

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BOCCACCIO ASSOCIATION

– *studium fuit alma poesis* –



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ABA OFFICERS

Simone Marchesi
Princeton University, President

Kristina Olson
George Mason University, Vice President

Valerio Cappozzo
University of Mississippi, Secretary

Fabian Alfie
University of Arizona, Treasurer

Message from the President & the Vice President

Simone Marchesi, Kristina Olson

Dear Friends in Boccaccio,

We hope that you are well in these trying times. In the past, the Presidential message to the Members of the Association has often served as the place where an invitation to reflect on the importance of Boccaccio's message would be extended. There is unfortunately no need for that today. The global pandemic that has hit our lives has made Boccaccio a quite relevant point of reference in our culture.

From the coinage and circulation in the news of terms like 'Boccaccio-ing' to refer to the exodus from hard-hit urban centers, to the various historical and sociological reflections on the effects of past epidemics that appear daily in our newsfeeds in social media, the age-defining plague that constitutes the essential backdrop of the *Decameron* has proved inescapable. As a community that has devoted its passionate or professional attention to that text, we may ask ourselves how our expertise may serve the communities in which we live.

One possible way to do so is to create an archive that would document and preserve the many initiatives which are already developing around us, as we add our own. We believe that experiments such as the collective virtual readings of the *Decameron* promoted by the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa or the Coronavirus tales hosted by the Humanities Watch, the Synetic Theater project with one hundred modern retellings of the tales, and others, are not only relevant and helpful in shaping our response to today's crisis, but may serve as a basis for our reflection in the future.

To that effect, we here extend an invitation to the ABA membership to note such events and projects with us as they arise. Furthermore, and partly to the same point, acting upon the recommendations emerged from the roundtable about Boccaccio in the digital era held at our fourth Triennial Conference at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, we also found necessary to create an opportunity for a Digital Coordinator to design and maintain pages on the ABA website showcasing these and other digital initiatives.

In the pages of this Newsletter, you will find detailed information about the many initiatives that the ABA has promoted in prima persona in the recent past and that it plans to support in the near future. We just single out here a few of them.

First, the awarding of another round of the Giuseppe Velli Prize, which this year includes awards in the graduate-student essay category and for a creative project; the launch of a Paleography School in Italy dedicated to the study of Boccaccio's own codices and the funding of two special travel fellowships connected to it, named after a great Boccaccio philologist of the past, Attilio Hortis; the institution of a new graduate-student travel fellowship to the Triennial Conference, honoring the memory of Professor Pier Massimo Forni; the upcoming release of two *Lectura Boccaccii* volumes in the fall of 2020: Day 4, edited by Michael Sherberg, and Day 8, edited by Will Robins. All these initiatives attest to the vitality of our Association and the immense generosity of the individual members who have poured their energies into the ideation, the care, and the promotion of these exciting and lasting contributions to our common mission. Without them, which is to say without you, the Association will simply not exist. The newly-appointed Digital Coordinator would help maintain a page on the ABA website which details current and completed projects. Such a page would serve as a clearinghouse for this information, ensuring visibility for what already exists and what is currently underway.


We will close by noting that the current officers -- Simone Marchesi (President), Kristina Olson (Vice-President), Valerio Cappozzo (Secretary), and Fabian Alfie (Treasurer) -- will end their term on May 31, 2020 (in the picture from right to left).

The new team of officers -- Kristina Olson, President, Valerio Cappozzo, Vice-President, Maggie Fritz Morkin, Secretary, Elsa Filosa, Treasurer -- will begin their work the next day, with the same spirit of determination, collaboration and ambition that marked the officers before them.



Velli Prize 2019

We are pleased to announce the winners of the
2019 Velli Prize



Best graduate essay, ex aequo:

Alyssa Granacki (Duke University)
*Domesticating Philosophy:
Dante's Women in Boccaccio*

Megan Tomlinson (UCLA)
Travel as Transgression:
*The Mobility of Women in Giovanni Boccaccio's
De mulieribus claris and the Decameron*

Best creative work:

Lorenzo Bacchini (Johns Hopkins University)
Decameron VIII.3
Calandrino and the Heliotrope
(short video)

CONGRATULATIONS!!!

Digital Coordinator Initiative

The Association seeks volunteers among its membership to assume the role of Digital Coordinator.

The DC will be charged with:

- a. the creation and maintenance of a dedicated web page on the ABA website collecting links to national and international existing digital projects related to the life and works of Giovanni Boccaccio
- b. the collection, evaluation, and potential advertising within the membership of new digital projects of the same nature which are brought to his/her attention by Association Members
- c. the collection, evaluation, and potential advertising within the membership of calls for collaboration on such digital project. In addition to the dedicated webpage, the DC will also receive dedicated space on the ABA Newsletter for the promotion of new projects and calls for collaboration.

The DC role does not entail any remuneration, and publication of any material on the webpage as well as on the Newsletter is to be coordinated with the ABA officers, in particular the Secretary (Maggie Fritz Morkin, mfritzm@email.unc.edu)



We are pleased to announce the launch of
ABA newly designed website!

www.abaonline.us

We hope you enjoy its new uncluttered design
that is easy to navigate, and more user-friendly.
Many thanks to Catherine Adoyo



AMERICAN BOCCACCIO ASSOCIATION

Vando si in coral qui sa undi soletto.
nella camera sua trivile penoso.
in sopra uene un avian giouuenero

HOME HISTORY ACTIVITIES ABA NEWSLETTERS ABOUT US WEB OF BOCCACCIO MEMBERSHIP SEARCH

HOME

Welcome

The American Boccaccio Association, founded in 1974, is a non-profit scholarly organization dedicated to the promotion of the study and teaching of Giovanni Boccaccio's life and works.

The ABA sponsors sessions on Boccaccio at major conferences, including those of the AAIS, the ICMS in Kalamazoo, the MLA and the Renaissance Society of America, of which it is an official affiliated organization.



AMERICAN BOCCACCIO ASSOCIATION

HOME HISTORY ACTIVITIES ABA NEWSLETTERS ABOUT US WEB OF BOCCACCIO MEMBERSHIP SEARCH

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the American Boccaccio Association costs \$25 per year for regular memberships, \$15 for students, or \$40 for sustaining memberships. Sustaining members provide additional resources for the association's activities. Scholars who reside most of the year outside the United States are currently exempt from association dues. Your membership dues enable the Association to support initiatives based upon the ABA's core mission to promote the work of il nostro and more generally Trecento studies. To this end, the ABA is a society of collaborative international scholarship through its web presence, scholarly journal, bibliographic efforts, conference panels, and not least its own triennial conference, which will take place again in 2019. These funds enable the Association to maintain and enhance these activities, and contribute to future endeavors to support research and outreach in Boccaccio studies.

Become a Member

ABA Summer School in Medieval Paleography (moved to June 2021)

The American Boccaccio Association Summer School in Paleography will comprise a series of intensive courses taking place in the major historical libraries of Florence and Rome. The seminar includes methodological and practical components taught by experts in the field from a variety of Italian universities and institutions. The teaching program includes morning classes and afternoon supervised study sessions in the libraries. Applicants should be affiliated with a North American university and have a basic reading knowledge of the Italian language.

Qualified applicants should send their CV and a statement which explains their interest in participating in the seminar (maximum 250 words) by September 30, 2020 to Valerio Cappozzo (vcappozz@olemiss.edu) and Susanna Barsella (barsella@fordham.edu).

The Seminar is open to scholars and graduate students alike.

Thanks to an anonymous donor and named after Attilio Hortis, the ABA will award two travel fellowships in the amount of \$250 to support graduate students and contingent faculty participation in the course.



*The American Boccaccio Association
in collaboration with the Ente Nazionale
Giovanni Boccaccio presents:*

THE SUMMER SCHOOL IN MEDIEVAL PALEOGRAPHY: MANUSCRIPT CULTURE IN BOCCACCIO'S TIMES

Florence-Rome, ~~June 5-18, 2020~~
June 3-12, 2021!!

The seminar is taught by professors:

Irene Ceccherini
Marco Corsi
Teresa De Robertis
Maddalena Signorini
Stefano Zamponi

SEMINAR

The American Boccaccio Association Summer School in Paleography is a series of intensive courses taught directly in the major historical libraries of Florence and Rome. The seminar includes methodological and practical components taught by experts in the field from a variety of Italian universities and institutions. The teaching program includes morning classes and afternoon supervised study sessions in the libraries. Applicants should be affiliated with a North American university and have a basic reading knowledge of the Italian language. Qualified applicants should send their CV and a statement which explains their interest in participating in the seminar (maximum 250 words) by **March 5, 2020** to Valerio Cappozzo (vcappozz@olemiss.edu) and Susanna Barsella (barsella@fordham.edu).

The Seminar is open to scholars and graduate students alike.


TRAVEL GRANTS

The American Boccaccio Association will provide two travel grants of \$250 each to graduate students. In addition to a CV and brief statement of interest, graduate students should also provide a brief description of their research project in the field of Boccaccio studies (including title, abstract, description of the project, contribution to the field, and selected bibliography).

PROGRAM COSTS

The program fee for the seminar is \$550 (USD) to be paid to the American Boccaccio Association upon notification of acceptance.

Participants will receive notice of their acceptance by mid-March 2020.



Paradigms of Pandemic: Reading Boccaccio's Introduction to Decameron Day I, Today

by *Simone Marchesi*

A few weeks ago, at the start of my University's response to the current pandemic, the Chair of my Department asked me to lead a zoom conversation with students and colleagues about the Introduction to Day I of the *Decameron*. The brief for the exercise, the first in a series that was eventually to include a discussion of La Fontaine's *Fables* and Camus' *The Plague*, was simple. Focusing on his account of the 1348 epidemic in Florence, I was to try and tease out from Boccaccio's pages their relevance to our situation today. To indulge my Chair's kind request and do my part in the collegial effort to keep our Department's intellectual life going in a time of social rarefaction and interpersonal distancing, I picked up Boccaccio's text and read it one more time. He was right to ask that we talk about those pages together. What follows is my way of continuing the conversation that took place around that reading.

In the Introduction to the first Day of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio readily admitted that his account of the consequences of the social cataclysm brought about by the plague of 1348 would produce some of the darkest and most difficult pages of the *Decameron*. Yet, he insisted that readers should start there, and we may want to do so as well. Reading the Introduction to Day I during the Covid-19 pandemic may help us see in a clearer light, and potentially articulate more effectively, some of the concerns we share today. The *Decameron* may be especially valuable, I feel, for its constant call to examine the way we conceptualize and speak about what surrounds us. From the long geographical and chronological distance of the epidemic in Florence, that text may preemptively debunk some of the current myths about the emergency we are collectively working through and help us counteract the rhetoric that has associated itself to them.

In Boccaccio's view, for instance, the plague is not treated as a social leveler. On the contrary, he registers and signals that there is inequality in death. The rich may die as the poor do, but they do not die like them. Boccaccio's accounting of the different mortality rates among the implied 'grandi' and the 'minuta gente' (as well as the "gran parte della mezzana") is not the incidental reflex of an epidemiologist's scruple, but the indication of an unredeemed social gradient, which we may do well to bear in mind today. It is the powerless and not the powerful who "da speranza o da povertà ritenuti nelle lor case ... a migliaia per giorno infermavano, e ... quasi senza alcuna redenzione, tutti morivano" (I.Intro.36). The plague did certainly shock the social norm and unsettle its articulation, as his text reminds us throughout, but it did not erase the lines between the elite and the servants, the dominant and the subaltern in the world it affected.



Secondly, for the *Decameron* the plague did not admit to any easy determination of causality. When Boccaccio strategically refrained from adjudicating the origin and finality of the plague, listing as potential explanations natural causes (the “operazion de’ corpi superiori”) as much as divine punishment (the “giusta ira di Dio” of paragraph 8), he gave us a way to reflect on the current constructing of alternative chains of causation for the Covid-19. In his text, the suspension consisted in reading the situation in terms of either divine providential correction or natural automatism. And Boccaccio allowed both readings to stand. Today, the design-and-retribution model has perhaps mutated into the wide range of conspiratorial theories, hypothesizing obscurely transparent finalities in the artificial creation of the virus. Correspondingly, the chance-automatism model has taken the form of a call for a rethinking the rules of human engagement with the environment, leading to a potential redefinition of the Anthropocene. Whichever of these mutually dissonant assessments we subscribe to, emphasizing religious-conspiracy explanations or natural-environmental ones, the *Decameron* reminds us that, in positing and pursuing this kind of alternative, we are catering to the same consolatory thinking to which Boccaccio had already provided a reasoned answer –bracketing both hypotheses as beside the point.

Thirdly, in the *Decameron* the plague is not presented as a state of exception for the social body that it affects, but as one of its determinants. After having reviewed the practical dissolution of all rituality of death in front of the generalized mortality, Boccaccio adds a controversial and obscure sentence to which he apparently attributes some paraenetic, if not even prescriptive, force. “Assai manifestamente apparve,” he writes “che quello che il naturale corso delle cose non avea potuto con piccoli e radi danni a’ savi mostrare doversi con pazienza passare, la grandezza de’ mali enziandio i semplici far di ciò scorti e non curanti” (41). I am not sure what the ultimate lesson of these lines was meant to be for Boccaccio’s first audience. What clearly emerges, however, is a simple notion that may be useful for us today. Mortality is nothing new for the social body; what may be new –and what becomes perverse– is the social response that a community (Boccaccio’s as well as our own) provides to it. Read today, it seems to me, these lines suggest that the plague does not trigger a state of exception in the social body, as a war does and would, but recalls its reason for being. Perhaps, thus, in framing the epidemic we may want to consider alternatives to a rhetoric that avails itself of the metaphor of armed conflict. Perhaps terms like ‘battle’ and ‘frontlines,’ ‘heroism’ and ‘sacrifice’ are not necessarily the ones that best serve our situation. Just as we may consider alternatives to a thinking that equates the need to curb an epidemic with an exceptional suspension of rights rather than the assumption of a constitutionally communal responsibility.



Finally, but not with the least importance, what appears to interest the *Decameron* is to use the plague to measure the ethical response of a society in terms of collective and not individual goals. Boccaccio's procedure in reviewing the various responses given to the outbreak of the plague is. Seemingly, his condemnation extends to all potential avoidance behaviors he surveys in the central paragraphs of the Introduction: fleeing the city or staying there, pursuing pleasures in moderation or excess or even finding a middle path between the two extremes – they are all differently culpable behaviors. The fact that each of them is found wanting, however, does not absolve them all. To the contrary, it points to their common fault: their innate egotism. Societies, Boccaccio intimates to us, function or fail insofar as they keep their focus on remaining collective bodies. Even self-isolation today does not necessarily imply atomization, insofar as it does not become another aspect of the self-serving quality of an individual choice. Rather, it may be the result of a social choice that is collectively embraced –one that values a true political solution to shared crises, not a personal way out of them. It is not coincidental that the only response to the crisis of 1348 that the *Decameron* endorses is precisely the temporary and carefully-structured community of the brigata, a society in which story-telling becomes a non-zero-sum game of collective interaction.

One final consideration is perhaps in order here. When I was first asked to start the conversation whose essential points you have just read here, I resisted the idea. I felt that one of the advantages afforded to students and teachers working on culturally distant texts is the freedom from looking for exactly the kind of immediate relevance that the exercise seemingly implied. If a classic is a classic (and the *Decameron* certainly is one), it is such because it contains the potential to answer ever-new questions. Thus, we should perhaps be asking the text questions that are actually new. We should try, that is, to ask questions that are different from the ones the text was called to answer in the first place. Thus I reasoned. Yet, I also realized that if, as readers of Boccaccio's texts, we have trained ourselves in the crisis-response protocols of a distant culture, this does not absolve us from serving our own. Any specific competence comes with an obligation to try and translate it into this time and space. It is a collective mandate that I feel we should honor because, and not in spite of our sources' 'unmodernity.' We may be tempted to tell us otherwise today, but the *Decameron* is there to remind us, as Käthe Kollwitz stated not so long ago, that *Jede Gabe ist eine Aufgabe*.



You can reach the Virtual Brigata
on the ABA WebPage

www.abaonline.us

or by joining the
ABA Facebook Group
(American Boccaccio Association):

www.facebook.com/groups/796853600461573/

Contact:
Dr. Valerio Cappozzo

The University of Mississippi
Department of Modern Languages
Bondurant Hall C-115
P.O. Box 1848 - 38677 University MS
Tel. (662) 915-6980
Email: vcappozz@olemiss.edu

