



The Grotesque in Bergamo

J.P. Jacobsen's *Pesten i Bergamo* in light of
Bakhtin, Boccaccio, and Dante

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Abstract

This article examines J.P. Jacobsen's short-story *Pesten i Bergamo* (1881) through the lens of Bakhtin's *carnavalesque*. Bakhtin's *carnival* is a medieval societal alterity which takes hold in times of societal upheaval, here the spread of plague, and is depicted in the medieval literary mode identified as *grotesque realism*. It notes the narrative points in Jacobsen's story that cohere to Bakhtin's grotesque realism in two ways: the debauchery of the Old Bergamese citizenry, and the carnivalesque mockery of medieval religious practices, providing a structured inversion of previous societal practices established in the short story. It also examines close intertextual links between these elements in *Pesten i Bergamo* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, offering a potential source for Jacobsen's usage of grotesque realism as a literary mode and his depiction of societal reactions to widespread illness. Finally, it explores the literary geography of *Pesten i Bergamo* and how it coheres to the verticality of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, specifically *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. The article concludes that Jacobsen, knowingly or unknowingly, employed carnivalesque *topoi* to convey a medieval sense of medieval, following the medieval literary tradition broadly and more specifically the fourteenth-century Italian literary tradition, matching the temporal and geographic setting of *Pesten i Bergamo*.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Jacobsen, Dante, Bergamo, Boccaccio



1. INTRODUCTION

J.P. Jacobsen's *Pesten i Bergamo* (*The plague in Bergamo*), 1881, is strikingly haunting, written near the end of his life, and reckons with hopelessness, illness, and the roiling masses of humanity as a collective. It follows the reactions of the citizens of Old Bergamo to a plague which has devastated the poorer New Bergamo and come to the old city (Jacobsen 1881).¹ The narrative, lacking central characters, or, indeed, a definitive conclusion, appears vaguely unstructured: it lacks the abrupt emotional climax and small cast termed necessary for the structuralist model of the short story.² Whilst the narrative may not conform to a typical short-story structure, like a medieval city, there is a method to the winding lanes, dark alleys, and twists leading up to the church at the centre. Jacobsen's *Pesten i Bergamo* is layered with allegory and thematic structure from medieval texts, contemporary politics, Jacobsen's own life. In this essay, I examine the former, those layers built during the fourteenth century itself. I hope, like an archaeologist, to do so based upon and without damaging the work of my predecessors and shall first march through previous scholars' examinations of *Pesten i Bergamo*. I then begin climbing towards the centre, introducing a Bakhtinian reading of *Pesten i Bergamo* before proceeding on to examining the short story in the light of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, arguing for an intentionality regarding setting, structure, and literary geography. This latter section corresponds to and explains the Bakhtinian elements present in *Pesten i Bergamo*, offering a 'why' to the Bakhtinian 'what'.

2. PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

2.1 ON PESTEN I BERGAMO

Scholarship on *Pesten i Bergamo* has wandered in several directions, some of which cohere to my discussion more than others. Bo Hakon Jørgensen (2006) has examined the plague as an allegory for Jacobsen's diagnosis of tuberculosis, exploring the concept of disease without a cure, and the strange relationship with hope that entails from that. Jørgensen characterises the initial religious reaction of the Old Bergamese and their later debauchery as two kinds of ecstatic experience: two extremes, in a sense (2006:10). Jørgensen additionally points towards the lack of distinct characters; this story reckons with humanity as a mass, something I also wish to highlight. He discusses the vertical against the horizontal plane, contrasting the heavenliness of the former with the harm stemming from the latter (2006:11). I too shall discuss these two extremes, humanity as a mass, and verticality, although my approach differs from Jørgensen's.

Jørgen Holmgaard (1986) characterises the text as a tension between excess and moderation, with flagellation presented by Jacobsen as the 'solution' to this tension. Holmgaard (1986:81) further depicts this lack of moderation as economically wasteful, indicating towards a capitalistic reading of the text. This interpretation runs counter to my coming discussion but provides a thought-provoking counter-reading to my Bakhtinian lens.

Henrik Leth Pedersen (1977) runs counter to Holmgaard's (and Frederik Nielsen's) theory that the flagellants are the key to understanding the text. Pedersen (1977:45) notes a shift from realism to absurdism at the end of the monk's sermon and interprets this text as an ironic

¹ For the remainder of this essay, Tina Nunnally's translation (1994) will provide the in-text quotations for reading ease, but the original Danish will be footnoted.

² For an examination of short-story structuralism, see Éjxenbaum (1994). The contrasts, if not the frame, bear certain similarities to Søren Bagesen's reading of Boccaccio's *noveller* in *Den Blicherske Novelle* (1965:14–20) and Bagesen's *begivenhed* is present, albeit extended (41–42).

depiction of the outraged Danish bourgeoisie's reaction to the Modern Breakthrough. He then differentiates between the Bergamese symbolising the natural, whilst the flagellants, the artificial (Pedersen 1977:57). This duality plays a key role in my analysis, but I disagree that they are dichotomised as opposed entities. It is my belief that the collapse of societal values is more structured than Pedersen makes it out to be.

Erik Østerud (1998) presents Jacobsen as a master of allegory, discussing how *Mogens* contains *topoi* from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno*. I too believe Jacobsen drew from the *Commedia* not simply in *Mogens* but also in *Pesten i Bergamo*. The latter half of my analysis will correspond closely to Østerud's examination of *Mogens*: I shall draw links between *Pesten i Bergamo* and earlier Christian and literary traditions stemming from the Italian fourteenth century. This sojourn through scholarship is by no means exhaustive. Others, notably Frederik Nielsen (1968), Dag Heede (2006), and Knud Wentzel (1970) have written on *Pesten i Bergamo*. Much of this scholarship focusses on Jacobsen's own life and contemporary social issues (especially regarding religion's waning influence).

2.2 ON BAKHTIN IN PESTEN I BERGAMO

The only analysis focussing specifically on Bakhtinian elements in *Pesten i Bergamo* that I have managed to unearth is Morten Pedersen's (2002) *opgave* for Institut for Nordisk Sprog og Litteratur at Aarhus. Pedersen (2002:13) emphasises that the carnivalesque tone of the text acts as a deconstructive mode aimed towards religion, and notes that the text lacks the regenerative power that Bakhtin strongly emphasises is part of Carnival and Grotesque Realism. For Pedersen, *Pesten i Bergamo* represents a tension between religion and atheism, and carnivalesque tonality is used to mock the former. Pedersen (2002:10–13) also notes two opposing moments of Bakhtinian laughter, one aimed at the Church and the other at the Old Bergamese. I will focus not on the tension between religion and 'nothingness', or atheism, but rather the tension of a society facing dramatic upheaval turning towards traditional outlets for catharsis, to no avail. This leads to the ways in which that deconstruction is intricately tied to the structured inversion of society in medieval practices of carnival and feasting, as well as literature from the Italian fourteenth century that Jacobsen may have purposefully imitated, akin to Østerud's evaluation of *Mogens*.

3. THE CARNIVALESQUE IN BERGAMO

3.1 THE NARRATIVE

Bo Hakon Jørgensen (2006:11) divides the narrative into three key points: the arrival of the plague; reactions to the plague (first religious, then debauched); the flagellant procession in and out of Old Bergamo. I must subdivide them further. The basic narrative moments of *Pesten i Bergamo* are as follows: 1) We are introduced to Bergamo, and specifically that there is an Old Bergamo, on the hill, and a New Bergamo, below the hill. 2) A plague breaks out in New Bergamo, which is burnt. 3) This plague spreads to Old Bergamo. 4) We are told that order breaks down. 5) The narrative then jumps backwards in time, and the reader is shown the increased generosity, piety, holy processions, fasting and singing the Bergamese performed to attempt to alleviate the plague (culminating in declaring the Virgin Mary as *podesta*). 6) This increased religiosity gives way to debauchery, gluttony, hedonism, and selfishness; bodies are left to rot in the streets. 7) A solemn procession appears coming through the remains of New Bergamo and proceeds up the hill. 8) The citizens of Old Bergamo follow this procession, mocking, laughing, jeering. 9) This whips the processions into a frenzy, and they

flagellate themselves, a moment of madness and understanding occurs between the two parties. 10) A monk from among the flagellants preaches that Jesus never died on the cross, that he instead abandoned humankind to their sins. 11) The Old Bergamese are roused, shouting that they should crucify this monk in Jesus' place. 12) The monk laughs at the Old Bergamese, the mockery has switched sides. 13) This procession departs down the hill and out of Old Bergamo. This is far more detailed, and unwieldy, than Jørgensen's synopsis, but allows for closer examination.

For our purposes, sections 5–9 are the most important. Here, we see a religious framework purposefully created. The Old Bergamese “came together in unity and harmony” (Jacobsen 1994:110).³ They distribute supposedly plague-preventing “juniper berries and vinegar” to the poor, and dispose of corpses properly (Jacobsen 1994:110).⁴ We are further told of their religious devotion: specifically, that they “sought out the churches at all hours of the day, singly or in procession”, that they sang with “a hundred swaying throats”, they offer prayers, and that “fasts were prescribed and each day the holy relics were set out on the altars”.⁵ Specific religious norms, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, are being established here, and this section culminates with the Bergamese having chosen “the Holy Virgin as *Podesta* or mayor over the town, now and forever” (Jacobsen 1994:10).⁶

This having failed to prevent the plague from spreading, the Bergamese abandon their piety and descend into debauched hedonism. Morten Pedersen (2002) is correct in noting that this descent employs carnivalesque themes to deconstruct pre-established societal norms. The carnivalesque is not, however, used merely to depict a society descending into chaos or godlessness. The way this descent occurs is structured: it inverts the religious protocol detailed above. Where once the Bergamese came together, now “each person thought only of himself” (Jacobsen 1994:112).⁷ Where once religious songs echoed from a hundred throats, now the city rings with “blasphemy and ungodliness, of the moans of gluttons and the howls of drunkards” (Jacobsen 1994:111).⁸ Both the morality and auditory experience of the city are specifically contrasted here. Furthermore, the prayers proffered before are now transformed into “necromancy, sorcery, and the invocation of demons”.⁹ Fasting has now become drunkenness and gluttony. Each specific religious or cultural rite Jacobsen (1994:110) detailed in his short description of “[i]n the very beginning, when the plague first arrived”, has been inverted.¹⁰ They have indeed, as later described, “raised ungodliness to a system” (Jacobsen 1994:115).¹¹

The procession of flagellants also mirrors this earlier established religious-cultural precedent. They form “a strange procession”, akin to the earlier Bergamese “processions”, they too march towards a church, and “[t]hey are singing as they walk, and strange, despairing sounds of lamentation”, fill the air of Old Bergamo (Jacobsen 1994:110–113).¹² Their bloody scourges hint at the flagellation to come, but also serve as an alternative form of the fasting noted in the first phase of Bergamo's plague, as well as, following Holmgaard (1986:78), the debauchery of that second phase. The hellish pageantry of the procession, the “huge black crosses”, and banners “red like fire and blood”, emphasised multiple times

³ sluttet sig sammen i enighed og samdrægtighed (Jacobsen 1952:50)

⁴ Enebær og eddike (Jacobsen 1952:50)

⁵ søgt kirkerne årle og silde, enkeltvis og i optog; hundrede svingende svælg; faster var der bleven påbudt og relikvierne havde hver dag stået stillet frem på altrene. (Jacobsen 1952:50)

⁶ den hellige jomfru til podesta eller borgmester over byen, nu og evindeligt. (Jacobsen 1952:50)

⁷ Enhver havde tænke for sig selv. (Jacobsen 1952:51)

⁸ bespottelse og ugudelighed, af fråderes stønnen og drankeres hyl. (Jacobsen 1952:50)

⁹ nekromantia, trolldom og djævlepåkaldelse. (Jacobsen 1952:51)

¹⁰ Lige i begyndelsen, da pesten kom på. (Jacobsen 1952:50)

¹¹ ugudeligheden i system. (Jacobsen 1952:53)

¹² sælsomt tog; optog; De synger imens de går, og sære, fortvivlelsesfuldt klagende toner. (Jacobsen 1952:51f.)

in Jacobsen's (1994:113) text, echo that pageantry one can infer accompanied the Bergamese churchly relics at the heights of their religious zeal.¹³ This procession, too, can be conceived of not only as an alternative to Bergamese debauchery, but as an inversion of previous religious norms, or perhaps as a mockery of them.

3.2 BAKHTIN'S CARNIVALESQUE

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) conception of the CARNIVALESQUE is multifaceted, and my discussion necessarily will be limited in scope.¹⁴ A few principles of the carnivalesque relevant to our discussion can be drawn out. It is essentially a mode of being inherent to medieval society (and thus conveyed through medieval literature) of a second order, that is, an alterity to the normative mode of being (Bakhtin 1984:4). Three manifestations are delineated: ritual spectacles involving pageantry, especially those parodying the medieval Church; comic verbal compositions; and verbal jeering, oaths, and other such transgressions (Bakhtin 1984:5ff.). Bakhtin (1984:7–10) further links feasts and this "carnival time" to moments of crisis, as well as stating that these are times which "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions". Bakhtin singles out from the first category the medieval feast of fools, which he presents as a "grotesque degradation of various churchly rituals and symbols" involving "gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing" (Bakhtin 1984:80). This coheres closely to the Bergamese debauchery in Jacobsen's tale. Bakhtin (1984:83) further explains that "another essential element was a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the 'feast of fools'... The members of this hierarchy of fools sang solemn mass". Inversion too is inherent in the pageantry of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin (1984:91) further links the carnivalesque to hell: "one of the indispensable accessories of carnival was the set called 'hell'". Bakhtin's (1984) terminology for the medieval literary mode that conveys the carnivalesque is GROTESQUE REALISM, which serves to degrade a subject into a matter of flesh. He succinctly summarises his position by stating that "The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life" (Bakhtin 1984:96).

3.3 INVERSION IN BERGAMO

The Old Bergamese descent into debauchery can be conceived of as not a total breakdown of societal order, but a reversion into their alternate 'life', following Bakhtin. They have reverted to a carnival-state, perhaps understandably, as this is the manner in which a medieval person might understand excess or celebration. The careful inversion in Jacobsen's text, detailed above, points towards this carnivalesque *modus operandi*. Yet the carnivalesque is seemingly split into two strains: the raucous drunken revelry of the Old Bergamese, and the solemn, yet also fleshly and grotesque inverted churchly procession of the flagellants. The former contains the joyful, freeing aspects of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, the latter the more structured inverted hierarchy of the Church (although both contain inversion). Both contain grotesque, fleshly imagery. These are dual, yet conflicting depictions of a grotesque inversion that discordantly meet in Jacobsen's text. Their meeting and subsequent interactions create yet more carnivalesque *topoi*.

New carnivalesque themes are created during the interaction between these two strains of inverted carnival. Upon the flagellant procession's arrival to Old Bergamo, the Old Bergamese are first dismayed, but soon begin to follow, "the way they would have followed

¹³ store, sorte kors; røde som ild og blod. (Jacobsen 1952:52).

¹⁴ I employ H el ene Iswolsky's 1984 translation of *Rabelais and His World*.

a band of acrobats or a trained bear” (Jacobsen 1994:114).¹⁵ The solemn procession gains the comedic, parodic aspect of carnival. The now-dual procession “led the way, singing and bellowing with the most ridiculous gestures of devotion – except for one of them, who turned cartwheels”, completing the image of a carnivalesque medieval feast day (Jacobsen 1994:115).¹⁶ Bakhtin (1984:87ff.) characterizes laughter and jeering as both symbolic elements of the carnivalesque: “free laughter was related to feasts and... coincided with the permission for meat, fat, and intercourse” whilst “obscenities and curses, profanities and swearing” were “deeply infused with images of the lower stratum”, that is, grotesque realism. These two emotional expressions, thus far absent from the story explicitly (although some jeering and laughter is perhaps implied in the earlier depiction of debauchery), first occur upon this encounter, and are performed by the Old Bergamese. Morten Pedersen (2002:9) rightly discusses laughter from both the Old Bergamese and later the flagellant monk as two forms of a similar carnivalesque ambivalence. I would also point to the laughter being accompanied by mockery from both the Old Bergamese and the flagellants: these two emotional expressions are intertwined in Jacobsen’s text. The Old Bergamese first laugh upon the arrival to the church, after the aforementioned dual-carnivalesque procession, and this continues inside the church: a young man holds “mass up there using the wildest, craziest words, full of obscenities and blasphemy”, whilst his parishioners are “roaring with laughter, hiccuping with drink” (Jacobsen 1994:115).¹⁷ This follows the parodic mass of the feast of fools quite closely (Bakhtin 1984:74f.). The laughter is paired with jeering at the flagellants: “the entire church laughed and howled and gloated at the strangers” (Jacobsen 1994:115).¹⁸ Later, the laughter of the flagellant monk at the Old Bergamese holds both an ecstatic and a jeering quality: he is staring at the Bergamese whose “teeth shone white like the teeth of baited beasts of prey, and he spread out his arms toward Heaven in a moment of ecstasy and laughed” (Jacobsen 1994:122).¹⁹ It is only in the clash between these two strains of carnivalesque that laughter and mockery break into Jacobsen’s text.

Likewise, the Old Bergamese degrade the already-inverted worship of the flagellants further. Their mockery prompts the solemn procession to flagellate themselves “their eyes glittering with madness, foam frothing at their mouths, and blood trickling down their flesh” (Jacobsen 1994:118).²⁰ This is done while they sing a *misere*, the sacred is mixed with the profane, and the fasting of the Old Bergamese in the first weeks of the plague is inverted to a grotesque extreme. This is a church service through the lens of grotesque realism, degraded and brought to the earthly world of the flesh (Bakhtin 1984:28; 74). The depiction of the procession as one seething mass of flesh is repeated later in the reaction of the Old Bergamese to the monk’s heretical sermon. They shout in unison at him, faces contort and teeth flash as if animals, and hissing, howling, shouting provide auditory degradation. Throughout the text, although individuals are singled out at specific points, actions are taken solely as groups (with the exception of the monk). This further conforms to the literary style of grotesque realism. As in Bakhtin’s (1984:221) notes on Rabelais, “bodies are interwoven and begin to be fused in a grotesque image of a devoured and devouring world”. Individualism has no place in the grotesque, nor apparently in Bergamo.

¹⁵ som man ville fulgt efter en bande gøglere eller efter en tam bjørn. (Jacobsen 1952:53)

¹⁶ førte den syngende og vrælende med de naragtigst andægtige gebærder, undtagen af dem, som vendte mølle, (Jacobsen 1952:53)

¹⁷ mass deroppe med de vildeste, vanvittigste ord, fulde af utugt og af bespottelse; brølende af latter, hikkende af drik. (Jacobsen 1952:54)

¹⁸ hele kirken lo og hujede, og hoverede over de fremmede. (Jacobsen 1952:54)

¹⁹ tænderne på tirrede rovdyr, og han bredte armene i et øjeblikks ekstase op mod himlen og lo. (Jacobsen 1952:58)

²⁰ med vanvidsfunklende øjne, med frådeskyer for deres munde, med blodet rislende ned ad deres kød. (Jacobsen 1952:55)

3.4 MADNESS IN BERGAMO

Bakhtin (1984:39) deems that “the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms” and specifically links this to a view of the world undimmed by “commonplace ideas and judgments”. This, specifically, is the culmination of the raucous laughter, jeering, flagellation and singing in our inverted, parodic church service. A kind of carnivalesque ecstatic experience is shared between the flagellants and the Old Bergamese: “For they were seized by it; there was a tiny spot of insanity in their brains that understood this madness” (Jacobsen 1994:118).²¹ Briefly, the two strains of the carnivalesque become one, and they listen, then, to the flagellant monk, who delivers the carnivalesque sermon for this grotesque mass. His sermon is suitably Bakhtinian. It denies the death and resurrection of Christ, it focuses on the sensory experiences of Christ on the mount, and visual imagery of Hell is woven through the speech (Jacobsen 1994: 56f.). The heresy, the focus on the flesh, and the hellish pageantry all conform to this ‘feast of the fools’ atmosphere Jacobsen has diligently created, and all are an inversion of a typical sermon, which might instead depict the sacrifice of Jesus, the spiritual, and the glory of heaven. This sermon strikes terror into the Old Bergamese, as “a gasp of terror ran through the church” (Jacobsen 1994:121).²² Fear accompanying hellish pageantry is an important part of Bakhtinian carnival: “all that was terrifying becomes grotesque” (Bakhtin 1984:91). Yet at the height of the festivities, the “set called hell” was burned, and “[t]his grotesque image cannot be understood without appreciating the defeat of fear”. For Bakhtin (1984:94), the carnivalesque was infused with fear, terror, and madness, but also laughter, and joy, which would triumph over fear. This, then, would function to renew the world. Carnival was a time of death, of the breakdown of normative societal morality and was connected to human crisis, but was also a time of rebirth, of renewal, and change (Bakhtin 1984:9f.).

Instead, the flagellant procession leaves the church, crosses through the town square, and disappears down the mountain and out presumably into the ruins of New Bergamo (Jacobsen 1994:58). The Old Bergamese simply “stared after them as they trudged down the mountain”, while “[t]he song grew more distant” (Jacobsen 1994:122).²³ There is no hint of Bakhtinian renewal following this shared carnivalesque procession and grotesque churchly sermon; indeed, the debauchery itself seems gone from the now-solemn Old Bergamese. There is no new hope, joy, or life in Bergamo, or at least, none that Jacobsen has deemed to show us. The final laughter does not triumph over fear, but is of the flagellant monk, laughing at the Old Bergamese. Nor is there hint of renewal for the flagellants, who simply exit, stage left. The people of Bergamo, and perhaps the flagellants as well, have reverted to the medieval state of alterity, carnival, following the destruction of New Bergamo and the breakdown of order in Old Bergamo, yet they are left without the hope that medieval carnival promises.

4. LINKS TO FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN LITERATURE

4.1 FURTHER QUESTIONS

Two questions are raised by the preceding analysis. Firstly, if infused with so many carnivalesque *topoi*, why does *Pesten i Bergamo* fail to take the final step from death and madness to rebirth and joy? The second is whether the medieval Italian setting is merely a vehicle to convey the themes Jacobsen wishes to write about. Bakhtin (1984:102f.; 218) connects carnival particularly to Italy, noting that the carnivalesque or grotesque tradition was

²¹ For dette greb dem; der var et lille vanvidspunkt i deres hjærner, som forstod denne galskab. (Jacobsen 1952:55)

²² der var gået en stønnen af angst igennem kirken. (Jacobsen 1952:58)

²³ stirrede efter dem, mens de gik ned ad bjærget; Fjærnerne blev sangen. (Jacobsen 1952:58)

especially strong there. Does this provide sufficient explanation? Is it even less specific than this, that the medieval setting merely functions as an allegorical, atemporal state applicable to any time period, following Jørgensen (2006:11)?

I shall tackle the latter question before returning to the former.

The geographical setting is given to us: Bergamo, Italy. The temporal setting is indirectly given to us: the plague, in Bergamo, Italy. Whilst Italy had multiple bouts with the plague, that wave entitled the “Black Death” (mirroring Jacobsen’s own “White Death”) struck Italy c. 1348 (Ruggiero 2021:1). I might suggest that this is *the* plague in Bergamo, as many scholars before me have assumed.²⁴ This could easily not be the case: Italy was devastated by *Yersinia pestis* plagues four times in the 1500s and twice in the 1600s, and there is nothing explicit in *Pesten i Bergamo* ensuring a fourteenth-century rather than a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century setting (Alfani 2013:409). The use of the definitive: this is *Pesten*, not *Pest i Bergamo*, and the crusader-like trappings of the flagellant procession are potential implicit textual links to the c. 1348 dating. Furthermore, intertextual links between Jacobsen’s *Pesten i Bergamo* and Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* suggest that Jacobsen was familiar with the latter and provide both confirmation of ‘when’ and hint at ‘why’ this short story takes place when and where it does.

4.2 BOCCACCIO’S DECAMERON

Giovanni Boccaccio was an eyewitness to the onslaught of plague in Italy in 1348. He had begun his collection of tales before the plague struck but posited that their purpose was to help his fellow Florentines cope with the death and sorrow of this plague: his tales would provide amusement and diversion from the harrowing reality of Florence’s epidemic (Ruggiero 2021:1f.). Although the assembled stories themselves do not directly refer to the plague, the metafictional framed story of the *Decameron* does (Ruggiero 2021:11f.). It begins in 1348, when a “death-dealing pestilence” comes to Florence (Boccaccio 1982:8).²⁵ The reactions of the Florentines are as follows. Firstly, “[h]umble supplications” to God are made, alongside “ordered processions” (Boccaccio 1982:8). Then, as the plague spreads, Florentines react in various ways, some live moderately, but many “carouse and make merry, and go about singing and frolicking and satisfy the appetite in everything possible and laugh and scoff” (Boccaccio 1982:10). They “shunned the sick”, and as a result of this debauchery (and the high death-toll), “the reverent authority of the laws, both divine and human, was in all manner dissolved and fallen into decay” (Boccaccio 1982:11). Sexual mores come undone, and family bonds break down in the face of disease (Boccaccio 1982:12). Despite the proliferation of death, “laughter and jests and feasts and merrymaking in company” continue and Boccaccio describes the marked lack of grieving for the dead (Boccaccio 1982:13). Then, from “the dregs of the people”, a service, or order of people, styling themselves as *beccamorti* or *becchini* arise, and if hired, take bodies alongside priests to the closest church in an unceremonious procession (Boccaccio 1982:13f.). These *becchini* are later noted by the character Pampinea to be “the dregs of our city, thirsting for our blood, style themselves gravediggers, and ride and run about everywhere, flouting us with our distresses in ribald songs” (Boccaccio 1982:18). This all, of course, is preamble for the meetings of the young aristocratic men and women who tell fabulous tales to one another whilst retiring from Florence. This movement from increased piety to debauchery in specific ways to a quasi-religious yet grotesque procession rising from the lower classes, “thirsting for the blood” of the upper classes, is copied nearly exactly in first half

²⁴ The assumption of a medieval, likely mid-fourteenth-century setting is common in much of the scholarship listed above, see: Pedersen (2002:52); Jørgensen (2006:10).

²⁵ I employ John Payne’s 1982 translation of the *Decameron*.

of *Pesten i Bergamo*. Or, at the very least, the set-up for the major events of Jacobsen's text (the procession and parodic church service) follows the set-up for Boccaccio's framed story. The social inversion in the *Decameron* is present throughout Jacobsen's text: the 'holy' processions, which under a medieval normative society would have stemmed from the elite, instead arise from the 'dregs' of society: the flagellant procession itself comes from the countryside, where the New Bergamese fled, and passes through New Bergamo. Debauchery, present in the Old Bergamese, seems ubiquitous in Boccaccio's Florence: not confined to any one class. Jacobsen's flagellant procession too thirsts, quite madly, for the blood of the Old Bergamese; they too proceed to the nearest (still-standing, doubtlessly there were churches in now-burnt New Bergamo) church.

Bakhtin (1984:272) cites Boccaccio's *Decameron* as an example of medieval grotesque realism. For Bakhtin (1984:272f.), the *Decameron*'s plague is the catalyst for the switch into alterity, into the carnivalesque: it creates "new conditions for frank, unofficial words and images", and the plague "has created its own unique atmosphere that grants both outward and inward rights". Bakhtin could easily be discussing *Pesten i Bergamo*. The plague, for Bakhtin, symbolises death (not the furthest logical leap) and thus the lower stratum: the grotesque and bodily, situating the entirety of the *Decameron*'s narrative in grotesque realism. Bakhtin's (1984:273) analysis of Boccaccio culminates in examining madness, specifically, that madness is offered as a solution, a way to "outward and inner freedom from the dogmas of the dying yet still prevailing philosophy", a solution "that would permit to see the world with different eyes". Madness, too, is the culmination of the encounter between the Old Bergamese and the flagellants, and seemingly offers new understanding: "there was a tiny spot of insanity in their brains that understood this madness" (Jacobsen 1994:118).²⁶ Bakhtin (1984:273) however finds the *Decameron* unsatisfactory as a carnivalesque text: "The *Decameron* is the high point of grotesque realism, but in its poorer, pettier form". This is left unexplained, but presumably has to do with the lack of the regenerative theme Bakhtin finds so essential to the carnivalesque. In other words, the *Decameron* is missing what *Pesten i Bergamo* is, in terms of carnivalesque regeneration and life-affirmation. The old system is torn down and the medieval setting reverts to the alter-world of carnival, but no new life or newly generated system springs forth. The leap from death to new life is not made. Both inclusion and absence of carnivalesque *topoi* are mirrored by Jacobsen, and thus the *Decameron* might offer an intertextual explanation for the origin of *Pesten i Bergamo*'s grotesque realism. The lack of regeneration may be partly due to Jacobsen emulating the *Decameron*, and partially due to his own life circumstances. Guido Ruggiero (2021:11) notes that the *Decameron* takes place at the tail-end of the plague in Florence: better times are coming, even if not explicitly stated. Perhaps this too can function as an unsaid conclusion to *Pesten i Bergamo*, if these intertextual links are accepted. Perhaps the plague is winding down, drawing away from Bergamo like the procession of flagellants.

4.2 VERTICALITY AND DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

The social inversion analogous to the *Decameron* is not the only inversion in *Pesten i Bergamo*. Jørgensen (2006:11) observes that the church is situated on a vertical axis with the church at the summit, and then Old and New Bergamo in descending order. Jørgensen (2006:11) contrasts this to the horizontal axis, *hvorfra pest og omvendelsesforsøg kommer*.²⁷ The vertical axis is the more important of the two throughout the short story and is what I shall focus on here. The first lines of *Pesten i Bergamo* create a valuative dichotomy between Old and New Bergamo: "Old Bergamo was at the top of a low hill, fenced in behind walls and gates, and new

²⁶ der var et lille vanvidspunkt i deres hjærner, som forstod denne galskab. (Jacobsen 1952:55)

²⁷ "From where plague and conversion attempts come." My translation.

Bergamo lay at the foot of the hill, exposed to all winds” (Jacobsen 1994:109). New Bergamo succumbs to the plague first, and, fearing solely for their own lives, the Old Bergamese torch the lower town. The Old Bergamese cannot flee in the same way the new town had: their walls, and ostensibly their status, hem them in. We get a sense of verticality as the flagellant procession arrives, proceeding “up along the steep, wall-lined road that leads up to the old town” (Jacobsen 1994:113).²⁸ This religious procession continues upwards to Bergamo’s *domkirke*, the cathedral, presumably at the highest point in Bergamo. The parodic church service occurs at this peak, with a sermon focussed not on the divine, but the infernal, culminating in the monk’s laughter. The flagellant procession then descends out of Bergamo, disappearing onto the plain outside: “they trudged down the mountain” (Jacobsen 1994:122).²⁹ This verticality mirrors the social hierarchy established and then inverted in the story, that which imitates the *Decameron*. Yet Florence is not situated on a hill. Jacobsen’s choice of setting, Bergamo, seems to intentionally create a vertical geography that parallels both the social geography and the major events of the story.

It, however, is inverted. The hilltop becomes the centre for the carnivalesque debauchery. The cathedral, perhaps the closest place in Bergamo to the heavens, is the setting for the laughing parodic mass of the Old Bergamese, the frenzied self-flagellation of the procession, and the infernal sermon of the monk. This inversion, mirroring the social inversion where the poor, coming from outside Old Bergamo, become the devout, whilst the wealthier Old Bergamese become the drunken rabble, is instigated by the Bakhtinian switch into the carnivalesque. It also follows Dante Alighieri’s dual depiction of *Mons Purgatorio* and the pit of *Inferno* in his *Commedia*. Dante (2003:285) conceives of Purgatory as a mountain: the excommunicated make up the lowest rung, whilst at the top, just before the Earthly paradise, the avaricious, the gluttons, and the lustful are cleansed.³⁰ One might conceive of the cathedral itself as the Earthly Paradise, it is here where presumably the Old Bergamese have declared the Holy Virgin *podesta*, just as it is there where Dante (2003:546–581) can finally converse with Beatrice. Dante’s purification occurs in this Earthly paradise, just as the Old Bergamese seek to purify themselves of disease. A glorious procession of angels, the Heavenly Pageant, also journeys through the heavenly paradise: this is a place of processions and pageantry. One might conceive of Old Bergamo as *Purgatorio*, with the flagellant procession as the excommunicated, proceeding up the mountain to the Earthly Paradise, whilst the Old Bergamese already occupy the higher cornices: they are certainly avaricious, gluttonous, and lustful. The flagellant procession’s departure does not fit this model, however. I would suggest that, as *Purgatorio* is already situated on earth, the vertical axis of Old and New Bergamo fit this structure before the plague’s arrival, with the wealthier citizens occupying the cornices closer to the Earthly Paradise of the cathedral.³¹

The descent into disorder and thus the switch into the carnivalesque inverts this geography. The only purification found in the cathedral in *Pesten i Bergamo* is madness, through laughter, through flagellation, through parodic mass. This is no longer the closest place in Bergamo to heaven, but instead the most infernal, and this is alluded to by the monk’s speech. After the descent into debauchery, when sin itself is described as an “a raging pestilence both evil and visible”, the geography of Bergamo symbolically more closely resembles that of *Inferno* (Jacobsen 1994:111).³² That is, the inversion of *Purgatorio*, Dante and Vergil must descend into a pit, with Satan at the deepest point, in ice which melts and flows to *Mons Purgatorio*

²⁸ op ad den stejle, murindhegnede vej, som fører op til den gamle by. (Jacobsen 1952:52)

²⁹ de gik ned fra bjærget. (Jacobsen 1952:58)

³⁰ I use John Ciardi’s 2003 translation of *Commedia*.

³¹ The second canto of *Purgatorio* locates the mountain geographically to the southern hemisphere, using medieval geographical reasoning and Jerusalem and the Ganges as referents. See Ciardi’s footnoted explanation (Dante 2003:295–301).

³² ond og åpenbar, rasende pest. (Jacobsen 1952:50)

(Dante 2003:38). The cathedral becomes this deepest point, where the greatest sinners are to be found: the physical inversion, again, mirrors the social inversion. The moment of madness shared between the flagellants and the Old Bergamese becomes the dark inversion of Dante's purified ecstasy in the Earthly Paradise. The Old Bergamese are the sinners, both unable to leave Old Bergamo, and described in grotesque terminology suitable for the *Inferno*: "those contorted faces with the dark openings of the shouting mouths, where the rows of teeth shone white like the teeth of baited beasts of prey" (Jacobsen 1994:122).³³ The flagellants here participate in the hellish spectacle: they too are a frenzied mass of flesh, but they also take the role of Dante and Vergil: they ascend (or descend) to the cathedral, and afterwards, they can leave. Upon the switch into the carnivalesque at the coming of the plague, Bergamo inverts itself from an earthly *Mons Purgatorio* into a representation of *Inferno*. One might also link this to a carnivalesque depiction of Jerusalem, itself a city on a hill (indeed, the one Christ was crucified, or, following *Pesten*, not crucified on), itself also situated parallel to *Mons Purgatorio* (Dante 2003:295).

This geographical conceptualisation is suggestive rather than comprehensive, but hints at another fourteenth-century Italian text that may have influenced Jacobsen's writing. Jacobsen's familiarity with Dante's *Commedia* can perhaps be inferred by the incredible popularity Dante's text has sustained in the nearly-seven centuries since its composition, and by Jacobsen's exceedingly broad literary tastes.³⁴ If this connection is to be made, it must be acknowledged that Bergamo represents a more human, earthly version of Dantean extremes: it is, after all, only situated on *et lævt bjærg* (Jacobsen 1952).

5. CONCLUSION

After uncovering Bakhtinian, social, and spatial structures in *Pesten i Bergamo*, as well as potential textual links from the Italian fourteenth-century *Decameron* and *Commedia*, this analysis too must wind to an end. This essay has climbed from the certain to the tentative: Bakhtinian themes are present in Jacobsen's text, regardless of their origin. Textual parallels and commonality in setting suggest influence from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This may account for the use of grotesque realism as a literary mode, and the focus on carnivalesque inversion. The structured social inversion is paralleled by a structured geographical inversion, that bears marked resemblance in broad, holistic terms to the literary geography of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, which may hint at further textual influence. The connections here are more tentative, despite the greater surety of Jacobsen's knowledge of the *Commedia*, and further work is required, perhaps involving spatial literary theorists such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) or Robert Tally (2019). The influence of these medieval texts must remain partially speculative. Regardless of authorial derivation or intentionality, the Old Bergamese, and indeed the flagellants, represent carnivalesque reactions to a breaking of the old normative order, and represent an ordered reversion (or inversion) to a second order already present in medieval culture: the Bakhtinian carnival.

³³ disse fortrukne ansigter, med de råbende mundes mørke åbninger, hvor tandrækkerne lyste hvidt som tænderne på tirrede rovdyr. (Jacobsen 1952:58)

³⁴ Jacobsen's literary interests ranged from the Icelandic sagas to Byron, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy (Jensen 2017:30).

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