Boccaccio, Giovanni, 1313-1375

Definition: Boccaccio, Giovanni from Philip's Encyclopedia

Italian poet, prose writer, and scholar, considered to be one of the founders of the Italian Renaissance. His early work, the Filocolo (c.1336), is considered by many to be the first European novel, but he is best known for his masterpiece the Decameron (1348-58), a series of prose stories which exercised a tremendous influence on the development of Renaissance literature. His poetry includes Il Filostrato (c.1338). Boccaccio was a friend of Petrarch and biographer of Dante. See also Italian literature.

Summary Article: Boccaccio, Giovanni

From The Columbia Encyclopedia

(jōvān'ē), 1313–75, Italian poet and storyteller, author of the Decameron. Born in Paris, the illegitimate son of a Tuscan merchant and a French woman, he was educated at Certaldo and Naples by his father, who wanted him to take up commerce and law. In Naples he met (1336) the woman (dubiously identified as Maria d'Aquino, illegitimate daughter of King Robert) whom he was to immortalize in prose and verse as Fiammetta. She is reputed to have introduced him at court and to have urged him to write (c.1340) his early Filocolo, a long vernacular prose romance. Other early works include the poem Filostrato, which infused the legendary story of Troilus and Cressida with the atmosphere of Neapolitan court life; the Teseide, a poem in the style of the Aeneid; the psychological romance La Fiammetta (written c.1344); the pastoral Ninfale d'Ameto; and the allegorical Amorosa visione, imitative of Dante.

Boccaccio was recalled to Florence in 1341, and there he met (1350) the great poet Petrarch, who became a lifelong friend. Emulating Petrarch, he became a Latin and Greek scholar and worked vigorously to reintroduce Greek works. In his middle years Boccaccio wrote (1348–53) his great secular classic, the Decameron, a collection of 100 witty and occasionally licentious tales set against the somber background of the Black Death. The tales treat a wide variety of characters and events and brilliantly reveal humanity as sensual, tender, cruel, weak, self-seeking, and ludicrous. With the Decameron the courtly themes of medieval literature, while still much in evidence, began to give way to the voice and mores of early modern society. Writing in Italian rather than Latin and in prose rather than poetry, Boccaccio achieved stylistic mastery in the Decameron, which became a model for later efforts toward a distinctively Italian literary style. After completing the tales, Boccaccio experienced a severe emotional crisis, during which he wrote the satire Corbaccio, a savage attack on women.

In the next years there followed several works in Latin, the language of high culture. These included Bucolicum carmen [pastoral songs], the huge De casibus virorem illustrium and De mulieribus claris (the first biographies of famous men, the second of famous women), the mythological treatise De genealogiis, and the geographical dictionary De montibus. Boccaccio’s old age was troubled by poverty and ill health, but his activity continued. He was commissioned (1371) by the commune of Certaldo to read daily from his beloved Dante, and in 1373 in Florence he began the lectures which became his famous Commento on the Inferno. There are several translations of the Decameron and also many anthologies and collections of particular stories in translation.


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