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LITERATURE, PANDEMIC, AND THE 'INSUFFICIENCY OF SURVIVAL': Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

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Moments of extreme crisis are disorienting, as they tend to obscure the various coordinates—moral, political, legal, and relational—that we normally rely on to define ourselves and safely plot a course within civilized communities. It is in these catastrophic moments that human beings have most urgently felt a need for leaders capable of pointing the way toward some kind of stability and renewal. Though we tend to think of such leaders as emerging from “practical” fields such as politics and the sciences, in this article I will investigate the important role assigned to literature in such fraught contexts by Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. Indeed, Boccaccio's and Mandel's works utilize the extreme context of catastrophic pandemics in order to confront a question that has repeatedly been raised about art and literature since at least Plato: namely, its utility

in relation to “real” world problems and challenges. Though the pandemic in Mandel's work is fictional, the novel's proximity to our experience of COVID-19 and to the threat of global catastrophes like climate change and, most recently, world war provokes us to reexamine this question with some urgency.

Not long before Boccaccio, Dante had provided a forceful affirmation of the importance of literature, investing his *Divine Comedy* with the authority to lead the reader through the arduous process of salvation and to define the central values and principles to which a Christian community, as a social and political body, should aspire. Dante's claims for the role of literature in society were especially audacious in the context of the prevailing authority of theology. He underscored this claim by making Virgil, the author of the *Aeneid*, his own guide through Hell and Purgatory. Just as Virgil's epic poem had

ABSTRACT:

The question of literature's utility in relation to the “real world” has been asked since at least the time of Plato. This essay examines an extreme instance of this problem by investigating two works, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349-1353) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2016), that argue for the value of art in the midst of catastrophe. Boccaccio's collection of 100 tales, written in the context of the Black Plague, and Mandel's post-apocalyptic novel about a world devastated by a killer flu, overlap and diverge in instructive ways in making their cases for the important role of literature in confronting suffering, trauma, and loss. Specifically, this essay contrasts Boccaccio's vision of literature as encouraging a lucidly compassionate embrace of flawed humankind that looks to the future, and Mandel's evocation of Shakespeare as a trope for civilization that is more nostalgically oriented towards the recovery of the past as a response to the tragic

influentially defined the civic and moral ideals on which “romanitas” was based, so Dante would lead his readers to embrace a vision of faith that might help to heal a Christian community he considered to be in crisis. “You are my master and my author,” Dante says to Virgil upon meeting him in Canto 1 of *Inferno*, implicitly investing himself with a similar authority in relation to his own readers.¹

In this context, it is worth lingering over the etymology of the term *author*. Derived from the Latin *augere*, “to increase” or “to originate,” an author is both a creator and someone whose creation yields increase. Though today we think of *authority* in more simple terms as a quality that elicits submission in response to its presence, I want to emphasize here the dimension of this word that suggests a positively generative power. The authority of a compelling literary author is located not only in their capacity to define a community’s identity, but also in their ability to stimulate its further development. This is what makes the greatest authors important leaders (or influencers!) despite their usual lack of political or economic clout. Compelling works of literature inspire the creation of new works, as Harold Bloom and T. S. Eliot famously argued, that at once consolidate a culture’s connection to the past and swerve from that past, pointing their readers toward new and often productively disruptive ways of understanding and constructing both ourselves and our sociopolitical environments.² One might argue, for example, that the fact that Dante, followed by Petrarch and Boccaccio, chose to compose his epic in Italian was an important factor in the rise of a literate middle class in Florence that heralded the increased fluidity of class boundaries during the European Renaissance.³ The *Divine Comedy*, moreover, was a central catalyst in the development of the concept of purgatory in the late Middle Ages, while

later it became one of the foundational texts around which Italian cultural and national identity defined itself, provoking both imitations and critiques. One might make similar claims about Shakespeare, on whose authority so many affirmations about English cultural identity and political superiority have been made. And, to cite more recent examples, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—whatever one thinks of this novel today—profoundly influenced perceptions of slavery in the nineteenth century, while Tsar Alexander II famously identified Turgenyev’s quiet sketches of serfs in his *Sportsman’s Notebook* as having impacted his decision to grant them their freedom.⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio and Emily St. John Mandel are of particular interest in this context because both are explicitly concerned with the role of literature in leading communities out of moments of crisis that threaten their continued existence. As I will argue, both authors imagine art as marking out an alternative “space” temporarily removed from the immediate pressures of the “real,” though those pressures are the necessary precondition for its production.

The first sentence of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* seems appropriate for a text written during and in the immediate aftermath of the ravages of the Black Death: “*Umana cosa è avere compassione agli afflitti*” (It is human nature to have compassion for the afflicted).⁵ Boccaccio may have personally witnessed the horrors of the plague in Florence in 1348–49, as it killed at least half of the city’s population. Florence at this time was thriving; it is here and in other northern Italian cities that a nascent capitalist economy had begun to develop, with profits derived from the expansion of trade and banking leading to flourishing markets, a large and powerful middle class, and an increasingly vital and dynamic urban culture. Awash with luxury goods and money,

¹ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 7.

² Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” i; Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*.

³ See Panizza, “Literature in the Vernacular”; Page, *Dante and His Influence*; Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy*; Zompetti, “A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric.”

⁴ Interestingly, both works were published in 1852.

⁵ Boccaccio, *Decamerone*, 25. My own translation. Subsequent English translations will be from Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. The term *compassion* derives from the Latin *cum + patior*, indicating the experience of shared suffering. For discussions of compassion in the *Decameron*, see Papio, “Non meno di compassione piena che dilettevole”; Zak, “Umana cosa è aver compassione.”

home to some of the most brilliant Italian writers and artists, Florence had become one of the financial and cultural hubs of Europe by the time the plague descended on the city with sudden and devastating effects.⁶

It is thanks to Boccaccio that we have one of the most vivid and compelling reports of this pandemic's devastation. His unsparing account describes a city in which most communal structures—political, religious, and familial—collapsed in the face of the onslaught of this disease. It may seem odd, however, that Boccaccio chose to place this grisly description at the very beginning of his *Decameron*, turning the plague into the necessary catalyst for the framing narrative of the text as a whole. In that frame, seven young women join up with three young men to escape the horrors of Florence, deciding to take up temporary residence in a luxurious estate in the nearby countryside. Once there, they spend ten days devoted to pleasant diversions, including dancing, singing, taking walks in the estate's gardens, and, most importantly, telling stories (*novelle*) to each other as a way of passing the time. They agree that every day each will tell one story devoted to a theme determined by that day's "king" or "queen," so that by the end of ten days Boccaccio has related to his reader one hundred tales. Clearly, it was not at all necessary for Boccaccio to establish this literary frame in order to present his stories, so one can presume that he was particularly interested in evoking the stark contrast between disease and social dissolution in Florence and storytelling in an idyllic country setting.

A similar contrast is evoked in Mandel's post-apocalyptic novel, *Station Eleven*, which not long before the outbreak of COVID-19 had imagined the spread of a deadly flu that wipes out most of the world's population.⁷ Unlike many works in this genre, however, Mandel does not choose to focus

primarily on the struggle for survival that takes place during and after the apocalyptic event. Rather, the novel focuses on the Traveling Symphony, a group of actors and musicians who wander from settlement to settlement in the Great Lakes area, performing concerts and staging plays by Shakespeare. The Symphony's motto, borrowed from an episode of *Star Trek Voyager*, is "Because survival is insufficient." Though the settlements in which the Traveling Symphony puts on its performances are certainly not the idyllic settings in which Boccaccio's youths spin out their stories, the Symphony itself demarcates a charmed circle from within which trauma and the struggle for survival are temporarily exorcized. It is therefore fitting that Mandel chooses *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play about enchanted spaces and enchanting visions, as the work that the actors decide to perform when we first encounter them. The reason offered for the Symphony electing to perform only plays by Shakespeare is, as one character puts it, that "people want what was best about the world."⁸ But the original circumstances of the production of Shakespeare's plays also resonate with the company. We are reminded that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was possibly written in 1594, "the year London's theaters reopened after two seasons of plague."⁹ During this time, "Plague closed the theaters again and again, death flickering over the landscape."¹⁰

The refined setting in which Boccaccio's young Florentines tell their stories, the dream-space defined by the Traveling Symphony's performances, and of course the Globe Theater itself, are all, from this perspective, similar to the charmed forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: places of poetic invention that offer both a respite from and, possibly, a critical (re)assessment of the "real" world. Boccaccio and Mandel differ, however, in the role they ascribe

⁶ Boccaccio's own father and stepmother died in the outbreak. For an account of the black plague in the context of Boccaccio's Florence, see Ruggiero, *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague*, 1–29. See also Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*.

⁷ Mandel, *Station Eleven*.

⁸ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 38.

⁹ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 57.

¹⁰ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 57.

to stories in confronting the losses that catastrophe brings, especially in the context of the conflicting impulses to recover the past and reshape the future that such losses engender. As I will show, Mandel's novel often betrays a conservative impulse to celebrate and reclaim the achievements of the past that potentially yields creative stagnation in the present. By contrast, Boccaccio's response to catastrophe entails a more radical rethinking of the ways in which literature can lead us to new and productively disruptive ways of understanding human nature and human communities. Boccaccio understands more clearly than Mandel that the stories we tell as a way of reconstituting communities must do more than remind us of who we were; they must also suggest what else we might become.

Reaching the Decameron: Plague as Purgatory

In the literary frame to his *Decameron*, Boccaccio claims that he is not the actual author of the stories his readers will enjoy. Rather, he is relating to the reader, as told to him by a "trustworthy person," both the circumstances that led the ten noble youths to leave Florence for the country and the stories they told each other over the course of ten days.¹¹ However, rather than briefly informing us that the youths left Florence to escape the plague, he insists that a detailed and harrowing description of the pandemic's effects is a necessary prelude to the subsequent pleasures of their stories:

You will be affected no differently by this grim beginning than walkers confronted by a steep and rugged hill, beyond which there lies a beautiful and delectable plain. The degree of pleasure they derive from the latter will correspond directly to the difficulty of the climb and the descent.¹²

The analogy employed here would have been very familiar to Boccaccio's audience, since Dante's *Divine Comedy*, completed in 1321, was the most

famous work of Italian poetry of its day. The journey undertaken in the *Purgatorio*, which follows Dante's descent into Hell, requires an arduous climb around the spiral terraces of a mountain, at the top of which is the lost earthly Paradise. There Dante finally encounters Beatrice who, as an embodiment of divine grace, will lead him through Paradise in the third canticle. Purgatory is the one place in the *Divine Comedy* in which forward motion is actually possible, since the process of purging the soul must take place in time. The damned in Hell are eternally stuck where they are, and, similarly, the blessed in heaven have no desire to be anywhere else. By contrast, through a painful process of contrition and purification, the penitent sinners of Purgatory are subject to change as they progress toward the final conversion experienced in the earthly Paradise.¹³

As a great admirer and attentive reader of Dante's work, we can assume that Boccaccio presented his punishing description of the plague as a purgatorial ascent to be endured by the reader before reaching the "beautiful and delectable plain" of the tales they will subsequently enjoy.¹⁴ Boccaccio seems adamant about this: "Believe me, if I could decently have taken you whither I desire by some other route, rather than along a path so difficult as this, I would gladly have done so. But since it is impossible without this memoir to show the origin of the events you will read about later, I really have no alternative."¹⁵ We know, of course, that this is not true. As author, Boccaccio could have dispensed with the metafictional narrative altogether. What he indirectly affirms here is his commitment to leading us to his novelle by this difficult route.¹⁶ The question he elicits from his reader, then, is why such purgatorial ascent is necessary.

¹³ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*.

¹⁴ In his *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*, based on lectures delivered toward the end of his life, Boccaccio provided one of the first critical close readings of his literary predecessor's work.

¹⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 49–50.

¹⁶ For an important perspective on the role of the plague in the *Decameron*, see Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*, 14–46. See also Rosner, "Civilizational Trauma and Value Nihilism in Boccaccio's *Decameron*."

¹¹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 11.

¹² Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 49.

And it is indeed a memorably dreadful itinerary that he traces, which appears to contradict spectacularly the claim made in the first sentence of his work: “It is human nature to have compassion for the afflicted.” Unlike many who attributed the plague to God’s wrath, Boccaccio remains agnostic about its causes: “Some say that it [the plague] descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God’s righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated some years earlier in the East.”¹⁷ Certainly, “countless petitions humbly directed to God by the pious” were as ineffective as the blundering responses of the local authorities or the inept advice of helpless doctors.¹⁸ As the plague rages on, Boccaccio describes a near total collapse of institutional structures:

In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city. For, like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence, everybody was free to behave as he pleased.¹⁹

In this context, having described the gruesome and incurable manifestations of the disease, Boccaccio focuses on what shocks and outrages him the most about the pandemic’s effects. Almost all the inhabitants in Florence, he observes, “took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings, by which means they all thought that their own health would be preserved.”²⁰ Among these were those who isolated themselves from everyone else, choosing to live soberly and abstemiously; those who on the contrary banded together to indulge excessively in food, drink, and other pleasures; and those who “calmly maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against the plague than to run

away from it ... and sparing no thought for anyone but themselves, large numbers of men and women abandoned their city, their homes, their relatives, their estates and their belongings, and headed for the countryside.”²¹ In sum, Boccaccio tells us,

This scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.²²

Community and family ties dissolve, and the sick and the dying are left to themselves. Traditional funeral practices are no longer observed, as “more often than not bereavement was the signal for laughter and witticisms and general jollification.”²³ In the context of unbearable loss, mental self-preservation required a grotesque dissolution of empathy. By the end of his account, Boccaccio leaves us with a vision of a city littered with corpses left to decay in the streets and then unceremoniously dumped into mass graves, “stowed tier upon tier like ships’ cargo.”²⁴

These, then are some of the grim facts that Boccaccio feels it necessary to share with his readers before introducing us to the ten youths who will flee to their idyllic literary retreat in the Tuscan countryside. Initially it is seven young, “intelligent, well-born, attractive” women who come up with this plan, spurred by the eloquent Pampinea’s assessment of their situation. Most of their relatives and friends have died, and the city now only presents them with horrifying spectacles: “If we go outside, we shall see the dead and the sick being carried hither and thither, or we shall see people, once condemned to exile by the courts for their misdeeds, careering wildly about the streets in open defiance of the law, well knowing that those appointed to defend it are either dead or dying.”²⁵ Pampinea reasons that “every per-

¹⁷ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 50.

¹⁸ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 50.

¹⁹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 53.

²⁰ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 52.

²¹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 53.

²² Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 54.

²³ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 55.

²⁴ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 57.

²⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 59–60.

son born into this world has a natural right to sustain, preserve, and defend his own life to the best of his ability,” and that since their relatives have either died or already fled the city, they cannot be accused of callously abandoning anyone.²⁶ Having agreed to this course of action, they encounter three young men whom they know and who agree to come along to provide them with guidance and companionship “in a spirit of chaste and brotherly affection.”²⁷

Despite Pampinea’s claim that their flight from the city should not be understood as callous, Boccaccio’s earlier indictment of those who escaped Florence must give us pause. Pampinea’s appeal to their right to self-preservation is not convincing in this regard, as this presumably is also what motivated those who had similarly left before them. Indeed, as Boccaccio describes the Edenic setting to which this company of youths move—with its opulent villa and verdant surroundings, all maintained by an army of servants—it is tempting to compare them to those billionaires who sheltered in place in their mega-yachts or Hampton mansions during COVID-19.²⁸ In their deluxe retreat, the youths spend much of their time eating refined meals prepared by their cooks, taking leisurely walks in the surrounding gardens, dancing, and singing about love. Again, not so different from those same uber-rich who repurposed their homes with outdoor dining areas, television viewing theatres, and bocce courts in order to entertain guests safely during the COVID pandemic. Dioneo, one of the young men in this group, might well be seen as embracing this kind of solipsistic privilege, claiming that he left his troubles inside the city gates and that the rest should also “prepare to join with me in as much laughter, song, and merriment as your sense of decorum will allow.”²⁹

Pampinea, however, modifies Dioneo’s proposal.

Yes, they should have fun, but it should be intentionally structured fun, since “nothing will last for very long unless it possesses a definite form.”³⁰ Accordingly, she suggests they organize their stay by having one of their group be queen or king for the day, and when, predictably, Pampinea is the first to be elected, she proposes that during every day of their sojourn each should tell one story. The result is the *Decameron*, a collection of one hundred novelle recounted in the course of ten days. It is these stories, as Boccaccio made clear, that make up the “most beautiful and delectable plain” that he offers us as a reward for enduring his account of the plague. The parallel with Dante’s *Purgatorio* is both audacious and perplexing. Dante, after all, was writing about the process of Christian conversion and salvation, while the reward Boccaccio offers his readers is a kaleidoscopic collection of tales about sexual desire and adultery; lecherous monks and nuns; grasping merchants; human ingenuity, deception, and gullibility; tragic or noble love; kings, knights, and pirates; and more. In what sense can the pleasures and delights of these narratives parallel Dante the pilgrim’s salvific experience at the top of *Purgatorio*, and in what sense is reliving the horrors of the plague a purgative prerequisite to these pleasures? Given Boccaccio’s condemnation of the breakdown of community and of compassion during the plague, do these novelle somehow function to restore these values? Certainly not in any explicitly didactic way.³¹

The very first story of the First Day, after all, hits us with an account of the last days of Ser Cepperello, a wicked notary who for the entirety of his life had delighted in deception, discord, lechery, and all kinds of depravity. Perhaps more than any other character in the *Decameron*, he embodies the frightful capacity to undermine and dissolve human bonds that Boccaccio decries in his account of the

²⁶ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 59.

²⁷ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 64.

²⁸ Perhaps most famously among these, David Geffen posted an Instagram picture of his enormous yacht at sunset with a message stating, “Isolated in the Grenadines avoiding the virus. I’m hoping everybody is staying safe.” Kelly, “The Rich Are Riding Out the Coronavirus Pandemic Very Differently than the Rest of Us.”

²⁹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 64.

³⁰ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 65.

³¹ It is relevant, in this context, to recall that in his preface to the *Decameron* as a whole, Boccaccio describes his work as a compassionate gesture specifically intended for female readers, since women might be particularly in need of the advice and diversion his tales will afford, given the various social restrictions placed on them (Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 45–47).

plague.³² In this story, Ser Cepperello deceives a friar with a false confession so persuasive in affirming his piety that he is revered as a saint after his death. As if this were not enough, the second story of the First Day is about a morally upright Jewish merchant who decides to become a Christian after having witnessed the corruption of the church in Rome. If, he notes, the church manages to grow and flourish despite its corruption, then “it deservedly has the Holy Ghost as its foundation and support.”³³ By introducing his collection with stories that undermine the very institution tasked with providing the faithful with consolation and meaning in the face of suffering and mortality, Boccaccio might seem to be doubling down on the kind of contempt for human behavior that his description of the plague had initially voiced.³⁴ We might say the same about any number of other stories in this collection that often expose the seamy side of human motivations and desires: Friar Cipolla, who rakes in alms from dimwitted and credulous peasants by displaying to them false relics; the lusty Peronella, who successfully satisfies her desire for her lover almost in the very presence of her husband; Bruno and Buffalmacco, who persuade their terrified friend Calandrino that he’s pregnant; or the scholar Rinieri, who, having been cruelly tricked by a woman he loves, takes his revenge to sadistic extremes. And so on...

But these stories in fact encourage a more complicated response from the reader. For example, though indeed a terrible man, Ser Cepperello deceives the friar during his deathbed confession in part, at least, to help out two brothers in whose house he has been lodging and whose association with the notoriously sinful Ser Cepperello puts them at risk. No doubt Boccaccio underscores Cepperello’s glee in crafting his final and greatest deception, but

it does also serve some good. Likewise, if on the one hand the holy friar that confesses him is revealed as being rather simpleminded, on the other hand there is something appealing in his ingenuous willingness to believe in Ser Cepperello’s sanctity. Having described how the naïve country folk flocked to venerate Ser Cepperello as saint after the friar’s stirring funeral sermon, Boccaccio leaves us with some provocative reflections:

It was thus, then, that Ser Cepperello of Prato lived and died, becoming a Saint in the way you have heard. Nor would I wish to deny that perhaps God has blessed and admitted him to His presence. For albeit he led a wicked, sinful life, it is possible that at the eleventh hour he was so sincerely repentant that God had mercy upon him and received him into His kingdom. But since this is hidden from us, I speak only with regard to the outward appearance, and I say that this fellow should rather be in Hell, in the hands of the devil, than in Paradise. And if this is the case, we may recognize how very great is God’s loving kindness towards us, in that it takes account, not of our error, but of the purity of our faith, and grants our prayers even when we appoint as our emissary one who is His enemy, thinking him to be His friend, as though we were appealing to one who was truly holy as our intercessor for His favor. And therefore, so that we, the members of this joyful company, may be guided safely and securely by His grace through these present adversities, let us praise the name of Him with whom we began our storytelling, let us hold Him in reverence, and let us commend ourselves to Him in the hour of our need, in the certain knowledge that we shall be heard.³⁵

This is one of only a few times that Boccaccio’s youths explicitly mention the “present adversities” of the plague, and here he seems to propose an alternative to the pessimism of his earlier description of the effects of the pandemic. In the first place, the

³² It thus seems fitting that the introductory account of the plague makes up the first part of this First Day, with the story of Ser Cepperello taking up the second part.

³³ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 85.

³⁴ For compelling readings of the First Day of the *Decameron*, see Kircher, “The Modality of Moral Communication in the *Decameron*’s First Day”; Kircher, “Movement, Moment, and Mission in the Opening Day of the *Decameron*.”

³⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 81.

reader is cautioned against ever reaching absolute judgments about a person on the basis of their outward actions, since we can never know what is hidden in their hearts in the last moments of their lives. In the second place, though Ser Cepperello may be worshipped as a saint while actually a devil in hell, the narrator of this story, Panfilo, affirms that in his compassionate mercy God privileges our faith rather than worrying about its undeserving object. Boccaccio's story, of course, implicitly and impishly raises the possibility that *all* acts of faith through which we find consolation in the face of "troubles, trials, and tribulations" may be based on empty fictions like the one created by Ser Cepperello.³⁶ "Let us commend ourself to Him [God] in the hour of our need, in the certain knowledge that we shall be heard," Panfilo concludes, but that certainty has been already undermined by the plague itself.³⁷ And yet, in this first story, the fiction of Ser Cepperello as saint does at least create the foundations for the renewal of an enthusiastic community of believers. Perhaps we as readers of Boccaccio's own fiction are placed in a similar position, as we are encouraged to shift from harsh condemnation of human failure to a shared, amused indulgence toward his characters: the crafty Ser Cepperello, the well-meaning but naïve friar, and the deluded faithful. Rather than taking on the point of view of a God who may or may not be there, we are encouraged to share the perspective of the God-like presence of the *Decameron* itself—its actual author—who, resisting the temptation to recoil from the horrors of human behavior exposed during the plague, here chooses not to renounce humankind, however deceptive or deceived. In this sense, the stories told in the *Decameron* constitute a generous embrace of the ingenious, funny, lecherous, loving, deceitful, stupid, noble, victimized, poor, rich, and always flawed human beings that populate its pages.³⁸

Similarly, in the second story of the First Day, we

are at first glance left with a dispiriting assessment of the church as the supposed wellspring of Christian community. Rather than providing a hopeful alternative to the vision of self-inflated survivalism witnessed during the plague, this novella appears to articulate a pessimistic vision of Roman prelates who have abandoned their flocks altogether while giving themselves over to lechery, greed, and avarice. And yet, various elements in the story resist any easy retreat into cynical disgust. In the first place, Boccaccio begins his story by describing the close friendship between Giannotto di Civignì, an honest and upright Christian merchant, and the Jewish Abraham, also a rich merchant and also honest and upright.³⁹ The very fact of such a friendship is of course unusual in this time, a friendship that is clearly based on the two men's shared moral virtues rather than on their religious beliefs. Giannotto, however, deeply cares about his friend's salvation, earnestly—though a bit obtusely—urging him to convert to Christianity. It is then that Abraham, partly persuaded by Giannotto's arguments and partly out of respect for their friendship, decides to go to Rome before making a final decision. There he witnesses the corruption that convinces him that if the church can prosper under such circumstances, then indeed it must be watched over by the Holy Spirit, and he decides to convert.

However, in the conclusion to his account, Boccaccio again tempers skepticism and pessimism with a more ironically forgiving gaze. Despite Abraham's account of the church in Rome as "a hotbed of diabolical rather than divine activities," Giannotto is still delighted by his friend's decision to convert to Christianity, and Abraham, once baptized as Giovanni, lived as "a good and worthy man, holy in all his ways."⁴⁰ The irony here is that what mattered all along was the strength of their friendship and the honesty and uprightness they shared that allowed them to develop a deep bond despite differing religious affiliations. Is Abraham's conversion

³⁶ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 69.

³⁷ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 81.

³⁸ For a reading of this novella that complements my own, see Flasch, *Poesia dopo la Peste*, 75–102.

³⁹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 82.

⁴⁰ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 85.

genuine or tinged with bemusement and motivated by affection for his friend? Abraham, after all, was a “good and worthy man” before his conversion. Is Giannotto a bit dim in disregarding the account of corruption he is presented with, while privileging instead the sole fact of conversion? Regardless, we cannot help but admire his genuine concern for his friend, however possibly misguided. None of these questions are answered, but Boccaccio encourages us, in the end, to embrace these two friends for their mutual love rather than to privilege the failures of the institution that should in fact model such love.

These two novelle exemplify the saving perspective that the reader is repeatedly encouraged to take with regard to the many stories and characters we encounter in the *Decameron*: “Nothing human is alien to me.”⁴¹ This may seem to swerve somewhat from the phrase with which Boccaccio opens his collection, “It is human nature to have compassion for the afflicted,” but I would like to suggest here that the *Decameron*—at least implicitly—leads us from the nihilistically survivalist moral devastation of the plague to a commitment, in its tales, to accept unflinchingly the inevitably wide spectrum of human behaviors and motivations. It is by inhabiting the spaces of fiction, and of its author’s gaze, that we are able to achieve the necessary detachment to love, or at least to feel fondness—perhaps tinged with irony—for all kinds of people as experienced in the real world. This perspective differs to some degree from Martha Nussbaum’s influential celebration of literature’s capacity to provoke feelings of compassion or empathy toward our fellow human beings. By adopting Aristotle’s definition of compassion as “a painful emotion directed at another’s person’s misfortune or suffering,” Nussbaum requires a reader’s fully empathetic identification with a person’s emotional distress, and she views literature as ideally suited to evoking such response.⁴² It is this capacity of literature, she argues, that invest the arts with

“a vital political function, even when their content is not expressly political—for they cultivate imaginative abilities that are central to political life.”⁴³ By contrast, Boccaccio proposes that the “painful emotion” we experience in his description of the extreme circumstances of the plague is something that may need to be partly purged if we are to avoid the threat of nihilism or cynicism that both extreme suffering and the unfeeling responses to such suffering may provoke. To put it differently, in taking us from the harrowing “real” (Florence devastated by the plague) to the delectable plains of fiction, Boccaccio perhaps enacts a movement from the pity and fear provoked by tragedy to the renewal of comedy. As Northrop Frye has argued, comedy is always the explicit or implicit successor to tragedy, and from this perspective the cathartic purging of pity and fear yields precisely the more detached, forgiving, bemused, and benevolent outlook on humanity that we find in so many of Boccaccio’s novelle.⁴⁴

It is instructive to remember that the telling of these tales in the *Decameron* is set in motion by a group of young people gathering together into an organized community, in contrast to the fragmentation provoked by the plague. Once situated in their idyllic setting, they reclaim the political order that collapsed in the city of Florence through the daily election of kings and queens responsible for the management of the day’s activities. And finally, however sometimes scandalous the contents of the stories themselves, Boccaccio makes clear that these ten youths always behave themselves decorously. Though their stories describe a wide spectrum of human behaviors, from the noble to the debased, we are told that they themselves always maintained “an unflinching spirit of harmony.”⁴⁵ The space defined by literature, for Boccaccio, is a “safe space” within which to catch one’s breath and transform trauma into understanding, cynicism into lucid benevolence. From this perspective, Dioneo’s second account of their reasons for leaving Florence in the concluding

⁴¹ “*humani nil a me alienum puto*”; Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, p.186.

⁴² Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1385b13 ff., quoted in Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 306.

⁴³ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 433.

⁴⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 230.

⁴⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 825.

moments of the Tenth Day is illuminating: “We left Florence to seek some recreation by which to preserve our health and our lives, and to escape from the melancholy, the suffering and the anguish that are constantly experienced in our city since this plague first began.”⁴⁶ The word translated here as “recreation” is *diporto* in the original Italian, which etymologically carries with it the meaning of “taking oneself elsewhere.”⁴⁷ The use of the term is illuminating, since it identifies the pleasures and uses of literature with relocation. Relocating themselves is exactly what the youths do, not only for their physical, but also their emotional or psychological well-being. If we approach Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as a work of “relocation,” it is clear that it can only exist in relation to another, prior “space,” that of the Black Death.

The youths’ relocation, moreover, has always been temporary. By the end of the Tenth Day of storytelling, they decide to return to the city, which is still in the grip of the plague. The pandemic, in other words, implicitly frames the beginning and the end of this work while also serving as its stimulus. The temporary nature of the youths’ literary idyll is, ultimately, what turns it into an act of compassion, since it creates the conditions for a willing return to reality. This collection of stories, it is now widely acknowledged, became one of the foundational works in the development of Renaissance humanism. In its celebration of human striving and ingenuity among the middle and lower classes, in its representation of strong women, in its unabashed depictions of sexual desire, in its varied descriptions of love, marriage, and adultery, in its amused and skeptical accounts of hypocrisy among the religious, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* turns its gaze, both lovingly and ironically, onto human experience as a whole as its central subject matter. If in this sense literature is defined as a “beautiful and delectable plain,” it is because it earns its pragmatically compassionate perspective by first encountering and ascending the “steep and rugged mountain” of the plague’s nightmare.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 824.

⁴⁷ *Vocabolario Treccani*.

⁴⁸ In his discussion of Boccaccio, Eric Auerbach famously celebrates its naturalism as something new in Western literature that points us toward the culture of the Renaissance: “The literature of society acquired

Station Eleven and Shakespeare’s Brave New World

The function and value of art in the context of catastrophe are also foregrounded in Emily St. John Mandel’s novel *Station Eleven*, written only a few years before the outbreak of COVID-19 and set in our own times. This distinguishes her work from other recent literary or filmic postapocalyptic narratives that limit their focus to the struggle for survival.⁴⁹ The “Georgia Flu” imagined in this work kills 99.9 percent of the world’s population, but Mandel obliquely suggests that a different kind of pandemic was already afflicting our world before it came to its abrupt end. The epigraph to the novel is from *The Separate Notebooks*, by Czeslaw Milosz:

The bright side of the planet moves towards darkness

And the cities are falling asleep, each in its hour,
And for me, now as then, it is too much.

There is too much world.⁵⁰

The last two verses echo discreetly throughout Mandel’s narrative as one way of understanding our present world, which in her novel so swiftly melts into thin air at the arrival of the pandemic. It is a world she chooses to describe by tracing the existential isolation of a pluri-divorced tabloid actor, of a successful but lonely executive of a global shipping company, of a high-end London corporate consultant disaffected with his job, and of a drifting former paparazzo seeking new direction in his life. The world these characters inhabit is defined by a cosmopolitan rootlessness that parallels the nowhere and everywhere of the internet, of the smart phone, of Facebook, tweets, and memes. In an age of overcommunication, of viral marketing and messaging, Mandel implies, global community is more image than

what it had not previously possessed: a world of reality and of the present” (*Mimesis*, 219). For discussions of ethics in the *Decameron*, see Migiel, *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron*; Greene, “Forms of Accommodation in the *Decameron*.”

⁴⁹ For an influential study of the postapocalyptic genre, see Berger, *After the End*.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Mandel, *Station Eleven*, epigraph.

reality. In this respect, though far less emphatically than Boccaccio, both begin their works by introducing us to human communities that are threatened or troubled.

In “an incomplete list,” Mandel describes some of the “no more’s” that will characterize a postpandemic world. These include the fundamentals of modern civilization: cities, fire departments, police; and they include the wonders of science and technology: “no more pharmaceuticals.... No more flight.... No more spacecraft rising up from Cape Canaveral....”⁵¹ She concludes, however, with

No more internet. No more social media, no more scrolling through litanies of dreams and nervous hopes and photographs of lunches, cries for help and expressions of contentment and relationship-status updates with heart icons whole or broken, plans to meet up later, pleas, complaints, desires.... No more reading and commenting on the lives of others, and in so doing, feeling slightly less alone in the room. No more avatars.⁵²

Mandel is not explicitly critical in describing this virtual space that mediates identities and relationships, and yet we are left with a vision of individuals fundamentally isolated from each other despite the proliferating networks that connect them. Whether literally or metaphorically, people in this space have become avatars, virtual constructs that exist everywhere and nowhere, that communicate without connecting. The comic book created by Miranda, one of the discarded wives of the Hollywood actor, embodies this perspective. The work tells the story of Dr. Eleven, a scientist stranded on a moon-sized station hiding in space after an alien invasion of Earth. Dr. Eleven, it becomes clear, is Miranda, self-quarantined in a world from which she is fundamentally alienated.⁵³

In the postpandemic world described by Mandel,

⁵¹ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 31.

⁵² Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 32.

⁵³ For a different perspective on Mandel’s vision of the contemporary world in *Station Eleven*, see Garcia, “Postapocalyptic Curating.” Though Garcia is right to point out the ways in which Mandel celebrates contemporary technological achievements, she does not pay sufficient attention to the cultural critique of “our” world that is embedded in the novel.

people gradually regroup into small, scattered settlements that guarantee the essentials of survival. The author, however, is less interested in the formation of these settlements and in the particulars of subsistence than she is in the *Traveling Symphony*, a group of actors and musicians who travel from one community to another in the Great Lakes region, performing Shakespeare and giving concerts. The fact that their motto is taken from an episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* suggests a convergence between the Starship Enterprise—a trope for the civilizational ideals of humankind—and this bedraggled but determined group of artists fiercely committed to the importance of their work. Fittingly, the leaders of this group are the Symphony’s music conductor and its theater director, so that, as in the *Decameron*, there is an overlap of political and artistic governance. Shakespeare’s plays are the stories the members of this troupe recount, each one having found in the Symphony a refuge after variously harrowing experiences.

King Lear and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are the works by Shakespeare that Mandel chooses to foreground in her narrative. Before we encounter the *Traveling Symphony*, *King Lear* is the play that Arthur Leander, the tabloid actor, is performing in the first chapter of the novel when he dies of a heart attack—the same evening that the pandemic spreads in Toronto. Fittingly, *King Lear* is a tragedy about radical loss and the end of life. Indeed, there is an apocalyptic dimension to its account of a world in which political and family ties are entirely shattered. Alone and buffeted by the storm on the heath, Lear embodies the ultimate fragility of human existence and the threat of meaninglessness that always encroaches on it. By the conclusion of this tragedy, the possibility of recovering from the traumas of suffering and loss seems faint, and one of the survivors, Edgar, refuses to utter any words of trite consolation. They must, he states, “the weight of this sad time obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.32–33).⁵⁴ The temptation to repudiate

⁵⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2567.

consolatory language as a response to tragic loss is one that hovers over Mandel's novel, perhaps most clearly in the case of the central protagonist, Kirsten, who is unable to recall and thus to speak about the year after the flu's outbreak, when she lost her family and wandered alone, a victim of violence, across a postapocalyptic wasteland.

However, the very fact that Mandel situates her novel twenty years after the pandemic's devastation allows her for the most part to gloss over its immediate and most disturbing aftermath. We are given glimpses, in the ex-paparazzo Jeevan's story, of the traumas this aftermath entailed, but no more, and in fact some reviews have critiqued this work precisely for mostly glossing over what for many should be the main course of postapocalyptic fare.⁵⁵ Indeed, if *Lear* in this novel gestures toward the temptations of nihilism as a response to suffering and isolation, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* serves by contrast as a site of enchantment. It is significant, in this regard, that while the troupe at the beginning of the novel is rehearsing *King Lear*, the director finally decides that "the evening calls for fairies."⁵⁶ At one point, while rummaging through an abandoned house, Kirsten finds a wedding gown that she takes to use as a costume. She recalls that some of the actors felt that Shakespeare would be more "relatable" if they dressed in the same plain and patched clothes as the audience, "but Kirsten thought it meant something to see Titania in a gown, Hamlet in a shirt and tie," since "what the Symphony was doing, what they were always doing, was trying to cast a spell, and costuming helped; the lives they brushed up against were work-worn and difficult, people who spent all their time engaged in the tasks of survival."⁵⁷ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, itself a play about real and poetic enchantments, provokes what the author calls "moments of transcendent beauty and joy" that lift actors and audiences out of the drabness of the present: "What was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such

beauty. Twilight in the altered world, a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a parking lot."⁵⁸ Performing Shakespeare in this postpandemic context, we are told, is particularly fitting, since the playwright's own life and career were "defined" by the plague: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was likely written either in the year that London's theaters reopened after being closed for two seasons due to the pandemic, or the year before his son Hamnet died, probably of the plague.⁵⁹ Indeed, the comedy itself is not without its dark edges, something the author possibly implies by choosing to quote from the Fairy Queen Titania's words to her husband, Oberon, about their ongoing quarrel over the changeling boy.⁶⁰ The rift in their marriage, she claims, has shattered the natural order, such that

the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea
Contagious fogs which, falling in the land,
Hath every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents.
The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain,
The plowman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrain flock...
The human mortals want their winter cheer;
No night is now with hymn or carol blessed.
(2.1.88–102)⁶¹

As a consequence of this contagion, the seasons are out of order and "rheumatic diseases do abound" (2.1.105). Titania concludes by declaring that "this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dissension. / We are their parents and originals" (2.1.115–18). While studying this text, Kirsten had noted that "contagious" meant "pestilential" according to one edition, and indeed, though Mandel quotes only the lines about "contagious fogs" and "rheumatic diseases," the mention of "murrain flocks" also strongly evokes the disastrous effects of

⁵⁵ See, for example, Nunez, "Shakespeare for Survivors."

⁵⁶ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 43.

⁵⁷ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 151.

⁵⁸ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 47, 57.

⁵⁹ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 308, 57.

⁶⁰ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 57.

⁶¹ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 858.

disease.⁶² Just as the breakdown of the marriage between Oberon and Titania causes a rift in nature and the rupture of communities, so Mandel chooses to dwell most insistently on the fracturing of Arthur's marriages in her descriptions of the prepandemic world. Whether literally or symbolically, pandemic is linked with the dissolution of human ties.

At the end of Kirsten's performance as Titania, "The audience rose for a standing ovation. Kirsten stood in the state of suspension that always came over her at the end of performances, a sense of having flown very high and landed incompletely, her soul pulling upward out of her chest."⁶³ Just as the plot of this comedy leads us to a wish-fulfillment fantasy, or dream, of multiple weddings harmonized by the beguiling poetry of the fairies, so the play itself in Mandel's novel serves to mark out a space that transcends the harsh realities of the present to yield a moment of communal concord and transport. Mandel thus imagines the stories told by Shakespeare and retold in this postapocalyptic context as serving either to skirt the brink of the unspeakable, as in *King Lear*, or to provide us with fairy wings with which to leap over such chasms. The Traveling Symphony's decision to stage only Shakespeare in a postpandemic world, moreover, is explained as a function of audience demand: we are told that the Symphony had "performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but what was startling, what no one would have anticipated, was that audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings." According to Kirsten's friend Dieter, the reason is that "people want what was best about the world.' ... He himself found it difficult to live in the present."⁶⁴ The explanation given here is twofold. In the first place, Shakespeare embodies a "past" that relocates audiences out of their drab present, and second, he represents the highest achievements of that past. One might, in this context, accuse Mandel of the kind of "bardolatry"

that has been critiqued in academia in the past few decades. After all, as scholars have noted, categorizing Shakespeare as "the best" (or "for all time") is the consequence of a process of canonization that has been at least partly rooted in the political and economic hegemony of English language and culture over the past few centuries. From this perspective, Mandel could be seen as purveying the oft-repeated cliché of Shakespeare as cultural savior, as both inventor (to use Harold Bloom's term) and ultimate storehouse of "humanity."⁶⁵

Mandel, however, does not necessarily endorse this perspective, since it is voiced by her characters. She simply imagines what audiences might have wished for and thought, presumably (like many of us today) without having had much previous exposure to Shakespeare's works. The fact that "people want what was best about the world" is in itself understandable, as is the fact that the word "Shakespeare," talismanically charged over the past centuries, would retain its enchanting glow in a postapocalyptic context. Indeed, despite the ways in which *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might thematically resonate in this novel, it is "Shakespeare" as idea or signifier that seems to matter most to actors and their audiences in Mandel's postapocalyptic context. Beyond a brief allusion to *Hamlet*, no other play is mentioned, nor does the author engage in a sustained way with the stories or meanings of the two plays that do appear in the novel. It is the general idea of "Shakespeare" that the Symphony is committed to as central to what civilization should "mean." So, if on the one hand the *Decameron* provides its readers with stories set in both the past and the present featuring men and women from a wide range of classes, professions, religious affiliations, and nations, *Station Eleven* essentially gives us only "Shakespeare" as the metaphorical catalyst for civilization's renewal.

⁶² "Murrain" is rendered as "dead of disease" by the editors of *The Norton Shakespeare*.

⁶³ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 59.

⁶⁴ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 38.

⁶⁵ This is how Philip Smith reads Mandel's use of Shakespeare in "Shakespeare, Survival, and the Seeds of Civilization in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*," 298. For an amusing and incisive discussion of "bardolatry," see Hawkes, *That Shakespearean Rag*. On Shakespeare as "inventor" of the human, see Bloom, *Shakespeare*.

In this respect it is perhaps fitting that the Traveling Symphony, after having survived the threat posed by a religious fanatic (the “Prophet”) and his followers, makes its way at the end of the novel to the Severn City Airport settlement, known for its “Museum of Civilization.” The museum, as conceived by Clark, the former corporate consultant, displays objects “that had no practical use but that people wanted to preserve: cell phones with their delicate buttons, iPads, [a] Nintendo console, a selection of laptops. There were a number of impractical shoes: stilettos mostly, beautiful and strange. There were three car engines in a row, cleaned and polished, a motorcycle composed mostly of gleaming chrome.”⁶⁶ For Clark, these objects are both beautiful and moving, reminding him of “the human enterprise each object had required,” and for the people who visited the museum, “what happened here was something like prayer.”⁶⁷ The museum, with its now useless shimmering objects, also delineates an enchanted space in which to dream about or nurture one’s faith in a lost world. In this sense, “Shakespeare” as imagined in this novel very much belongs to the Museum of Civilization—perhaps its permanently traveling exhibit—as a reminder of the existential, cultural, and aesthetic surplus we require to feel “sufficient” in a civilized context. “Enchantment,” Jane Bennett suggests, “is a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under the momentary impression that the natural and cultural worlds *offer gifts* and, in so doing, remind us that it is good to be alive.”⁶⁸ This feeling, she continues, has a potentially ethical dimension insofar as it “encourages the finite human animal ... to give away some of its own time and effort on behalf of other creatures.”⁶⁹ The success of the Severn City Airport as a settlement suggests that the Museum of Civilization at its center to some degree serves this purpose, just as music and Shakespeare yield moments of “transcendent beauty and joy” that bind

together the members of the Traveling Symphony.⁷⁰ Enchantment provokes affirmation, and affirmation provokes a kind of unfocused faith, what Bennett calls “a disposition in favor of life.”⁷¹ This ethical disposition is perhaps not so distant from compassion. One must also acknowledge, however, that many of the enchanting objects in the Museum of Civilization—the iPhones, the computers, and the gaming consoles in particular—are the same objects that were earlier identified with the internet solitude of contemporary society. Whatever they now mean has been lifted from their original contexts and uses—and this seems true for “Shakespeare” as well.

Indeed, insofar as the enchantments that iPhones and “Shakespeare” produce are tied to a nostalgic yearning for or celebration of the past, one might also question their enduring benefits as a response to crisis. Whether or not Mandel intends for her reader to reach this insight is unclear. Despite the existential isolation of contemporary life that she touches on, she also frequently provides lyrical evocations of that lost world: “No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail.... No more screens shining in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages. No more concert stages lit by candy-colored halogens....”⁷² Mandel reminds us of the enchantments that we take for granted produced by the magical, flickering, glowing, or dazzling surges of electricity that illuminate our own nights, but her litany of “no more’s” also projects us into a nostalgic mourning for a past that we might want to mean more than its lost technological wonders. Perhaps there is something fitting about the fact that the Museum of Civilization is located in an airport. Like passengers suspended in the limbo between past departures and future destinations, the settlers

⁶⁶ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 258.

⁶⁷ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 254, 261.

⁶⁸ Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 158.

⁶⁹ Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 156.

⁷⁰ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 47.

⁷¹ Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 158.

⁷² Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 31.

are stuck in a no-place that is devoted to the non-time of nostalgia.

However tempting this novel's vision of Shakespeare leading a postpandemic world out of the darkness, it is also a potentially conservative one, since its hopes for the future are so much tied to reified totems and memorabilia from the past, including the very *Star Trek* motto that propels the Symphony forward. This of course is not to suggest that Shakespeare's actual works don't have anything to say to us about how we can wrestle with, construct, or inspire meaning in the face of loss and suffering. As I previously intimated, they very much do, and they no doubt did in his own time, when "plague closed the theaters again and again, death flickering over the landscape."⁷³ But in Mandel's novel Shakespeare is more magical fetish than living and productive presence, more an object of passive wonder and admiration than a provocation to thought, more magical fairies than Lear. Enchantment, as Rita Felski has argued, is "a condition of rapturous self-forgetting," which we sometimes desperately need, but Boccaccio's *Decameron* proposes stronger medicine in the context of crisis.⁷⁴ If Mandel's characters occupy a kind of passive limbo whose inhabitants are nostalgically turned toward the idea—even the fiction—of a lost past, Boccaccio's world is one which leads us through the purgatory of real loss to a renewal—through fiction—of our relations with real and always flawed human beings. In this sense, the *Decameron* is not simply forward looking in terms of its place in literary history, as has been often pointed out; through its forgivingly capacious embrace of the human, it implicitly affirmed the future of humankind in one of its darkest moments.⁷⁵

That future has certainly been recently called into question by the devastating effects of COVID-19. In addition to its global impact on health and the economy, it has likely intensified the cultural and political polarization that was becoming a worldwide phenomenon just before the pandemic. As our

relations with each other became further mediated by the necessities of virtual communication, our tendency to inhabit social e-bubbles confirming our own beliefs, biases, and prejudices and demonizing those on the "outside" has no doubt been further enabled. "Truth" in this context has become the purview of a particular group rather than an idea to be debated—an instrument of contradiction rather than a shared ideal. The "other" is defined increasingly narrowly and negatively to the detriment of that tolerance that Boccaccio implicitly celebrated. Politicians, the media, and other cultural outlets seem to have done nothing but worsen a climate of often cynical, impulsive distrust, and in the present context of conflicting and contested histories, Mandel's vision of a savior-author from the past seems unlikely to be realized. What we can hope for is a vision not unlike that of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, that persuades us to accept humanity in its always imperfect diversity, eschewing ideologically conceived notions of the "human"; a vision that persuades us to move forward through charitable compromise, empathy, compassion, laughter, and forgiveness. Is this too much to expect from an author and their work today? Perhaps so, especially in a climate in which the arts have been increasingly marginalized; and yet we might do well to recall that Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare, writers that revolutionized how we see ourselves and our world, emerged with sudden and entirely unexpected forcefulness in their own times, and they continue to impact our collective consciousness to this day.

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⁷³ Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 57.

⁷⁴ Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 35.

⁷⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 24.

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