

“Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum”;
the Absence of War in the *Decameron*

“**T**he invisible self [...], the great tradition of realistic fiction, the private life in the foreground. History a distant rumble of gunfire, somewhere offstage. In Jane Austin not even a rumble.” Thus David Lodge¹ with particular reference to the novel, which was the successor to the novella before the short story yet existed. There could scarcely be two authors more unlike than Boccaccio and Jane Austen, but of the rumble of gunfire, just beginning to be heard in his age, or any aspect of war, there is little indeed to be found in the *Decameron*. It seems that the great horror of the Plague, from which the company of young people has escaped, but which lurks in the dark corners of the readers’ mind after the “dolorosa ricordanza” of the *Introduzione*, has given way to the description of the “luoghi dilettevoli” of the retreat of the first days and was too great to leave room for other, more limited, yet seemingly less ineluctable evils, but, for some reason, war is almost entirely absent from the *Decameron* in contrast, for instance, with the *Trecentonovelle* of only a few decades later.²

It is true that there had been no great campaign, scarcely a pitched battle since the Florentine defeat of Altopascio, which must have made an impression on Boccaccio as a boy. Castruccio Castracane, the victor on that occasion, is later remembered by Sacchetti for example in novella 5, where he is encamped in the Valdinievole and we shall have occasion to mention him further. The only war of the period was the struggle between Venice and Genoa, conducted almost entirely at sea and in any case remote from both Florence and Naples. Curiously enough the only “battle” described in the *Decameron* is the naval one between two galleys in 4.4, incidental to Elissa’s tragic tale of the loves of Gerbino and the beautiful Tunisian princess. In another tale of an exotic princess, the Gostanza of 2.7, daughter of the Soldan of Babilonia, is betrothed by her father to the King of Garbo in gratitude because “in una grande sconfitta, la quale aveva data ad una gran moltitudine d’Arabi che addosso gli erano venuti, l’aveva maravigliosamente

¹ David Lodge *Changing Places* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 250).

² Editor’s note: Stych cites Boccaccio’s text from Pietro Fanfani’s edition.

ajutato.” Again it is a distant affair, between the forces of foreign powers and only alluded to obliquely as the motive for an action which is to set in train the long story of Gostanza’s adventures.

There is mention of a real and important conflict in 10.9, namely the Third Crusade, but there is also considerable confusion of the sequence of events from a strictly historical point of view, though perhaps Boccaccio is forestalling criticism of chronological confusion of which he was aware when he puts into Panfilo’s mouth the following words:

dico adunque che, secondo alcuni affermano al tempo dello imperadore Federigo primo a racquistare la Terra Santa si fece per li Cristiani un general passaggio. La qual cosa il Saladino [...] alquanto dinanzi sentendo, seco propose di volere personalmente vedere gli apparecchiamenti de’ signori cristiani a quel passaggio, per meglio poter provvedersi.

It is in the course of this reconnaissance that Saladin is so courteously entertained as a supposed merchant by messer Torello. The latter, “venuto il tempo del passaggio [...] si dispose ad andarvi del tutto,” accordingly sails from Genoa to Acre where he joins the Christian forces. These are overtaken by a great pestilence after which, “che si fosse l’arte o la fortuna del Saladino, quasi tutto il rimaso degli scampati Cristiani da lui a man salva fur presi, e per molte città divisi et imprigionati, fra’ quali presi messer Torello fu uno.”

This makes a convincing narrative sequence but is historically incorrect. Federico did indeed collect an army in 1189 and, after considerable delay in crossing through Hungary and the Eastern Empire, arrived in Armenia where, as is well known, he perished in 1190, as a consequence of which only a small remnant of his army reached Palestine. The Third Crusade was thus stalled until the arrival of the forces of France and England in the following year. The great victories of Saladin, however, at Tiberias and the Horns of Hattin, followed by the recapture of Jerusalem and other places, took place in 1187 and were in fact the basic reason for the launching of the Third Crusade; thus the chronological order of events is reversed in the novella. In 1.5 there is mention of Corrado di Monferrato in this Crusade with a reference to his valour, but nothing more.

In the great range of characters, seemingly of every rank and profession, from kings and princes to brigands and thieves, from bishops to friars, merchants, poets and painters, innkeepers, cooks, grooms and gardeners, there are very few military men, who must however have constituted a considerable class at the time, notwithstanding the absence of big campaigns, and who must have been the heroes, or perhaps the villains of stories worthy of narration.

Among the few military figures who do appear, Charles of Anjou, the judicial murderer of Corradino, is described by Fiammetta, the narrator of

10.6, as celebrated for his “magnifica impresa, e poi per la vittoria avuta del re Manfredi,” and also for causing the flight of the Ghibellines from Florence on his entry into the city in 1287. These however are only echoes of events long past and are now merely quoted to demonstrate magnanimity in one who, now past the age for amorous adventures, arranges a good marriage for the daughter of the exiled Ghibelline Neri degli Uberti, with whom he has fallen in love. In the introduction to 10.7 the “virile magnificenzia” of the “buon re Carlo” is praised by the company in general, although a Ghibelline lady³ is critical and Pampinea, in the novella itself, redresses the balance by celebrating the magnanimity of Peter of Aragon towards a girl who has fallen in love with him after seeing him run a tilt at a tournament “[n]el tempo che i Franceschi di Sicilia furon cacciati.” There is again a political flavour to the comments on Pampinea’s novella in the introduction to 10.8: “Filomena, per comandamento del Re [Dioneo], essendo Pampinea di parlar ristata, e già avendo ciascuna commendato il re Pietro, e più la Ghibellina che l’altre, incominciò.”

The only professional soldier to be represented is Gulfardo, a German mercenary (8.1), and Boccaccio was obviously familiar with men of this type, for he writes of Gulfardo, who filled in time between campaigns with a little trading in the great commercial centre of Milan, that he was “assai leale a coloro ne’ cui servigj si mettea, il che rade volte suole de’ Tedeschi avvenire,” a judgement which evidently refers to his military rather than to his commercial activities. He was not one of those described by Petrarch in the lapidary phrase saying “Kamerad” and passing into the ranks of the other side. He is also honest in business matters however and thus enjoys credit, a fact of which he takes advantage in the novella, which in itself does not concern us here.

There is no denunciation of war anywhere in the *Decameron* nor of the evils of war and of mercenaries such as we find in Sacchetti, whose opinion that “nissuna cosa è tanto nimica della libertà quanto è la guerra,” expressed in a letter to Donato Acciaiuoli, Gonfaloniere di Giustizia in Florence, is frequently evidenced in his *novelle*, notably with particular reference to mer-

³ In his “The ‘Ghibelline’ Narrator in the *Decameron*,” *Italian Studies* 33 (1978): 22–28, Brian Richardson has convincingly identified this lady as Emilia although he remarks that “Boccaccio has, it seems, deliberately refrained from giving any unequivocal indication of her identity.” He goes on to contrast the content of stories related by her and by Fiammetta as well as their reactions on this occasion, and shows that if one accepts Emilia as the ‘Ghibellina,’ one may be led “to reflect on the depiction in the *Decameron* of the two contrasting societies [of Naples and Florence] in which Boccaccio had lived.” Contrasting societies, competing dynasties, yes, but of war not a trace.

cenaries. At the end of one devoted to Sir John Hawkwood (181), the *condottiere* tells two friars who wished him “Dio vi dia pace” that they were in reality wishing him to starve since with peace his occupation would be gone. This has in fact a ring of truth as possibly a sample of the knight’s bluff military humour, though not likely to be appreciated by suffering civilians. Sacchetti comments: “O miseri adunque quelli pochi, che pochi sono che vivono liberi; non credon alli inganni della gente dell’arme: stiano in pace, e innanzi siano villaneggiati due o tre volte, che si movano a far guerra; perocché la si comincia agevolmente, e balestra in parte che nessuno il crede, e ’l suo male non si può emendare per fretta.”

To this we might perhaps oppose Boccaccio’s statement in the *Conclusione dell’autore*: “L’arme similmente la salute difendon di coloro che pacificamente di viver disiderano, et anche uccidon gli uomini molte volte, non per malizia di loro ma di coloro che malvagiamente l’adoperano” and note that he is merely advancing this as an instance of the fact that everything has a good and a bad aspect, in defence of those of his *novelle* which may have given offence to some. The mere mention of “l’arme” in such a casual way suggests that he had no particularly strong feeling about war and its effects.

This is presumably the reason why we find so little about “la gente dell’arme” in the *Decameron* compared with Sacchetti’s account in novella 135 of the gratitude of a poor “saccardo,” which is actually a parallel at a much humbler level of *Decameron* 1.9, since it treats of a courtesy rather than a charitable act, generously returned, or that of the marauding “Inghilesi” of Hawkwood in the vicinity of Florence in 36, or of the popular fears reflected in that novella as well as those underlying the slapstick description of the night alarm at the siege of Macerata in 132.

In the limited attention which he does give to military figures it would appear that Boccaccio had little better opinion of knights than he had of German mercenaries to judge by his comment on the knight whose ill-success as a raconteur is related in 6.1 (“messer lo cavaliere al quale forse non stava meglio la spada allato che’l novellare alla lingua”). It may be however that it was not his military qualities that were called in question but rather a lack of wit and urbanity befitting one who bore a sword as a token of knightly rank. The days of the “cavallieri antiqui,” knights errant and crusaders, were now past and the chivalry of the *Decameron* is rather that of polished courtiers who could tell “a whispering tale in a fair lady’s ear” although it is true that, being “per avventura [...] molto migliore intenditore che non novellatore.” He has at least the wit to desist from recounting the tale that he has made a hash of to relate another, presumably with better success.

In 10.1 there is a valiant knight, Ruggieri de' Figiovanni, "ricco e di grande animo," who finding little scope for his valour in Florence, goes to Spain "et in fatti d'arme maravigliose cose faccendo, assai tosto si fece per valoroso cognoscere" in the service of the king. In spite of his wealth however he is not satisfied with having achieved this reputation but feels that not being rewarded as others were "diminuisse la fama sua" and decides to return home. The king, discovering this, rewards him with money since he does not wish to settle in Spain. The actions in which he takes part are not specified and again the war is far off and vague and the mercenary tone of the whole affair seems to accord ill with the chivalrous spirit of an earlier age.

All in all, the conclusion must inevitably be that war as a theme had little interest, and still less attraction, for Boccaccio, as might perhaps be already deduced from the failure of the *Teseida* as an epic, in spite of the conventional listing of champions and certain chivalric elements which accompany the tale of rivalry in love into which it develops. It may be that in an age of total war or the threat of it, our media-borne knowledge that there is always armed conflict somewhere in the world has conditioned us to accept, almost to expect, it as a basic literary theme, and when it is not there we are aware of its absence as one sometimes becomes aware of silence.

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