LITERATURĂ COMPARATĂ

FOURTEEN DAYS: A META-DECAMERON PROJECT IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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Abstract

This paper examines *Fourteen Days* (2024), a collaborative novel edited by Margaret Atwood and Douglas Preston, through the lens of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the broader context of pandemic literature. Written by 36 authors, *Fourteen Days* exemplifies contemporary collaborative fiction, using multiple voices to portray traumatic experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. Set within the confines of a New York City apartment building, the novel presents characters who, having been isolated due to the pandemic, convene to exchange personal narratives as a means of emotional sustenance. Employing the theoretical framework of intertextuality (Kristeva) and Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and the plurality of voices, this study analyzes the narrative structure, thematic connections, and the novel's modern meta-*Decameron* approach. The paper argues that *Fourteen Days* not only reflects Boccaccio's *Decameron* in its structure but also updates it by addressing contemporary issues such as inequality, isolation, trauma, and the function of storytelling. Additionally, it explores the dynamics of collaborative fiction, emphasizing how the integration of multiple perspectives enriches the novel's thematic depth. By bridging classical literary forms with modern crises, this article illustrates how collaborative fiction can produce a polyphonic narrative that resonates with diverse audiences. It also critically engages with the representation of marginalized voices within collaborative projects, contributing to the fields of pandemic literature and collective storytelling.

Keywords: collaborative fiction, pandemic literature, metafiction, The Decameron, intertextuality, dialogism, collective storytelling

Rezumat

Lucrarea de față oferă un studiu de caz asupra romanului colectiv *Fourteen Days* (2024), editat de Margaret Atwood și Douglas Preston, prin prisma *Decameronului* lui Boccaccio și a contextului mai larg al literaturii pandemice. Scris în tandem de 36 de autori, *Fourteen*

Days funcționează ca exemplu de ficțiune colectivă contemporană, utilizând o polifonie a vocilor pentru a descrie experiențele traumatice din timpul izolării COVID-19. Acțiunea romanului se desfășoară în spațiul parcelat al unei clădiri de apartamente din New York, unde diverse tipologii de personaje aflate în izolare din cauza carantinei se reunesc pentru a-și împărtăși povestiri intime, utilizând acest demers narativ ca formă de susținere emoțională și coeziune comunitară. Folosind cadrul teoretic al intertextualității (Kristeva) și conceptele lui Bahtin de dialogism și pluralitate a vocilor narative, acest studiu analizează structura narativă, conexiunile tematice și abordarea modernă de tip meta-*Decameron* a romanului. Lucrarea demonstrează că romanul *Fourteen Days* nu doar reflectă structura *Decameronului* lui Boccaccio, ci o și actualizează prin abordarea unor teme contemporane, precum inegalitatea socială, izolarea, trauma și funcția terapeutică a povestirii. Totodată, analiza explorează dinamica ficțiunii colective, evidențiind modul în care integrarea unei pluralități de perspective sporește complexitatea tematică a textului. Prin construirea unei punți între formele narative clasice și crizele societății pandemice, articolul prezent pledează pentru potențialul narativ al colaborării literare în generarea unei polifonii capabile să rezoneze cu un public eterogen și oferă o examinare critică a reprezentării vocilor marginalizate în cadrul proiectelor literare colective, contribuind astfel la aprofundarea discuțiilor legate de literatura pandemică.

Cuvinte-cheie: ficțiune colectivă, literatură pandemică, metaficțiune, Decameronul, intertexualitate, dialogism, storytelling.

Introduction: *Fourteen Days* – part of the Cultural Memory of Covid-19

The period that the coronavirus has marked in human history is certainly one of social alienation and isolation, both catalysts of a temporal suspension that, according to Astrid Erll (2020, p. 867) brings forth storytelling. "Literary narrative", Downes and Römhild would emphasise, "can assume a crucial place in our attempts at exploring and strengthening our sense of selfhood" (2022, p. 49). All the more so in an epidemiological context where storytelling transcends the boundaries of entertainment and intervenes as a method of survival. This is undoubtedly the case of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which is considered to be the first text to fuse a literary narrative topos with a real-life epidemic context. "By doing so, he [Boccaccio] initiated the tradition of using narration as prophylaxis during episodes of contagion" (Marafioti 2018, p. X). Boccaccio's practice of storytelling seems to contain elements that bring not only emotional but also somatic reassurance; the idea that stories are life-saving stems primarily from the archetypal storyteller Scheherazade, who proves the incredible power of narration in *Thousand and One Nights*. Based on these two literary matrices of the frame story, writers throughout the ages in different epidemiological contexts have taken this recipe for survival and transposed it to contemporary time and space. No exception is *Fourteen Days*, a collaborative novel published in February 2024, edited by Margaret Atwood and Douglas Preston. Set in a Lower East Side apartment building at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the novel, embodying Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope"

(1981), brings together a group of residents on the roof terrace who, to make the passage of time more bearable, begin to share various stories from their lives or the lives of their acquaintances. This paper proposes a case study of the collective novel in order to demonstrate the influences taken from Boccaccio and to prove the specific features of what may be considered a Meta-*Decameron* project.

The Function of Storytelling

Storytelling became so popular during the COVID-19 crisis, that scholars have called it "the time of storytelling" (Kumagai and Baruch 2021, p. 1905). *Fourteen Days* appears relatively late in comparison to many other pandemic literary projects that have themselves taken up the narrative scheme of *The Decameron*, or at least drew on the theme of storytelling as a therapeutic medium during an epidemic crisis (Angeletti 2023, p. 25). A good example is *The Decameron Project: 29 New Stories from the Pandemic*, published by The New York Times Magazine, which portrays how stories can function as tools for the assimilation of trauma and pandemic. The two literary projects are closely connected, creating an undeniable relationship of intertextuality (Kristeva 1966) that will be addressed later in this paper.

In *Fourteen Days*, the stories are primarily escapist, but they also function as a social act, contrasting with the outbreak of the pandemic. If in Boccaccio's Italy survival is closely tied to social privilege (the ten young Florentines are of noble origin and take refuge in the villa outside the city to shelter from the plague and spend a pleasant time together), the protagonists of *Fourteen Days* are far from being members of a higher social class, but middle-class individuals who couldn't afford to leave the city, who live through the toilet paper crisis while watching the death toll reports, all against the background of ambulances that seem to surround the city in an atmosphere reminiscent of the ominous *miasma* of the ancient fortresses in Sophocles' tragedies – "Think about that for a moment. All those ambulances. A city full of 9/11s" (2024, p. 47).

The collaborative novel *Fourteen Days* attempts to distance itself as far as possible from other pandemic texts and to move away from archetypal literary models, as the foreword states: "Fourteen Days […] is a collaborative novel that is startling and original – you might even call it a literary event […] It is not a serial novel, nor is it a classic frame narrative in the mold of the *Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*. It is an epic novellus in the ancient and truest sense of the word" (p. VII). However, what the novel ultimately achieves is quite the opposite. It engages in an active dialogue with other literary works and naturally borrows and draws inspiration from them. In doing so, it becomes undoubtedly a *Decameron*-type project. The following part of this paper will analyze the structure of the frame narrative and its implications, focusing on the discourse of the text and its paratexts in order to demonstrate the influences of *The Decameron* on *Fourteen Days*.

A Meta-Decameron Project or Not?

"Call me 1A" (p. 1) – this is the manner in which the collective novel *Fourteen Days* opens for the reader, starting from the very first words on the path of intertextuality. A clear reference to the famous opening of Melville's monumental work *Moby Dick* – "Call me Ishmael" (1922, p. 1) – this phrase anticipates a subjective, first-person narrative and presents an unreliable narrator, because the reader cannot be sure if that is a real name or a pseudonym. If we consider a Genette (1980) type of diegetic analysis, throughout the novel there exists a polyphony at the narrative level, as there is both a homodiegetic narrator who uses an internal focalization (the protagonist Yessenia Grigorescu and the storyline of her father) and many intradiegetic narrative voices (all the other residents of the block who are naturally located within the narrative world of the novel and who recount events they have participated in or heard about throughout their lives).

This plurality of narrative voices is specific to the frame narrative and is undoubtedly borrowed from Boccaccio, who constructs his work starting from an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator, responsible for contextualizing the action (the ten young Florentine characters fleeing the Black Death) and who elaborates the fabric of the diegetic by giving each character intradiegetic and homodiegetic roles as they tell their stories. They represent intradiegetic voices because they narrate from within the fictional world established by the main narrator, and homodiegetic because they are part of the overall action (they participate in the narratives and in the discussions between stories).

However, narrative structure is far from the only thing that *Fourteen Days* borrows from Boccaccio. The next part of the paper will focus on explaining the narrative dynamics between the characters, the framing story structure, and the (seemingly) contradictory discourse between the paratexts and the text proper.

Plot Dynamics and Core Character

Yessenia Grigorescu is the main character of the novel, a figure who remains shrouded in an air of mystery even after finishing the storyline. She's "the super of a building on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side of New York City" (1) and has Romanian roots, her parents having migrated from Romania to the United States as teenagers (the authenticity of Yessenia's portrait as a character will be discussed in more detail in the 4th part of the paper).

Taking over her father's job, Yessenia finds herself in the middle of a pandemic as the super of a more or less depraved building and finds the so-called "Fernsby Bible", an old notebook from the previous super, with "Notes and Observations" about the tenants; recording and writing down the stories that she hears on the rooftop, she becomes the memory keeper of this micro-universe (a pandemic Mnemosyne), but also the writer of the manuscript, as we are participating to the actual writing of the novel, becoming part of a meta-narrative structure.

As a collective novel comprising 36 writers, the text displays an involuntary polyphony that is effectively redirected towards the numerous characters depicted. The use of pseudonyms rather than civilian names further enhancespervasive ambiguity serves to further enhance the ambiguity that is pervasive throughout the text, particularly in light of the prevailing circumstances of the pandemic. The experience of social isolation has not only resulted in a sense of estrangement from the Other, but also from one's own self. This phenomenon can be seen as a metaphorical forgetting of one's own name, which calls for a cathartic moment of *anagnorisis*.[1] But how do the characters in *Fourteen Days* reach anagnorisis? Through storytelling, just as in *The Decameron*, because, Rivka Galchen would point out, "Best fiction can both transport you far from yourself but also, somehow, help you understand exactly where you are." (2020, p. I)

The Framed Narrative

The framed narrative in question commences on March 31st, 2020, unfolding over the course of two weeks. This temporal setting is crucial, as it grounds the events in a specific and turbulent period, likely reflecting the challenges and anxieties of the first days of the pandemic lockdown. The narrative structure is anchored by the central figure, Yessenia, the "master of ceremonies", a role referred to by Alexandra Jacobs in her review of *Fourteen Days* in The New York Times (2024). One can say that the super provides continuity and cohesion within the narrative, guiding the overarching story and setting the stage for the diverse voices that follow.

The narrative employs a rotating cast of storytellers, a device that echoes again the structure of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The subject matter of these narratives is extensive and profoundly evocative, encompassing pivotal concerns such as immigration, racial prejudice, police brutality, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the function of storytelling.

By employing this narrative structure, the work illuminates the potential of storytelling as a means of coping, understanding, and processing complex emotions and situations, particularly in times of crisis. The framed narrative, therefore, transcends the boundaries of a mere literary device, functioning instead as a mirror to the world beyond the story, which prompts readers to engage with the underlying issues in reflective manner: "The story had cast a spell over us all […] I could feel us all kind of shaking ourselves back into the present" (p. 121). It is noteworthy

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[1] In their discussion of pandemic fiction as a therapeutic play, Downes and Romhild draw attention to the view put forward by Lacan that being engulfed in the presence and desires of an "Other" not only makes the other unreadable, but also makes it impossible to retain an understanding of ourselves. It is an overwhelming state in which the disoriented subject loses all sense of self. For the modern subject, this can be an anxiety-provoking idea. The tenet of Lacanian theory that we need to be able to read the other in order to become readable to ourselves is exemplified in the concept of the "mirror" stage, in which the child develops a sense of self by learning to read the reactions it receives from others.

that the narratives do not directly address the pandemic (as is the case with *The Decameron*); however, the epidemic context is discernible within the framing narrative: "The more we all avoided talking about the pandemic, the more palpable the fear grew under the surface. People were still showing up, and everyone was pretty religious about the six-foot distance and absolutely no touching, but still: I hoped we weren't dooming one another to invisible death up here, telling stories every night" (p. 153).

Additionally, the instances of departure from the diegetic space of the narratives frequently coincide with revelations or even a desire to immortalize the essence of the conveyed stories. It is therefore unsurprising that on day 12, Monsieur Ramboz is recorded as stating the following: 'I think we've done something extraordinary up here telling stories in the face of this goddamned disease. Maybe we should start recording them for posterity' […] 'But what's happening on this rooftop is an assertion of our humanity against the terror and banality of a virus. It shouldn't be forgotten' […] 'If Boccaccio and Chaucer hadn't written down the stories they collected during his lifetime, we'd have lost some of the great works of Western canon' (p. 252).

This is merely one of the numerous direct and nominal references to Boccaccio that can be found throughout the novel. It is indubitable that one of the most fruitful episodes to be subjected to analysis is *TheDecameron* reading exercise that occurs on day 12. This will be further discussed in the third part of the paper. In examining the text, it is important for now to consider the discrepancies between the written work of the 36 authors and the foreword.

Text vs Paratext

A re-reading and closer analysis of both the text and the paratexts reveals a discrepancy, if not even a contradiction, between the discourse of the paratexts and the actual stylistic approach employed in the text. This is exemplified by To illustrate, one may consider the following excerpt from the preface "A Note from the Authors Guild Foundation": "You are holding in your hands a novel that is both singular and extraordinary. The word "novel" comes from the Latin word *novellus*, through the Italian word *novella*, to describe a story that was not the reworking of a familiar tale, myth, or Biblical parable, but something new, fresh, strange, amusing, and surprising. *Fourteen Days* meets that definition. It is a collaborative novel that is startling and original – you might even call it a literary event […] It is not a serial novel, nor is it a classic frame narrative in the mold of the *Decameron* or *TheCanterbury Tales*. It is an epic novellus in the ancient and truest sense of the word" (p. VII).

Although the paratext attempts to disassociate itself from traditional models, the reality of the text reveals a distinct approach to the influence of *TheDecameron*. The narrative structure is notably similar, featuring comparable temporal and spatial elements, such as a fixed duration of fourteen days (instead of the classic ten) and

a designated setting, either a rooftop or a villa, which serves as a *locus amoenus*. Furthermore, the composition of the groups is analogous, comprising neighbors or a brigade, and the social order is consistent, with a central figure who serves as the storyteller, akin to a monarch. The underlying objective remains unchanged, as evidenced by Boccaccio's own words: "they should tell stories, for even though just one person is doing the talking, all the others will still have the pleasure of listening" (2015, p. 18).

In an unexpected but entirely fitting turn of events, the characters, or, in the words of Roland Barthes, "êtres de papier" (1970, p. 57), appear to draw nearer to the reality of the pandemic context than the actual writers. The characters are affected by the pandemic crisis and are compelled to draw parallels between the events and the circumstances depicted in Boccaccio's era: "Just like the original Decameron, the princes and princesses fled the city to a villa in the hills and told stories while half of Florence died with suppurating buboes. […] The rich just went to the Hamptons. That's what the pandemic's done – the rich shagging ass out of town and leaving the rest of us to die. Whatever our differences, as the New Yorkers who stayed, we're all in this together. […] This pandemic's ripped back the curtain, hasn't it? Nothing like a plague to show how the poor are trashed in this country. I bet half the Upper East Side is empty. Abandoned. All those mansions and town houses and floor-throughs stuffed with antique furniture and paintings, empty and dead. While their owners have parked their fat asses on a five-acre lawn in Southampton, drinking vespers and talking about Damien Hirst" (p. 269).

Despite the preface's ostensible objective of marketing the novel to a contemporary audience fixated on the pursuit of novelty and contemporaneity, the novel consistently evinces parallels with Boccaccio's work. These encompass the narrative structure of the frame narrative, its temporal and spatial placement, the alternating use of a new storyteller with each iteration, and the assertion that, in challenging circumstances, tales can offer solace and guidance. The question then arises as to the nature of the narratives concerned. Undeniably, the most compelling narratives are those that explore the darker aspects of human nature. Let us pursue this line of enquiry further.

Dark Stories Bring Hope

"*The Decameron* talks about bad people and bad behaviour" (Galchen 2020, p. XIII), but it seems that these stories bring hope, as they are about those "who behave with almost unimaginable nobility in the face of the manifestly cruel and unjust world" (p. XVI). As Angeletti proves, the *brigata* returns home having invented new rules of life, finally able to see the present and think for the future (p. 29) and Boccaccio's intention to invest in storytelling as a form of survival is fulfilled – "I intend to offer some solace", Boccaccio writes in his Prologue, "to those who stand in need of it" (2003, p. 2).

In his research about the disease-preventive powers of storytelling, Marafioti highlights that, selecting an incipit for *The Decameron*, Boccaccio elected to employ a detailed account of the catastrophic eruption of mortality and morbidity that occurred in Florence during the 1348 outbreak of the plague. Instead of adopting a more conventional narrative device, as exemplified by the *Arabian Nights*, *The Book of the Seven Sages*, and similar collections of stories, he chose a highly detailed account that reflected the gravity of the situation (p. 31). The reasons for this choice are self-evident: Boccaccio survived the plague, witnessed the suffering it brought, and saw the deaths of friends and family over many years. The plague did not end immediately, and Boccaccio experienced its effects firsthand, establishing an archetype that was later emulated by storytellers and narrators throughout the centuries in times of epidemics.

The author's portrayal of humanity's afflictions, including suffering, loss, betrayal, hypocrisy, grief, social constraints, and corruption, presents a realistic depiction of the social order while simultaneously addressing the anxieties of the era, as Downes and Römhild have observed: "For the first four days, they indulge in music, dance, and other creative pursuits, and for the next ten days they tell stories: each member of the group must tell one tale while the others listen. First, they tell stories to make each other laugh. Then, they tell stories which end in tragedy. Finally, they tell romances, whose subjects suffer, but ultimately find happiness. Each generic category offers a narrative response to the anxieties provoked by the epidemic, but this sequence of categories forms its own narrative arc – from distraction (comedy), to confrontation (tragedy), and resolution (romance)" (p. 46).

The narratives presented in *Fourteen Days* are, at the very least, as unsettling and somber as those found in *The Decameron*. The stories are so pervasively disquieting that the characters frequently object and request a reclassification of the genre: "How about a nice story for a change, an uplifting story?" (p. 144) But what would be the role of a "nice" story? Would it still create an underlying effect on the psyche?

The Role of "nice" storytelling

It is a widely accepted premise that fear engenders suspense, and narratives pertaining to "bad behavior" not only capture the attention of listeners but also prompt a reflection on their moral values. Furthermore, the experience of fear or tension in a controlled setting (such as reading a book, watching a film or in this case listening to a story) can also result in catharsis, whereby the release of this accumulated tension is emotionally gratifying, despite the potential for anxiety in the immediate moment.

It is therefore unsurprising that, in the context of a pandemic and a human crisis, the residents of the building recount experiences that are characterised

by turbulence and upheaval. Nevertheless, they persist in challenging the very nature of storytelling, frequently precipitating debates about the relative merits of what should and should not be disclosed: 'A nice story? There's no such thing. To hell with nice. Real life is mostly trauma and shock – so yeah, let's hear a mean ugly story right now.' […] 'You think what we need is more violence, hatred, and racism? […] Fine, I'll let you folks up here bring more misery into the world with your stories. I'm done. Thank you all, but I'm done with this rooftop confab-whatever' (p. 144).

The rejection of "nice" stories reflects a demand for authenticity, even if it may be brutal or unpleasant. Moreover, it becomes evident that narratives should serve in this case as a reflection of reality, rather than merely as a means of escaping into an idealized world. Furthermore, it is intriguing to consider the ethical implications and the responsibility that the storyteller bears towards their listening audience. Does the storyteller seek to perpetuate a cycle of negativity or offer their audience an embellished representation of life? The answer is inherently subjective, contingent upon the particular narrative style of the individual storyteller. Consequently, a different storyteller is selected on a daily basis to engage the audience.

The Decameron – Reading Exercise

Probably one of the most interesting episodes in the novel is the reading exercise of *TheDecameron*, narrated by the professor on day 12, which brings a huge criticism upon the work of Boccaccio.

Through the interpretive lens of young students, Boccaccio is accused of misogyny, homophobia, classism, speciesism and so on. What was supposed to be a reading experiment aimed at better understanding the current pandemic situation has turned into a disaster of political correctness taken to the extreme (with the aim, of course, of mocking today's society): "I found Boccaccio to be deeply misogynistic. Women are called fickle, willful, suspicious, faint-hearted and timorous, or men are the head of women, and without their ordinance seldom cometh any emprise of ours to good end;" how dare you ask us to read such woman-hating trash?' (p. 261). "The stories are all about rich people. Kings and queens, people with money. Just like today, if this novel coronavirus hits our shores, the rich will flee to the Hamptons or their yachts and leave the poor to suffer the plague. The wealthy will receive experimental cures that are unavailable to the general population. While these few told their stories in a villa in Florence, wheelbarrows full of corpses filled the streets, and families had to keep their distance from one another. Boccaccio favours the rich. Why did you choose this toady for wealthy people?" (p. 260). Of course, these anachronistic interpretations can provoke the readers' laughter, but they can

also problematise certain aspects related to moral relativism and the way in which certain social categories have suffered over time. Although this episode was probably not intended as a tribute to Boccaccio, the novel succeeds in revisiting the themes of the Italian writer and spreading, voluntarily or not, some of his most iconic stories.

Critique and Other Aspects
The Decameron Project: 29 Stories from the Pandemic and *Fourteen Days*

The stories collected in the New York Times Magazine's *The Decameron Project* were firstly launched online in May 2020 and subsequently published in hardcover by Simon & Schuster's Scribner imprint later that year. The collection features a diverse array of narratives that encompass dystopian fiction, personal accounts of the initial phases of lockdown, and reflections on the possibility of reconstructing a more idealistic socio-economic system in the aftermath of the pandemic (Downes and Römhild, p. 46).

The project unites writers from a multitude of global locations and addresses the subject of the pandemic directly. Consequently, it is unsurprising that *Fourteen Days* also draws inspiration from this project. It is interesting to consider the previous passage taken from the foreword of the 2024 novel in comparison with the preface of *The Decameron Project*. The following extract is worthy of particular attention: "In the Italian of Boccaccio, the word "novella" means both news and stories. The tales of the Decameron are the news in a form the listeners can follow […] The first story is a comic account of how to deal with a soon-to-be corpse; the comedy gives cover to the catastrophe too familiar to be understood" (2020, p. XV).

Novelty or not, both works are ultimately derivative of Boccaccio's original text. One of the works assumes this fact to the extent that it is reflected in the title, whereas the other eschews any allusion to the source text and presents a formal separation from it.

Additionally, both projects feature the contributions of Margaret Atwood. In *The Decameron Project*, Atwood employs a clever rewriting of Griselda's story, imbued with feminist connotations. In the *Fourteen Days* project, she contributes with a short, framed story from the tenth day, entitled "The Exterminator", narrated from the perspective of a spider. It could be argued that there is an attempt to have Atwood write about a peculiar character just in order to accommodate her eccentricities, resulting in a ratherquite bizarre and implausible story.

The Essentiality of a Sensitivity Reader

However, the verisimilitude or stylistic approach of Atwood's narrative is are not the sole issues pertaining to the novel. A native Romanian reader may

identify several problematic aspects within the discourse of the framed narrative, particularly with regard to the veracity of the main character's portrayal of her Romanian heritage.

Furthermore, the translated text contains a number of errors, including the use of incorrect grammatical forms (such as the use of "strălucitor" instead of "strălucitoare" (p. 4)) and cultural misunderstandings, such as the characterization of Orthodox traditions as exclusively Romanian: "It's a Romanian tradition, where you decorate hardboiled eggs and then rap them against each other, and the one that didn't break won" (p. 295). Additionally, the narrative incorporates a number of stereotypical Romanian clichés, including references to vampires and Vlad the Impaler (p. 4). These elements serve to reiterate the absence of cultural understanding of Romanian background and underscore the imperative for a culturally sensitive reader.

Perhaps one of the most inappropriate choices remains the name of the protagonist, Yessenia Grigorescu. The last name "Grigorescu" has a great cultural resonance for Romanians, being the name of one of the most influential Romanian impressionist painters (Nicolae Grigorescu). Etymologically speaking, "Yessenia" used to be very popular in Latin America, naming the protagonist of the 1970 Mexican soap opera *Yesenia*, a character of Roma origin created by Yolanda Vargas Dulché (Evans 2006, p. 604). It goes without saying that the confusion between people of Romanian origin and people of Roma ethnicity is based on a misunderstanding of historical events.

The coexistence of numerous grammatical errors, clichés, and inappropriate name associations within the text indicates a lack of editorial oversight. Obviously speaking, the individual responsible for authoring the narrative frame and outlining of the character Yessenia (in this case, Douglas Preston) should have consulted with a sensitivity reader to ensure the story's content was free of any potentially offensive elements.

Conclusion

It is reasonable to conclude that the novel *Fourteen Days* represents a noteworthy occurrence, characterised by its diverse authorship and plurality of voices. Despite its initial designation as a "novellus", the influences of the frame story and Boccaccio's *Decameron* are unmistakable.

The themes addressed, the serial nature of the work, and its narrative structure collectively substantiate the assertion that the book is indeed a meta-project. Moreover, the work attains its "meta" quality through the very process of its creation, a process in which readers are actively engaged.

Contextualized as "COVID-literature", the novel continues to offer insights into the anxieties and social dynamics of the pandemic. However, the work is deficient in several respects, most notably in its portrayal of the Romanian protagonist, which

is unduly stereotypical and devoid of verisimilitude. Furthermore, the pervasive "American gaze" serves to diminish the narrative, imposing a narrow perspective that undermines the potential richness of the story's multicultural voices. Consequently, the novel's endeavor to embrace pluralism is undermined, resulting in a lack of depth and nuance that could have elevated it to a more powerful and inclusive reflection of global experiences during the pandemic.

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