

Welcome Students!!

During our three week Columbia University mini-course, we will read several of the stories from the “Decameron” – a long collection of 100 stories by an author named Giovanni Boccaccio. These stories were written almost 600 years ago, in the middle ages, in Italy. It will feel very strange and foreign in lots of ways – but I think it will also feel surprisingly close and familiar in other ways. It’s often very funny, and it’s lots of fun to read – but it’s also really deep. I think it has a lot to say about the nature of power, and about the resistance to power, and about how people manage to live, and to thrive, and to make the world a little better, in the face of injustice and oppression. This book has been required reading for many years in Columbia’s Core Curriculum.

A Quick Outline of the Overall Situation in the Decameron:

There is a terrible plague in the city of Florence, in Italy, in the year 1348. Ten young aristocrats – some men and some women – escape to a villa in the countryside. They come up with some rules to govern themselves – with a different leader each day – and decide to pass the time by telling one another stories. And the book consists mostly of the stories they tell – 10 of them each day for 10 days: 100 in all.

Assignments:

For our first meeting, please read the preface (pages 1-3) and the introduction to the first day (pages 4-23) and the first story of the first day (pages 24-37)

For our second meeting, please read the first story of the third day (pages 192-199), and the tenth story of the third day (pages 274-279), and the first story of the fourth day (pages 291-301)

For our third meeting, please read the tenth story of the fifth day (pages 432-441), and the ninth story of the seventh day (pages 533-543), and the seventh story of the eighth day (pages 585-610)

If you want to, you can write some short reflections on what you read – and on how it relates to the questions listed on the next page - and bring them in to class. But this is not required.

Questions to think about as you read:

What are laws and customs and other kinds of social power for? Why do we have them? What does Boccaccio seem to be saying about that?

Why does Boccaccio start off with such a detailed and frightening description of the plague? What purpose does that description serve in the book?

What kinds of tools do ordinary people have - I mean people without political or economic power: (in this book that means poor people, working people, women, etc.) - what kinds of tools do they have to make their lives a little better?

Try to think about the main character in each story. What are they faced with? What are their options? How do they respond?