

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Ruggiero, Guido. Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance

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Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094849ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39792>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Watt, M. (2022). Review of [Ruggiero, Guido. Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 347–349. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39792>



Ruggiero, Guido.

Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 306. ISBN 978-0-6742-5782-5 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

For those of us who engage regularly with Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the frequent use of the adjective "unprecedented" during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–22, seemed remarkably naïve. Unprecedented in our own lifetimes perhaps, but certainly not in the arc of history. Images of refrigerator trucks being used as makeshift morgues in New York City immediately brought to my mind the fourteenth-century accounts of cadavers outnumbering the living and of plague victims dying alone who were compelled to sew up their own funeral shrouds from the inside. The lockdowns, curfews, quarantines, and self-isolation similarly could not help but recall the lonely lives of the ladies to whom Boccaccio dedicated the *Decameron* in an attempt to bring some happiness to their otherwise very dreary existence. For those teaching medieval literature during this recent modern horror show, the concerns and circumstances of Boccaccio's *brigata*, however, provided students and their instructors with a safe space within which to process the trauma of a global event that was in so many cases highly personal. I only wish that I had read Guido Ruggiero's *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance* before the fall of 2021, for it would have greatly enhanced my own teaching. In his book, Ruggiero provides scholars and students with a concrete study of how the stories of the *Decameron* might have been understood at the time they were written. In so doing he has created an extremely helpful framework within which to compare how modern readers and medieval readers processed not only sex and love (as the title of the book suggests) but also violence, deception, trauma, and grief. I have often told my own students that in the absence of a time machine, literature is the only means by which we can have a conversation with people of the past, but what Ruggiero has done here is also provide a cross-temporal translator to facilitate that conversation.

Love and Sex in the Time of the Plague is not written in a conventional scholarly style. The first chapter, "Laughter," for example, challenges the reader to put himself/herself in the shoes of Calandrino in the fifth story of Day 9. The challenge lasts a little too long, but the point is well made as Ruggiero's reader experiences precisely the type of exercise that Ruggiero is urging

upon us. After the chapter on laughter, Ruggiero shifts gears and colludes with his reader in another way in the second chapter, “Violence.” Becoming a storyteller like Boccaccio himself, Ruggiero recounts a number of the more violent narratives of the *Decameron* and then shifts to professor/philosopher mode, discoursing on the relationship between violence, love, and identity as they were understood in Boccaccio’s time, and how this interaction evolved throughout the Renaissance.

The third chapter, “Sorrow,” focuses on the grisly tale of the severed head in Lisabetta’s basil pot (Day IV, 5) and features a contemplation of the brothers’ motives in keeping the murder secret—concerns for honour—and a discourse on Lisabetta’s isolation as a result. In the same study, Ruggiero also considers the significance of the figure of Saint John in a Florentine context, thus demonstrating a profound understanding of the role of contemporary culture in the *Decameron*.

In chapter 4, “Transcendence,” Ruggiero deftly confronts the courtly love tradition in which the vocabularies of sexual and spiritual ecstasy are often intertwined. Here, he plays also with the *Decameron*’s preoccupation with the Garden of Eden trope, and the loss of innocence engendered by temptation. Into this discussion he inserts Michel Foucault’s theories together with his own interpretation of the story of Alibech putting the devil back in hell, to contextualize this *novella* within fourteenth-century millennialism.

In “Power,” the fifth chapter that comes before the conclusion, Ruggiero takes on the difficult tenth story of Day 10 (the long-suffering Griselda) and the notion of a “happy ending.” Ruggiero posits that Griselda’s story, told by Dioneo (the “new God”) is a harbinger of a new kind of love and of a new era. Indeed, the idea of the *Decameron* itself as a new creation story, as an allegorical fresh start, is not unique, but Ruggiero’s detailed examination of the role of love, sexual pleasure, and power in a marriage, and what it might mean for a post-plague world, links it explicitly to the generalized sense of doom that prevailed even before the Black Death of 1348 and to the Joachimite prophecies of the coming age of the Holy Spirit. In this, Ruggiero has revealed the *Decameron* as a work in which theological and historical approaches to literature might be reconciled.

The author’s many years of research and writing are clearly evident in this book. In many ways *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague* reads like a memoir of a long and productive academic career as Ruggiero, at times, waxes philosophical

and, at others, reflects upon the scholarship that has informed his thinking over time. The narrative style is approachable and includes numerous subheadings that evoke the brief descriptions of the *novelle* that guide the reader through Boccaccio's collection of one hundred stories. For scholars familiar with the *Decameron*, the long descriptions of the plots of the various *novelle* might seem unnecessary, but this is one of the many features that allows this book to speak to a broader audience beyond the academy.

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