The Plague Hits Florence

Giovanni Boccaccio
(c. 1350)

"Dear ladies ... here we tarry, as if, I think, for no other purpose than to bear witness to the number of the corpses that are brought here for internment. ... And if we quit the church, we see dead or sick folk carried about, or we see those, who for their crimes were of late condemned to exile ... but who, now ... well knowing that their magistrates are a prey to death or disease, have returned, and traverse the city in packs, making it hideous with their riotous antics; or else we see the refuse of the people, fostered on our blood, becchini, as they call themselves, who for our torment go prancing about ... making mock of our miseries in scurrilous songs. ... Or go we home, what see we there? ... where once were servants in plenty, I find none left but my maid, and shudder with terror, and feel the very hairs of my head to stand on end; and turn or tarry where I may, I encounter the ghosts of the departed. ... None ... having means and place of retirement as we have, stays here ... or if any such there be, they are of those ... who make no distinction between things honorable and their opposites, so they but answer the cravings of appetite, and, alone or in company, do daily and nightly what things soever give promise of most gratification. Nor are these secular persons alone, but such as live recluse in monasteries break their rule, and give themselves up to carnal pleasures, persuading themselves that they are permissible to them, and only forbidden to others, and, thereby thinking to escape, are become unchaste and dissolute.

Credits: Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, ed. Edward Hutton (London: Dent, 1955), 1:13-14.