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The aesthetics of humanism during the Renaissance: a case study of Boccaccio

Yutong Chen

Shanghai International Studies University,

Abstract. The intense political and religious atmosphere of medieval Europe exerted great pressure on human nature, suppressing individual expression. In response, humanist thought—rooted in natural human tendencies—began to emerge under this weight. Originating in Italy and centered on the critical inheritance of classical Greek culture, the Renaissance unfolded through the medium of the arts. Boccaccio's literary works, in particular, exhibit distinct stylistic features. His Decameron, a representative example of the frame narrative form, is imbued with the unique aesthetics of humanism and realism characteristic of the Renaissance. This aesthetic not only highlights the brilliance of human nature through its critique of the medieval Church and political authorities, but also expresses a historically specific literary style through its "text within a text" narrative structure reminiscent of One Thousand and One Nights. By blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, this structure conveys a dual metaphor of imagery and reality, offering an interwoven and multifaceted aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Renaissance, humanism, Boccaccio, aesthetics

1. Introduction

The Renaissance, a movement for intellectual and cultural liberation in Europe from the 14th to the 16th centuries, marked a pivotal transition from the medieval era to modern times. As Zhu observed, "The Renaissance is the pivot between the Middle Ages and modernity. [1]" Fundamentally, the Renaissance arose from the intensifying conflict between the European people's growing desire for worldly enjoyment, fostered by advances in productive forces, and the repressive grip of medieval religion and feudalism on human nature. From a social perspective, the Renaissance was also a cultural movement of the emerging bourgeoisie against feudalism.

This transformation was driven by two major factors. First, in the context of Europe's complex and evolving religious landscape, the Church gradually departed from and distorted traditional doctrine. It even engaged in profiteering through practices like the sale of indulgences, which blatantly violated the principles of Christian fundamentalism. The greed and corruption of medieval clergy inflicted significant oppression and harm on the lower classes, fostering an anti-Church sentiment. This climate of repression naturally infused the arts of the transitional period with a distinct "aesthetic undertone." A crucial factor in the Church's ability to dominate religious interpretation was its monopoly over scriptural texts. Before the invention of the printing press, access to the Bible was extremely limited for the general populace. The Church exploited this exclusivity to distort doctrine for personal gain. The unique cultural remnants of this historical moment often appear in later works—for instance, in the Romantic era, Victor Hugo mocked the Church by declaring that "literature will kill architecture." With the spread of printing technology, every household could own a copy of the Bible and read works like Boccaccio's Decameron, gaining insight into the Church's corruption. People could now understand scripture and pray at home without being swayed by clerical manipulation. As a result, works such as Boccaccio's Decameron and Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, which carried a spirit of religious critique and realism, naturally embodied an aesthetic of satire and carnival even within tragedy. Carnival, by its nature, is a state of anti-authoritarianism and the celebration of human vitality. As Bakhtin stated, "They represent a completely different worldview—one that emphasizes the unofficial, the non-Church, and the non-State approach to understanding the world and human relationships. [2]"

Second, the development of productive forces also gradually transformed Europe's relations of production. As Zhu Guangqian noted, "Europeans came into contact with advanced cultures, especially those of the Arabs, India, and China, from which they absorbed many useful elements." Technological advancements allowed European society to begin accumulating surplus value, and the nascent bourgeoisie began to emerge. In this context, the reform of production relations and the population's growing desire for worldly enjoyment came to represent a defiant force against the oppressive political and religious structures of the time. Figures such as Boccaccio, Dante, and Petrarch—the three giants of the Renaissance—were the first to challenge asceticism and repression through literary expressions that celebrated the power and brilliance of human nature. In The Decameron,

Boccaccio uses the Black Death as a narrative catalyst: ten young people flee to a villa outside Florence and pass the time telling stories. Through these tales—many of which satirize the Church and bureaucracy—the young narrators and their way of life reveal the aesthetic tastes of the emerging bourgeoisie. Numerous stories in The Decameron celebrate love as a manifestation of individual agency. For example, in the "Proem" to the fourth day, Boccaccio writes: "Any rational person would say: I love you just as other men love you—it is natural. Anyone who seeks to obstruct human nature had better be well prepared. [3]" Born into a wealthy merchant family in a town near Florence, Boccaccio's works—and those of many Renaissance writers—reflect the progressive values and aesthetic preferences of the rising bourgeois class in contrast to feudal society. Their attitude toward life and pursuit of pleasure was founded upon ideals of individual freedom and autonomy. Thus, opposition to the medieval repression of human nature and the celebration of human liberty became a shared humanist aesthetic among Renaissance writers like Boccaccio.

Against this backdrop, a wave of scholars and intellectuals turned to the classical cultures of ancient Greece and Rome to advocate for freedom and the dignity of human nature, standing in opposition to the values of Catholicism. The revival of classical antiquity was particularly meaningful, as ancient Greek art—especially tragedy—was imbued with a sense of necessity, fatalism, and the sublime. These works evoked awe and pity by portraying gods or heroes struggling against fate and authority, thereby producing an elevated aesthetic experience. This spirit of resistance reflected the enduring strength and independence of human nature—the very core of the "Greek spirit." This spiritual essence perfectly aligned with the Renaissance pursuit of liberating human nature. In inheriting this tradition, Renaissance thinkers forged a distinctive aesthetic of humanism.

2. A Thousand and One Nights-style mirrored narration: the narrative aesthetics represented by the decameron

The reason why literary works from the Renaissance era have become enduring classics in literary history and established a distinctive aesthetic structure lies largely in the narrative styles prevalent at the time. Artists such as Boccaccio and Chaucer, who were active mainly in the fourteenth century, adopted a "story-within-a-story" or framed narrative structure in their works. This approach not only ensured a smooth storytelling flow but also created a dual metaphorical relationship between reality and fiction, between the outer text and the inner texts. As a result, readers experienced a heightened sense of aesthetic engagement and were able to more profoundly grasp the emotions and critical dimensions embedded in the narrative.

Attention to form and structure is one of the defining features of Western literature. Throughout the long evolution of Western literary tradition, we find numerous structural parallels and correspondences. Epic poems such as The Iliad, The Song of the Nibelungs, and The Divine Comedy adopt a narrative mode that encloses mythology or religion within a realistic framework. The tripartite structure pioneered by ancient Greek tragedy finds resonance in the Renaissance theory of the dramatic "three unities." Additionally, the chorus in ancient Greek drama, as a crucial narrative element, parallels the role of the narrator or aside in later theatrical works. Narrative form has consistently been one of the most prominent areas in which Western literary texts experiment with structural variations. The renowned twentieth-century postmodernist Jorge Luis Borges gained fame for stories like The Garden of Forking Paths and The Circular Ruins. Whether portraying, under the backdrop of World War II, a spy's perspective on a Ming dynasty official composing an "infinite book," or telling the tale of a magician who can conjure a living human being from imagination only to discover he himself is a figment of someone else's imagination, Borges consistently employs a narrative structure where one text contains another. In conversation, Borges referred to such stories as imitations of One Thousand and One Nights. Here, One Thousand and One Nights serves not as a literal source but as a symbolic or emblematic reference. Borges's real emphasis was on the classic Western narrative structure of embedding stories within stories—a tradition that Renaissance writers like Boccaccio, Dante, and Chaucer further developed and brought to artistic heights through their works.

It is evident that works such as The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales exemplify this form of narrative structure. Contemporary scholarship tends to focus on empirical studies, such as whether Chaucer, writing around the same time as Boccaccio, was directly influenced by him. Researchers often trace biographical details and documented conversations to establish direct textual connections. However, this positivist perspective frequently overlooks the cultural-historical context internal to the texts themselves, as well as the broader interplay with social and historical conditions beyond the texts and their authors. The method of "parallel studies" that emerged in comparative literature in the latter half of the twentieth century offers a more expansive lens. By analyzing cultural contexts, historical backgrounds, authorial intentions, and even stepping beyond temporal and disciplinary boundaries, comparative literature enables genuine cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, and transhistorical inquiry. Viewed from this perspective, the texts reveal a mirrored contrast between illusion and reality—an intertextual interplay that precisely captures the unique narrative aesthetics of the Renaissance era.

3. Aesthetic paradigms from a comparative literature perspective

In The Decameron, Boccaccio pioneered a dialogic, story-circle style of narration—an innovative narrative form that not only stood out amidst the constraints of the medieval era but also helped shape a crucial aesthetic paradigm of humanism during that time. From the perspective of comparative literature, this paradigm is primarily characterized by a group of individuals, having survived the oppressive backdrop of the plague, retreating to an isolated locale and taking turns telling stories to pass the time. Similarly, Chaucer, writing slightly after Boccaccio, wove his narrative framework around a group of pilgrims journeying to

Canterbury, each telling tales along the way. These individual stories are unified by an introductory prologue in verse that brings together a vivid gallery of characters. Both narratives reflect the structure of classical Western literature; the fascinating aspect lies in how readers, having already been placed into a semi-fictional realm through the framing prologues or settings, encounter yet another layer of narration—stories told by characters within the text itself. This doubling of narrative reality creates a layered interplay between the real and the imagined, generating a complex aesthetic experience that has had far-reaching influence. This influence can be seen in later works such as Robinson Crusoe, where Defoe constructs a metaphorical narrative structure of reality and illusion through the motif of "diaspora. [4]" Diaspora, in this context, refers not only to the geographic displacement of Robinson himself, but also symbolically to the dispersal of British culture and Christianity, represented by Robinson, in contrast to the colonized cultures embodied by characters such as Friday. Because Robinson's image aligned with the cultural expectations of British society at the time, the boundary between fiction and reality was further blurred—the story became a theatrical performance of familiar culture and lived reality for its readers.

Indeed, the literature of the Renaissance was inherently inclusive. It drew not only from classical aesthetic traditions but also absorbed elements from Eastern texts. The mirrored narrative structures reminiscent of One Thousand and One Nights appear in both The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales, albeit transformed through their distinct historical and geographical contexts. From a comparative literature standpoint, an analysis of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's narrative strategies and authorial intent reveals that this structural metaphor of the real and the imaginary serves a similar aesthetic function. Just as ancient Greek tragedy sought to edify citizens of the polis through invoking noble fear and pity, The Decameron's survival theme implicitly signals mass death, while its tales dissect the corruption and decadence of the Church and feudal aristocracy during the plague years. The Canterbury Tales exposes the baseness of figures such as the pardoner through its diverse character portrayals. As William Blake once commented, "As Newton classified the stars, and Linnaeus the plants, Chaucer classified the human classes. [5]" Through the pilgrims' shared journey, the narration of their stories reveals inner truths, drawing parallels between the fictional and the real, and emphasizing moral contrast that resonates more closely with readers. Writers such as Boccaccio and Chaucer used storytelling characters to symbolize and textualize reality, presenting tales imbued with realism and satire. In doing so, they compel readers not only to witness a survival drama but also to sense the narrative gaze of the text itself. Similarly, in One Thousand and One Nights, readers often lose track of whether they are more concerned with the content of Scheherazade's daily tales or whether she will survive another night. The purpose of the text—whether to emphasize the inner story or the outer frame—remains intentionally ambiguous.

During the Renaissance—a uniquely transformative historical period—this narrative style and aesthetic paradigm uniquely reawakened readers' critical awareness of reality. Each story in the text mirrored the dramas unfolding in the world around them. Authors like Boccaccio and Chaucer blurred the line between art and life. As Kant noted in Critique of Pure Reason: "As objects, we possess knowledge proper to humanity and acknowledge the objective reality of the human being, yet this does not mean we deny the truth of our own beliefs. [6]" Renaissance literature embraced this kind of objective truth. Rather than distorting reality for literary effect, it presented society as it was, while the literary form gave readers a unique aesthetic experience—one in which reality stared back at them—thus invoking a humanistic awakening from within the text.

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