

The Essential Boccaccio, or an Accidental Ethics

Two great thematic currents—one ontological, the other ethical—pulse through the *Decameron*, through the one hundred *novelle* and through the overarching connective frame tale about the seven young women and three young men who leave Florence together during the great plague of 1348 and rebuild their lives through a carefully formed mini-society founded on a commitment to the restorative use of the word. One current carries Boccaccio's meditation on what is, on the essential nature of things, on truth versus falsehood; the other is devoted to the manifold accidents and contingencies of life,* and to the spectacle of a human comedy in which individuals from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds navigate between universals and particulars in the pursuit of happiness—itsself not a universal but differently construed by each individual seeker.

These themes are built into the structure of the *Decameron* through the tension between the world of the frame characters, all from the Florentine nobility, with access to beautiful villas in the countryside and servants to help maintain their lifestyles, and the many diverse worlds—of great economic, social, cultural, and geographic variety—conjured by the stories. Which of these many textual realities lays better claim to represent the “truth”? And what are we to make of the many divergent standards of comportment found in the *Decameron*? Within the frame tale alone, the ten storytellers have varying opinions; moreover,

*In philosophy, essence or form is the attribute that makes an object or substance what it fundamentally is, without which it loses its identity, whereas accident or contingency refers to a property without which the substance can still retain its identity. These terms and concepts were well-known to Boccaccio.

their servants are not mute bystanders but participants who bring their own perspectives into the world of their masters and mistresses. Indeed, one of the maidservants, Licisca, offers a comment on the tricks played by married women on their husbands that becomes the controversial topic of Day VII, generating the topics of Days VIII and IX as well.

The frame tale of the *Decameron* is the story of a quest for survival that becomes a quest for happiness, and of how the achievement of an idyllic and uncompromised state must eventually be tempered by the parameters and limits imposed by society: it is a circular journey that moves first away from Florence and reality, reaches a place of maximum distance from the devastated city—a place called, tellingly, “the Valley of the Ladies”—and then moves back to Florence and reality.* But at the same time that the *Decameron* possesses this circular essence, this “form” (in the philosophical sense of the word), it is also a vast and variegated constellation of human difference and contingency, a spreading treelike map of individual, familial, and social particularity that extends far beyond its hundred tales—for each tale spreads out into smaller branches and buds of further tales, some barely touched on, others left tightly wrapped and unexplored, all adding to a vastness that no critical cartography has yet accounted for.

From the *Decameron*'s beginning, Boccaccio uses the status and condition of women to frame his ethical and social questions, explaining that his work is addressed to women because they are more in need of the comfort that his stories offer. Men have the distractions of the world to alleviate their suffering, so women should have at least the distractions provided by the *Decameron*'s stories. Men are able to forget their sorrows in action, so women should have the benefit of language and its vicarious pleasures. Men can act:

If men are afflicted by melancholy or ponderous thoughts, they have many ways of alleviating or for-

*This is the reading explicated in greater detail in my essay “The Wheel of the *Decameron*,” first published 1983, reprinted *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pages 224–44.

getting them: if they wish, they can take a walk and listen to or look at many different things; they can go hawking, hunting, or fishing; they can ride, gamble, or attend to business. (page 5)

Women are denied action, and as a result are prey to their thoughts, which can easily grow pathological in conditions of confinement and enclosure:

restricted by the wishes, whim, and commands of fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, they remain most of the time limited to the narrow confines of their bedrooms, where they sit in apparent idleness, now wishing one thing and now wishing another, turning over in their minds a number of thoughts. (page 4)

By contrasting men to women in this way, Boccaccio enlists the status of women as a vehicle for addressing his most pressing social and ethical concerns. What are the constraints that a society, in the interests of order and stability, can legitimately place on the autonomy and freedom of some of its members? To what degree do those whom society has denied the pleasures of life have the right to seek out those pleasures for themselves? What societal laws may be violated in the process? Can a society withstand the violation of its laws? At what point must the needs of the status quo—and of those who constitute the “majority” in societal terms if not numerically—be reasserted over the needs of the repressed “minority”?

Boccaccio looks at these issues through multiple lenses and generates multiple responses; his point is never to endeavor to answer these questions in an absolute sense but to weave a tapestry dramatizing the ethical dilemmas that arise as a natural consequence of the complexity and particularity of human social interactions. The one absolute position that emerges is that it is *unethical* to impose a rigid template onto human society, which is shaped by contingency and circumstance and as a result requires from us an “accidental ethics,” in the sense of an ethics that is alive to the accidental and contingency-driven reality of life in its variety. Of course society is governed by laws and codes that are by definition framed as universals, unable to deal

with contingency and difference. Boccaccio situates his masterpiece and his advocacy of an accidental ethics in the space that opens up between laws conceived as absolutes, whether those laws be divine or human, and the reality of circumstance and accident.

Boccaccio finds many ways of activating the social mechanisms that lead to the law's failure to account for individual circumstances: within the frame tale alone, he presents difference of gender, including in his new mini-society both men and women, and difference of economic class and social station, through the inclusion of the servants. Boccaccio's preferred mechanism for considering difference is gender, which he establishes as his fundamental category even before the meeting of the storytellers, in the Author's Preface, where he sharply distinguishes between the lives of men and women. Moving on to the Introduction to Day I and to the anomalous formation of a mixed-gender social group or *brigata*,* we note that the plague sweeps away not only the wholesome societal codes by which humans support one another but also less wholesome codes of behavior that throughout history and in most cultures have attached themselves with particular force to women as the carriers of the honor of their families. The group of unmarried men and women that meets in Santa Maria Novella in the Introduction to Day I and then leaves the city together engages in behavior that would not have been acceptable in Florentine society under normal circumstances.

While considering their options, the ladies of the *brigata* discuss the dishonor that would attend leaving the city without male escort; their problem seems solved by the arrival of three young men, but in fact the solution leads to a new problem: there is also dishonor in departing in male

*The Italian word *brigata*, meaning a group formed for social purposes, is used by Boccaccio for his ten storytellers and has become synonymous in Boccaccio criticism with the members of the Decameron frame tale: Pampinea, Filomena, Neifile, Filostrato, Fiammetta, Elissa, Dioneo, Lauretta, Emilia, and Panfilo. On the significance of the uncommon mixed-gender *brigata*, see my essay "*Sociologia della brigata: il gender nel gruppo sociale da Guido, i' vorrei al Decameron*," in *Per una storia di genere della letteratura italiana: Percorsi critici e gender studies*, ed. Virginia Cox and Chiara Ferrari (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011).

company, especially given that these particular men are enamored of three of the ladies. The ladies thus face dishonor either way they turn, a situation that runs the risk of effectively immobilizing them, a not uncommon occurrence for women in that era. Boccaccio allows the impasse to be resolved—the impasse caused by being female and seeking to survive in a context in which survival requires mobility (as it usually does)—by having the ladies agree not to allow the opinions of others to hold more sway than their own clean consciences:

That does not matter at all; as long as I live with dignity and have no remorse of conscience about anything, let anyone who wishes say what he likes to the contrary: God and Truth will take up arms in my defense.

(page 20)

On this shaky platform, whose instability under the relentless assaults of society and the status quo is frequently exposed, Boccaccio allows the female members of the *brigata* to live briefly according to their consciences rather than according to society's codes of conduct.

This brief sojourn in a world founded on individual human dignity and conscience is valuable for the male members of the *brigata* as well, for though they have more options than their female companions, they too struggle with male codes of behavior that the *Decameron* takes care to examine. Male socialization is a huge topic of the *Decameron*, as in the story of how Bruno and Buffalmacco entice Master Simone, a doctor, to go through hazing rituals to become a member of their nonexistent but very exclusive club (VIII, 9). In this *novella* we find an oblique handbook on the contemporary practices of male social clubs: the invented club is composed of twenty-five men, a new member has to be proposed and accepted, the officers rotate every six months, and formal dress is required for the first presentation of a candidate for membership. Another tale tells of the aggressive attempts of Betto Brunelleschi to recruit a resistant Guido Cavalcanti to his social club, composed of men who care little for Guido's intellectual brilliance but are dazzled by his high status and great wealth (VI, 9). The customs of Brunelleschi's group

include the honoring of strangers and of citizens, dressing alike at least once a year, riding through the city and occasional jousting, especially on holidays or to celebrate good tidings like a military victory. Most important is dining together, and they are looking for members who can bear the costs of the rotating dinners that members are obliged to offer one another. Guido Cavalcanti goes to great lengths to avoid the trap of joining a male social club in which he would be not an authentic philosopher-poet but just another wealthy noble footing the dinner bill for his social but not intellectual equals.

But Boccaccio is more concerned with the lives of women than many authors of his time. Beginning with the Author's Preface, he is willing to generalize about the lives of women—to universalize—in order to file his “class-action suit” on their behalf. And in fact the *Decameron* is less a blanket indictment against universalizing, which it seems to consider inevitable, than a meditation on various kinds of universalizing. Boccaccio frequently focuses on the relationship between an essence (form, substance) and the various signifiers or names that can be attached to it, showing how we vainly attempt to alter the substance by altering its name. Thus, in the story that serves as part of Boccaccio's self-defense in the Introduction to Day IV, Filippo Balducci futilely tries to dissuade his son from desiring young women by calling them “*papere*” or “goslings” (page 289), that is, by associating women with “lower” animal life. He then defends the pleasure that he himself takes from women by making a connection between women and “higher” beings, the personifications of art and learning called the Muses, pointing out that “the Muses are ladies, and although ladies are not as worthy as Muses, they do, nevertheless, look like them at first glance; and so for this reason, if for no other, they should please me” (291). Here Boccaccio overwrites the medieval love lyric's ideal of the lady as angel with the newer humanist ideal of the lady as Muse (an association based also on the ancient trope of Lady Philosophy). But the shift is semantic, not ontological. Boccaccio's analysis thus indicates that there is an essence that is not altered by altering the name.

Filippo Balducci is motivated by a narcissistic overreaction to his grief at the death of his wife, which leads him to

want to protect the boy from desire and the consequent pain of loss—to protect him from life itself. The confinement of Filippo Balducci's son echoes that of the ladies of the Preface; indeed, much of the *Decameron* is dedicated to showing that the restriction of liberty is a flawed and ultimately ineffective solution to life's problems. However, the analogy between the ladies of the Preface and Filippo Balducci's son only goes so far, since women are confined not to protect them from the experience of pain but to protect the honor of the patrilineage. Motivation matters when it comes to essentializing as well: Filippo Balducci's defensive essentializing is demeaning but not harmful, unlike the aggressive attack on women voiced by Ambruogiuolo in the story of Bernabò of Genova and his wife, Zinevra (II, 9).

Disputing Bernabò's claim that his wife would remain faithful to him no matter how long he were to be away, Ambruogiuolo, who has never met Zinevra, argues that women are naturally inferior to men, more fickle and more unable to resist temptation, and that Zinevra is a woman like any other. This is an essentializing discourse, precisely as the word is used in critiques of essentialism in modern feminist theory:

you yourself say your wife is a woman and that she is made of flesh and blood like other women. If this is true, she must have the same desires as other women have or those same forces that other women possess to resist such natural appetites; so, it is quite possible, no matter how very virtuous she may be, that she does what other women do
(page 168)

To prove his point about the fickleness of all women, Ambruogiuolo wagers that he can seduce Zinevra; unable to do so, he tricks Bernabò into believing that he has been successful. Bernabò promptly orders his wife killed. Here Boccaccio is considering essentialism on the one hand but also what modern critics consider its opposite, constructivism: Bernabò is constructed by his society such that he cannot withstand the slight to his honor, despite the indications that he is on the whole a decent man. Moreover, a constructivist rather than essentialist view is suggested by the plot: Zinevra manages to escape by cross-dressing and taking

on the identity of a man, named Sicurano, who becomes a favorite of the Sultan. By allowing Zinevra to apparently change her essence by changing her clothes and her name, Boccaccio undercuts the essentialist position that he seems to favor in the Introduction to Day IV.

To Ambruogiuolo's speech on the essential nature of womankind, Bernabò replies: "I am a merchant, not a philosopher, and I shall answer you as a merchant" (page 168). This statement is noteworthy, because in fact misogyny is rooted in essentialism—in the philosophical idea that there is an essential female nature. Boccaccio himself is constantly attempting to work out the relationship of the universal to the particular; the status of women offers a socially charged venue for precisely this type of philosophical speculation. His late misogynist book, *Corbaccio*, reveals an ongoing fascination with the same set of philosophical problems treated in the *Decameron*, although the multifaceted perspectives of the *Decameron* have been replaced with a univocally misogynist view. For instance, we have seen how Boccaccio likens women to the Muses in the *Decameron* in order to raise the status of women. In the *Corbaccio* he writes that women claim superiority to men by comparing themselves to female higher entities, such as the Muses, and then offensively repudiates this female claim to superiority with a shocking swerve toward natural and unavoidable bodily functions: "It is true that they [the Muses, etc.] are female, but they do not piss." This refutation feels effective, because it is coarse and undeniably true, but in fact it is rhetorical sophism rooted in the willful use of essentialism: Boccaccio substitutes for the elevating essentialism that links women to the Muses the debasing essentialism whereby they all urinate. But so do all men, and yet their essential nature is not so defined.

The point here, of which Boccaccio is fully aware, is that clever misogynist rhetoric is rooted in a skillful use of essentialism, like that deployed by Ambruogiuolo in *Decameron* II, 9. We have seen that Ambruogiuolo argues against Zinevra's fidelity by invoking the essential fickleness of all women. In the following story (II, 10), the narrator, Dioneo, continues in Ambruogiuolo's essentializing mode, but with a twist that exemplifies Boccaccio's defiance of easy categorization: instead of fickleness or moral frailty Dioneo

reclassifies female inconstancy as a fundamental and undeniable right to follow the call of nature.* In fact, Dioneo will throughout the *Decameron* equate the right of women to pursue pleasure to their right to pursue life. So, essentializing can take many different forms, and in some cases it can be used in support of what could be called “women’s rights.” Most interesting on the idea that all women are alike is the *novella* of the Marchioness of Montferrato (I, 5), where Boccaccio gives his female protagonist not only the wit to save her honor and repel the unwanted attentions of the King of France but also the philosophical understanding to mount a sophisticated deconstruction of essentialism.

The King of France has heard that the Marchioness of Montferrato was “most beautiful and worthy among all the women of the world” (page 50) and, without ever having seen her, falls passionately in love with her. En route to the Crusade, he chooses an itinerary that gives him a plausible reason for visiting the Marchioness, whose husband has already departed for the same Crusade. Upon receiving the news that the King of France plans to honor her with a visit, the Marchioness suspects that he is motivated by the renown of her beauty. She receives him honorably, preparing a great banquet with many courses. However, “as one dish followed another, he began to wonder, for at his table, no matter how many different dishes were served, all of them had been prepared with chicken” (page 51). Here the philosophical point is embedded in humorous language that features in Italian a female noun, not an abstraction like “Muse” but instead, like “*papere*,” a reference to lower animal life: there are many dishes served, but they are all the same, for they are all prepared with “*galline*”—female chickens, or hens. Familiar with the many different kinds of game that can be found in the surrounding countryside, the King is amazed that all the food served him is essentially the same, and he devises a question for the Marchioness that not only critiques the pervasive “*galline*” but also alludes to

*On this topic, see my essay “*Le parole son donne e i fatti son maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the Decameron (Dec. 2.9, 2.10, 5.10)*,” first published 1993, reprinted in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, pages 281–303.

his aspiration of sexual conquest: “Madam, are there only hens and no cocks born in this part of the country?” (page 51). To which the Marchioness replies: “No, my lord, but though they may differ in dress and rank, the women here are the same as they are elsewhere” (page 52).

The Marchioness uses the language of essentialism to defend herself: she tells the King to get over his infatuation based on the idea that she is somehow different and superior and special and to realize that—in the same way that he has eaten only one thing, “*galline*,” albeit dressed up in many different fashions—so “the women here are the same as they are elsewhere.” Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this remarkable reply is that, in terms of its content, the Marchioness is saying more or less what Ambruogiuolo says: all women are the same. But the Marchioness is a particular woman, an individual who has crafted a deft *performance*, calculated to save her honor without enraging the King and endangering herself, and her bold reply, inserted into its place at the culmination of her scripted rebuke, demonstrates not her universality but her singularity—her very special wit and panache. At the same time, she is able to forcefully get across the message that there is no reason for the King to come all the way to Montferrato to seek out someone he has never met, for there are after all other women in the world who will be able to satisfy his needs.

The story of the Marchioness is typical of Boccaccio in its teasing opacity: does Boccaccio agree with the letter of the Marchioness’s words, or with its spirit? Boccaccio invites us into the teeming variety of life captured in its equivocal and circumstantial messiness and he suggests not an answer—not an essence—but an attitude, an approach to life’s accidents and contingencies: an accidental ethics. We find this approach expressed with clarity and resolution in the *Decameron*’s opening words: “To have compassion for those who suffer is a human quality which everyone should possess” (page 3).

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