
From the president

Boris Veytsman

I am writing this letter in March 2020 amid the preparation for the coming coronavirus outbreak. Here in the San Francisco Bay Area schools are closed, theaters, museums and libraries are shuttered, sporting events and conferences are canceled. Some people, including me, are privileged to be able to work from home. Unfortunately many are not. We are recommended to practice social distancing: to minimize our gatherings and avoid others.

A friend of mine chose this moment to re-read the *Decameron* by Boccaccio; a very appropriate reading. Let me remind you of the plot of the book: in the wake of plague epidemics in Florence, seven young women and three young men practice social distancing. They escape to the countryside and entertain themselves with stories for ten days of the two weeks they quarantine themselves. Ten narrators times ten days produce one hundred stories, a veritable feast.

Written in the middle of the 14th century, the *Decameron* was initially distributed as handwritten manuscripts. Rhiannon Daniels in her *Boccaccio and the Book Production and Reading in Italy 1340–1520* (Legenda, 2009) mentions 14 extant manuscripts dated to the 14th century, 46 manuscripts dated to the 15th century and seven manuscripts dated to the 16th century, when printed editions became more popular. The wide readership of the *Decameron* led to democratic editions: most of the extant manuscripts were done on paper rather than parchment. The first printed edition of the *Decameron*, according to Daniels, is dated to 1470, just a decade and a half after Gutenberg's Bible. Afterwards the book was reprinted many times during the 15th and 16th centuries. Unlike Gutenberg's Bible, the early editions of the *Decameron* were typeset in Roman type, as befits a humanist book. Daniels writes about the tendency of early printers to make the book widely available by lowering the price: the move from the single column design to the two column one to decrease the page count, the introduction of woodcut illustration instead of manual ones, etc. This tendency mirrors the tendency of the handwritten editions to democratize the book, making it accessible to a wide readership.

An important feature of the *Decameron* is its beauty. Each story is interesting in itself (many later writers including Chaucer borrowed from them), but their subtle interplay with each other and the personalities of their narrators are superb.

Of course, not many Florence inhabitants had the means to practice social distancing in the way

Boccaccio's protagonists did. John Henderson's *Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City* (Yale, 2019), recently reviewed by Erin Maglaque in the *London Review of Books* (42:4, 2020), is a good companion to the *Decameron*. While the science of the 13th century did not provide much knowledge about the plague (the role of fleas was discovered much later), the steps taken by the city health board *Sanità* are impressive and very rational. By cordoning the city, *Sanità* got time to prepare for the inevitable outbreak. The board studied the response of other cities hit before Florence and learned their lessons. It quarantined the families of sick and dead in their homes. The churches were closed. Instead, portable altars were erected on street corners: priests conducted Mass from there, and the people said *Amen* from behind the doors. Confessions were also taken through doors or windows, with priests covering their mouths and noses with waxed cloth. While the medieval medicine (theriac, ground pearls, crushed scorpions, etc.) was probably not very effective, another idea of *Sanità* likely was. Assuming that poor nutrition might provoke the disease, the health board spent enormous sums of money (partially from the draconian fines for quarantine violations) to feed the quarantined people. While some rich Florentines complained that many city's poor never ate as well as during the plague, this measure doubtlessly helped to reduce the number of violations and to increase the immunity of well fed people. The death rate in Florence was 12% of the population; for comparison for Venice it was 33%, in Milan 46%, in Verona 61%.

I am impressed by three features of these stories. First, the beauty, which persisted in the plague infested years. Second, the science and rationality of the response. Third, the solidarity: we overcome infection when we understand that we all are in the same boat. I think they deeply resonate with us, T_EX people. T_EX was born from the striving for beauty and rationality. Following Knuth, we use rational methods to create beautiful pages in service of presentation of beautiful thoughts. Our software is free and available to all, which stresses our solidarity as humans. In our small community we try to embody the ideals that helped us to overcome the travails of the past.

And a last word. When I read papers on COVID, I habitually check how they are typeset. When I see T_EX I feel a pride that somehow our efforts contributed to the common task.

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