ironic" structure to his very moral tale.

That he presents it to us and to the world of 1350 as a totally frivolous diversion when inside is something totally other. A moral tale every bit as serious to its author as was the Divine Comedy was to its author.
Structure of Decameron

The whole of the architecture of the Decameron is based on a dualistic structure that establishes right from the start a kind of tension for the reader between the two main aspects of the structure.

1. The Frame

2. The Stories

This means that in opposition to the clarity and directness of the Divine Comedy in which all action moves along a single line always moving toward that one goal from the beginning, here the reader is constantly torn back and forth in and out of two different worlds that clash sharply with one another. Thus there is tension ever present, contrast, ambiguity.
This formalistic split, this formal choice by Boccaccio mirrors perfectly the condition in which he felt he was living with the Black Death marking this terrible cleavage between the old and the new coming almost exactly at mid-century.

Thus the Decameron looks back and forward at the same time mirroring the feelings Boccaccio and his people had of being caught in the middle of some terrible cataclysmic divide.

The old chivalric world was passing, the world of courtiers, of jousts, of knights, and ladies of courtly love. (France)

The new world was the commercial world of the middle class: money, commerce, travel, anything for a buck!!!!!!!!!(Italy)
The World of the Frame
ESCAPE FROM DEATH (The journey to the country)
This is the old world that is passing, the medieval world.

FRANCE
queens, palaces, servants
aristocracy
courts and courtiers
courtly love
fairy tales
music
dancing
games
poems
stories
vanity, mirrors, makeup, self indulgence
escapist lack of reality
escape from the real
escape from death
escape from the city
escape from the ugly real world

LANGUAGE:
rhetorical,
unreal,
phony,
strained,
superficial,
a phony "courtesy,"
is a French world
(vs the new Italian world Boccaccio knows).
World of the Stories: NEW WORLD OF THE MERCHANT

Italy

new men
goodbye to chivalry
real people
people from all classes all stations (vs queens)
lower classes present too for first time in lit
not just sweet world of French courtier
now Egypt, Tunisia, Cyprus etc.
the world of tough commerce
tough bankers
tough lawyers
every real day experience
vivid presentation of sex
(vs sweet euphemisms of courtly love)
travel
sex-lots of it.

LANGUAGE

earthy,
direct,
vernacular,
rough,
language of the people,
none of the rhetorical phoniness,
talk of rough bodily functions,
shit and fucking.

ITALY

here we see the new world of new commercial cities of Italy: Flo/Genoa/Pisa
Decameron registers the new world of triumphant Italy coming in the 15thC
when the Renaissance will make Italy the cultural center of the world
The Decameron is Modern

The Tension Between the Two Worlds
Structure and Reader Experience

Boccaccio's choice of creating two completely different worlds and the pushing them together and thereby the reader too, is the most significant formal aspect of the Decameron.

Whereas the Divine Comedy is unilinear, one straight line, with Dante always present, and his personal voyage always making progress towards its goal, The Decameron is dual and plunges the reader into constant tension, tension between two different worlds.

This choice between the structure of the Divine Comedy and the Decameron alerts us to the difference between the age of Dante and the post-Black Death of the age of Boccaccio.

The Decameron reflects age of moral confusion, crisis, pain and suffering, of INSECURITY which is the most distinct result of the structure of the Decameron.
The Decameron is distinguished right from the start by the tone of irony and trickery and this is echoed in many stories including the first one - a false confession.

These two worlds confront the reader with the reality of mid-14thC Europe caught in the horrors of the Black Death and all the doubt that ensues.

STRUCTURE AND READER

Thus the structure (with a warning...) FORCES reader into an experiential tension structure forces reader into condition of tension structure forces reader into condition....questioning......what is truth ? moral?

which is what he wants.......
The Decameron is Modern

Boccacio one of first people to use the word "modern."
In doing so he alerts us to the beginning of something new in his age.

He and Petrarch are living in new age when all the verities of the age of Dante are up for discussion.

Black Death changed everything.....turned everything upside down.

Thus the Decameron is a work for the modern age.

It anticipates the Modern Condition which is insecurity, relativity, every man his own philosopher every man his own theologian.

In the Modern Age we all have to CONSTRUCT our own reality our own values. That is the Modern dilemma.....to feel alone in the world without security..without foundation.

The Decameron in its brilliant structure introduces us to that condition with a great technique....the structure forces us into the condition of ambiguity as readers and thus we EXPERIENCE the modern condition in reading the book.
HOW DID THE BLACK DEATH CHANGE EUROPE?

CHANGE ITALY?
Fourteenth Century Background

1. Universal chronology breaks down into “ages.”
2. Church breaks down into schism and heresy.
3. Empire breaks down, thanks to collapse of Pope-Emperor partnership.
4. Christendom breaks down into “Europe.”
5. Europe breaks down into nation-states.
6. Italy breaks down into communes.
7. France breaks down into the Hundred Years War. (1337)
8. International language of Latin breaks down into vernaculars.
9. Literatures break down into national/vernacular works.
10. Art breaks down into personal point of view (Giotto).
11. Traditional religion of church breaks down into personal piety, personal inspiration, personal secret religious communication, and mysticism.
12. Christian confidence, piety breaks down under burden of Black Death.
13. Philosophy breaks down into subjectivism, intuition (Ockham).
14. Social cohesion, labor cooperation, entrepreneurial/labor unity breaks down under the impact of Black Death. End of “happy” family manor, beginning of modern labor, unions vs. owners (example: Ciompi Rebellion in Florence, 1381)
15. Agriculture breaks down under over-extension, famine, drought, and then Black Death; no workers, land values explode, overpopulation.
HISTORY CHANGES 1350
NOTHING LOOKS THE SAME AGAIN
THE OLD WORLD AND THE NEW WORLD
SOMETHING COMING
SOMETHING NEW

Petrarch in the Forum
with friend
Giovanni Colonna
Making of the Western Mind
Institute for the Study of Western Civilization
Week 18. Boccaccio

Thursday February 27, 2020
VIA BOCCACCIO
RISTORANTE RUSTICO

Thursday February 27, 2020
Palazzo Pretorio
Where his father served in the gov of city
Making of the Western Mind
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Week 18. Boccaccio