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Impact all'Italiana

Essay and Photos by Shelby Luzzi

I travel within Italy because of Giovanni Boccaccio. Admittedly, that is not the only reason, but he certainly deserves some of the credit.

I spent just under two years combined living in the northern regions of Italy, thanks to a semester abroad during my undergraduate years and a year-long internship following them. As an Italian major, I had fallen in love with the country's literary history. While there, I relished the opportunity to become my own personal tour operator, researching, guiding, and attending my own one-woman tours. Manzoni delivered *The Betrothed* in Lecco, Goldoni made me laugh with *Mirandolina* in Venice, and I bore witness to Levi's *If This is a Man* in Turin. It is Boccaccio's 1351 smash-hit *Decameron*, however, that has always left me most inspired in Florence.



A view of Santa Maria Novella in Florence from the top of the Duomo. The small church is cited as the initial gathering place for Decameron's 10 protagonists.

Decameron was written just as the Renaissance found a footing in the boot. Set in the hills outside of Florence, the novel follows 10 Florentine young adults escaping from the Plague's hold on the city. Over 10 days, a total of 100 stories are told, resulting in a shining example of an ideology that would come to be known as Renaissance humanism.

“Tis humane to have compassion on the afflicted; and as it shews well in all, so it is especially demanded of those who have had need of comfort and have found it in others.”

So begins *Decameron*, leading with those altruistic words which evoke Europe’s newfound sense of goodwill. Humanism of this sort seeped into the acts of daily life, as society began to focus on education and the arts. Its effects are seen as well in our understanding of *Decameron*’s most prevalent theme: *fortuna*. The term is not easily translated into English, but its definition may be found somewhere between fate and luck. The ideologies of Boccaccio’s time changed its meaning from purely transcendental fate to something more malleable; though they who are acted upon by *fortuna* can do little to avoid it, this new age of celebrating the humane meant that others could inflict change on the *fortuna* of others.

As I revisit Boccaccio and the themes of his work, I cannot help but to make connections between our two centuries. His characters, usually merchants or clergymen from Italy, travel to new towns and countries. They sometimes bring with them the spirit of humanism, with urgings to enroll low-class children in apprenticeships or to commission works by artists. We see the same practices today, though it is known by a very different set of terms.

Impact (n): *the striking of one thing against another; forceful contact; collision; an impinging; influence*

The travelers of today are not just merchants, but tourists. The spirit of good that they carry is not just humanism, but philanthropy. And the effect that these philanthropic travelers have on the people and communities of their destinations extends beyond a single child in a village. It is traveling with the intention of leaving a positive imprint on the destination, and it is the convergence of two sets of people and the fruit of the mediator’s relationship with both sides.

Today we are seeing more travel industry businesses embrace the spirit of impactful tourism. Boutique hoteliers hire members of their local community and take the time to train them for higher-level positions. Tour operators establish funds that can provide a sustainable flow of money to the communities they serve for improvement projects. Small cruise lines may sponsor conservation efforts that ensure that the waters through which they travel are filled with life for the enjoyment of many generations. The purpose of practicing impact tourism is to make sure that those cultural and natural resources enjoyed by travelers are left improved for those living in the destination—to affect *fortuna*.

And so, in a way, today too I travel because of Giovanni Boccaccio, or in the spirit of his era’s humanism. But this time, as I prepare to revive my one-woman literary tour business, I make myself aware of any opportunities to have a positive impact on the local communities, be it through volunteer work or through donations. The characters in *Decameron* were quite a few generations away from witnessing the explosion of tourism that has happened over the past decade. Nonetheless, they provided prototypical tales of travelers helping to make positive changes. It is a spirit that has only strengthened today.

To look to the future, I must once more return to the past. There is some debate as to whether the Renaissance should be considered a period or a process. The former suggests a clear demarcation between the ideologies of the prior and forthcoming ages, just as some view the shift from the Middle Ages to be a clear end of medieval superstition and the beginning of modern science. The latter instead describes an historical era that is identified by a prominent theme, but in reality, is an evolution of ideologies. Though the tedious debate between *period* or *process* wages on, there is one spark of inspiration to be taken from it all: Impact tourism must be a process. To say that the era of giving and donating as travelers is different from that before it, insists that the era to follow it might be totally removed from the current premise of doing good. Let impact tourism be a process, and let it do good.



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