

Boccaccio in Florence

Also by W.D. Jackson

Then and Now:

Then and Now — Words in the Dark (Menard Press)

From Now to Then (Menard Press)

W.D. JACKSON

Boccaccio in Florence
and other poems

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**BOCCACCIO IN FLORENCE
& OTHER POEMS**

THE DANCE OF DEATH

(after *Todtentanz der Stadt Basel*)

“Dance, dance, dance till you drop”

W.H. Auden, *Death's Echo*

i

The Pope

*Come, Holy Father, show them how
You do the dance and make your bow.
Though triple-crowned and double-crossed,
Your powers to bind and loose are lost.*

*

Alive, they called me ‘Your Holiness’.
Selling indulgences made me wealthy.
I was God’s mouth on earth, no less—
But now my breath couldn’t smell less healthy.

ii

The Emperor

*Imperial Highness, grim and grey,
It’s too late now for looking sorry:
I’ll pipe you down death’s dusty way.
So off you dance—I’m in a hurry.*

*

Able not only to defend
My empire but to make it bigger,
Here I cut a sorry figure:
Death's dominion has no end.

iii

The Empress

*Empress, for you I'll demonstrate
The dance—just trip along behind.
The court has left you to your fate.
Dance, dance while I rob you blind.*

*

A lusty life I thought I led
As a rich kaiser's fubsy *Frau*.
I've danced my last dance, anyhow,
And lack all pride and joy, being dead—

iv

The King

*O King, relax. Don't waste your breath
On giving orders. My thin hand
Makes all men weak and powerless, and
Crowns their bowed heads with a dry wreath.*

*

Living, I loved to wield my power,
Raised to the highest ranks of honour.
And now? I'm nothing but a goner:
Shackled and gagged, I await my hour.

v

The Queen

*Queenie, your fun and games are over,
So down you flop into your grave.
Your beauty, health and wealth can't save
Your face—from pushing up the clover.*

*

Oh help, where are my maids to cheer
And grace my chamber? Someone please
Come here and set my mind at ease!
Or is my end so near? . . .

vi

The Cardinal

*Off you waltz in your crimson hat,
Monseigneur, mind you don't fall flat!
You've blessed or cursed the dead with a text,
But I'm afraid it's your turn next.*

*

I was a well-known Cardinal,
An apple of the papal eye:
The whole world honoured me—must I
Keep dancing till I fall?

vii

The Bishop

*Learned defender of the Faith,
Bishop, you've often turned aside
Into the primrose way of pride.
But you can't run away from death.*

*

Flattered by sacristan and flunkey
As long as I lived as a Reverend Sir,
Breathing death's deconstructed air
I dance and chatter like a monkey.

viii

The Duke

*With ladies you have danced, proud Duke,
And had them come and had them go.
The dead may make you want to puke,
But take their hands and say hello.*

*

Dammit, must I be off so quickly
And leave land, friends, wife, children, fame
Behind, until I look the same
As these—as thin and sickly?

ix

The Duchess

*My gracious lady, be of good cheer!
Although you come of a noble line,
Loved and respected by all up here,
Down there, my love, you're mine all mine.*

*

My lute is cracked. And no dissembling
Affects this bony dancing horror.
Duchess today but not tomorrow,
I dance in fear and trembling.

x

The Earl

*Although my news has brought no joy,
My lord, feed me in your French cuisine,
Before you hop it . . . Or are you itching
To join the hoi polloi?*

*

A noble earl I was. My name
Was known and feared in all the world,
But death has danced me off and hurled
Me down, and felled my fame.

xi

The Abbot

*Abbot, come here and let me knock
Your mitre off and break your staff.
Good shepherds always put their flock
First. You're good for a laugh.*

*

I rose to be abbot, biggest of brothers,
And lived empowered and honoured, until
Nobody dared oppose my will.
But death has culled me like the others.

xii

The Knight

*Sir Knight, your name is on my list.
Your sword-hand had the power to kill,
But the thrust of my armour-piercing fist
Cannot be parried by strength or skill.*

*

A conscientious, valiant knight,
I served the world with derring-do.
Breaking my order's rules, I now
Must dance a last good-night.

xiii

The Lawyer

*No dodge or obsequious flattery
Can get you off; there's no appeal.
My prison cells set no one free,
Cleric or lay. I over-rule.*

*

Man's law derives from God on high,
As all may read in learned books.
Lawyers should not behave like crooks,
But love the truth and hate to lie.

xiv

The Alderman

*Although a gent of this great city,
One who's done business here, and sat
On board and council and committee,
Please bow your head while I eat your hat.*

*

I worked my fingers to the bone
To see the common good protected.
Both rich and poor should be respected,
Not live or die as if on their own.

xv

The Canon

*O Canon, chanting loud and clear,
Leading your nice cathedral choir,
Listen: my scrannel pipe shrieks higher.
—Life's old sweet song croaks here.*

*

I loved to swank in cope and frock,
And warble sacred melodies:
Death's clashing discords cut through these
And gave me a nasty shock.

xvi

The Doctor

*Doctor, please check my anatomy,
That all is as it ought to be.
You used to treat, for a fat fee,
Patients who shortly looked like me!*

*

An expert in urology,
I hoped to help both man and wife.
Who'll check *my* water, now that my life
Is pissing away so rapidly?

xvii

The Nobleman

*Come, noble warrior, sheathe your sword,
And screw, if you want to save your face,
Your courage to the sticking place.
Death is the hero's last reward.*

*

I terrified my enemies,
Though armed and in harness cap-à-pie—
As death has seized and rattled *me*,
Grimly forcing me to my knees.

xviii

The Lady

*Milady, all this beauty-care
Is nothing but a purblind error.
Your body—skin—face—hair—
Are grey as ashes. Look in your mirror.*

*

My eyes were blue, my hair was gold,
But all I can see in my mirror's a skull.
What a horrible shock! What a drag! How dull
To feel my blood run cold.

xix

The Merchant

*Business as usual, sir? Well, not
Much longer. Though a proper toff,
Nothing you've got can buy me off.
Come dance till you rot.*

*

My time was money, and I learned
To get rich quick by ruthless thrift.
But death, devaluing my gift,
Robs me of everything I earned.

xx

The Abbess

*My lady Abbess, full of grace,
How flat your little tummy's grown.
But I've no need to cast a stone!
Or cut off my nose to spite my face.*

*