Extremes of high and low

by Eric Ormsby

A review of The Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio

Once upon a time people swapped stories with one another. In my own Southern family these stories were usually passed around in the evening, on the porch, as the twilight thickened and the first fireflies began to pulse above the lawn. The stories involved the calamitous fates of distant relatives—the more distant the better—or the escapades of those my grandmother or my aunt or uncle considered their social inferiors. I preferred the second category since they involved hapless and disreputable characters, evoked with a certain condescending humor. My mother told stories while she was driving. As the tale grew more and more complicated she would slow down to below the speed limit, but then, as she approached the denouement, she would hit the accelerator and we would be hurled forward to the climax. This had a way of imprinting those stories on my mind; even the most rambling of them were tinged with menace, enhanced by the shouts and honks of the outraged drivers behind us. Such stories, whether recounted on the porch or behind the wheel of the Buick, often had a moral. Behind the personages of prodigal cousin Byne or “Old Jeff Lemon” stood the cautionary figures of Prodigality, Laziness, or Improvidence.

Not much had changed since the days of Boccaccio, seven hundred years before. In his Decameron,
now superbly translated by Wayne A. Rebhorn, ten young aristocrats take refuge in Fiesole while the plague rages in Florence below and swap stories in the late afternoon or early evening. The stories involve hidden kings and princes in exile, impoverished knights and long-suffering ladies; they invoke historical figures such as Saladin or “the King of Babylon.” They also recount the misadventures of merchants and mountebanks, the ruses and reversals of lascivious priests and randy nuns, the pratfalls of dunces; the rascals are often punished but not always, the innocent are sometimes vindicated but again, not always. The noble are improbably noble and high-minded while the ignoble positively wallow, sometimes quite literally, in ditches brimming with excrement. There is something almost Manichaean in the contrasts: Love is set against Lust, Magnanimity against Meanness, Virtue against Vice. These are tales of “the extremes of high and low,” as Boccaccio himself puts it.

Boccaccio sets his stories within a strict frame, as the title of the work indicates. There are ten participants—seven women and three men—and they tell their tales, ten a day, over a span of ten days. As Rebhorn points out in his informative introduction, Boccaccio designed this structure in a nod of homage to Dante, one of his two models and examplars (the other was Petrarch, a long-time friend and mentor); the Divine Comedy is made up of one hundred cantos and some of Dante’s characters, such as the poet Guido Cavalcanti, reappear in the Decameron. Through this device of the “frame story,” with its well-demarcated divisions, Boccaccio manages to constrain his own narrative exuberance by a sort of mathematical propriety. The frame story, which has as one of its effects to set events at a certain ironic distance, structures The 1001 Nights as well as earlier collections, such as the Sanskrit Panchatantra or the voluminous Kathasaritsagara, the “Ocean of Rivers of Stories,” by the eleventh-century Kashmiri pundit Somadeva—none of which were known to Boccaccio, even if some of their motifs resurface in the Decameron. The device would later serve Chaucer, who admired Boccaccio, in The Canterbury Tales.

In his excellent endnotes Rebhorn identifies and points out Boccaccio’s sources for many of his tales and he also suggests parallels with earlier collections. Through no fault of his own, however, this leaves the larger question unanswered. Where did Boccaccio, or any of the other compilers, get these motifs? How is it that stories seem to float about in some common empyrean, despite differences of language, of period, and of custom? Like proverbs they travel the world without benefit of passport; they infiltrate the most far-flung realms. Moreover, the traditions that take them over make them very much their own. In The 1001 Nights, to take one small example (Night 327), Prince Ali, reduced to beggarmom, recognizes his long-lost love Zumurrud only when, disguised as a king, she summons him to her bed and he discovers, much to his relief, that the “king” is in fact a woman, his own Zumurrud. In the Decameron (Day 2, tale 3), Alessandro makes the same happy discovery, this time of his lost love disguised as an “abbot.” The amorous details are very similar to those of the Nights:

After many polite refusals, Alessandro undressed and got into bed. The Abbot put his hand on Alessandro’s chest and then, to Alessandro’s great astonishment, began touching him the way amorous young girls fondle their lovers, causing Alessandro to suspect that the Abbot was in the
throes of some unnatural passion. . . . Alessandro placed his hand on the Abbot’s chest and discovered two small, round breasts, as firm and delicate as if they had been made of ivory.

The Nights, by contrast, are much more explicit:

She [Zumurrud] took Ali’s hand and put it between her thighs. The spot was smooth as silk, white, very white. . . . “Weird, weird,” said Ali to himself, “a king built like a woman!” but then desire took hold of him, his member grew hard, hard . . .

Boccaccio, as Rebhorn makes plain, is generally rather coy about sexual details (as opposed to the scatological); he prefers fanciful euphemisms—“nightingale” for penis is one typical example. Despite such differences, however, the use of the above motif doesn’t seem coincidental.

Rebhorn notes that “this story has no historical source.” This reminds me yet again of my own family’s stories. My grandmother liked to tell about a man who was so lazy—the very epitome of “shiftlessness”—that when his neighbors brought him a cartload of corn, to save him from starvation, he merely asked, “Is it shucked?” When they told him it wasn’t, he lazily replied, “Well, boys, drive the cart on.” I was surprised to learn later that this was a classic American folktale which my grandmother—who claimed to have known the man!—had simply taken over and made her own. This only goes to show that storytellers—and grandmothers—are fabricators as well as fabulators. So too was Boccaccio, as Rebhorn documents his tales, many of which seem to have been his own irrepressible inventions.

Rebhorn’s translation is excellent. He is sensitive to the fact that Boccaccio uses several different registers, from formal prose to the colloquial to dialect, and he works hard to bring these various nuances across. Sometimes his translation startles a bit; he makes no apologies for using American slang: several of the characters address each other as “buddy,” for example. At times he goes overboard, as when he renders the Italian moglia mia casciata, melata, delicata as “my cheesy-weesy, sweet honeybun of a wife.” Then again, such touches have the effect of bringing the usually quite stately Italian to rather boisterous life.

Rebhorn argues that the Decameron was the final work of Boccaccio “the medieval poet,” before he became, under Petrarch’s influence, a “Renaissance scholar.” At least two of Boccaccio’s recurrent themes support this contention. The first is an untrammeled pleasure in the physical punishments visited on certain characters, whether rogues or dupes. Nothing seems to amuse the “gentle ladies” in the garden of Fiesole more than to hear of a good thrashing administered or of a dirty trick played on some deserving (or undeserving) wretch. Characters are trapped in coffins, plunged into sewage, or locked in trunks while their despoilers cavort around them, and these shenanigans always occasion hilarity. Sometimes this is just retribution. One husband, confined in a linen chest, has to listen as his best friend copulates with his wife on top of the chest, but since this occurs after he has also had his wicked way with the friend’s wife, the revenge—what Dante would have called the contrapasso—seems merited (in any case, the story concludes with the two couples embarking on a life of blithe wife-swapping). We are reminded again and again that this is
still the world of Dante and of Petrarch as well as, later, of Chaucer, Rabelais, and Cervantes, a world where nothing is funnier than a good drubbing.

A second theme, one that shows Boccaccio at his most medieval, lies in his exemplars of virtue. Of these the most insufferable must be “patient Griselda,” the protagonist of the final story on the tenth day. No matter what enormities Gualtieri, her cruel and arrogant husband, inflicts on her, she remains docile and imperturbable. He pretends to have her children taken off and killed, he abuses her publicly, he reduces her to the status of a servant in her own household and then announces that he is setting her aside to marry a younger woman. In all this Griselda hardly utters a murmur. She is a female Job, but even Job on his dungheap seems like a shameless kvetcher alongside Griselda. When her children are restored to her and Gualtieri reveals that thirteen years of domestic cruelty have merely been his way of testing her, Griselda greets the news with the same equanimity with which she endured her torments. I have to confess that after years of gritting my teeth while reading this story, I’m beginning to side with Gualtieri, horrible as he is. Griselda is a bit like the tar-baby in the Brer Rabbit stories; no matter what’s done to her she never punches back.

She would have driven a milder man than Gualtieri to rage. Even so, her very passivity, her unwavering endurance, give her a powerfully negative presence in the tale. You may not admire her, you may wish, as I do, that you could give her a stiff boot in the backside, but you don’t forget her.

Throughout The Decameron Boccaccio engages in a virulent and sustained assault on the corruption and hypocrisy of the clergy. Sometimes this is quite witty. When “Abraham the Jew” (Day 1, story 2) is pressured by a Christian friend to convert, he refuses to do so until he has visited Rome where he can “see the man who you say is the Vicar of God on earth and to observe his life and habits, and likewise those of his brothers, the cardinals.” When Abraham does go to Rome and witnesses the “lust, avarice, gluttony, fraud, envy, pride and the like” that characterize the clergy, he ends up converting to Christianity; he explains to his flabbergasted friend, that amid all the corruption, “the Holy Spirit must indeed be its foundation and support.” Otherwise, how could this “forge of diabolical works” not only survive but continue to thrive? In another tale (Day 9, story 2), an abbess who has been disporting herself with a priest in her cell is summoned to the cell of a younger nun who has been spotted entertaining her own lover. In her haste the abbess puts her lover’s trousers on her head instead of her veil; when she upbraids her, the younger nun simply tells her “to tie up her cap” and the abbess realizes that she has been caught out. As Boccaccio mischievously remarks, the abbess declares that from then on all the nuns can respond to “the goadings of the flesh,” as long as they do so discreetly.
Even in his most scathing depictions of lubricious priests and wanton nuns, Boccaccio’s manner remains strangely genial. For all his indebtedness to Dante and Petrarch, hardly models of geniality, Boccaccio regards his frolicking clerics more as burlesques than as irredeemably damned souls. He exposes them with a sly affection of regard. In any case he must have known, beyond any doubt, that they had given him the best stories in the book.

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