

Le Donne Forti: Sex, Marriage, and the Expression of Female Agency in Boccaccio's *The Decameron*

Miranda Jade Friel

Dr. Cristina Francescon

Department of Modern Languages

While feminism, femininity, and women's rights are still hotly debated and contested globally, it is hard to deny the following—most women in Italy now enjoy greater personal freedom than they did in the 1300s, when Boccaccio was writing *The Decameron*. Of course, around the time Boccaccio was writing, women experienced fewer personal freedoms, particularly in choices involving their sexual lives. Marriage and the opportunity for sexual activity were often determined by the woman's parents. British historians Trevor Dean and Kate Lowe write, "In Medieval Italy, there is certainly plentiful evidence for parental control of children's marriages....Parents [promised] their daughters against their daughter's will, or even used beatings to impose their will" (9). They also write, "There is never any doubt who is dominant in any of the relationships....Marriage was thought to be the domination of one party, the female, by the other, the male" (4–5). In light of this information, one can infer that female sexuality, tied to marriage, was a function of Italian society, dictated primarily by expectations shaped by men.

Feminism, a school of thought that decries societal expectations that limit female freedom, has been influential in the contemporary West. In European countries and the United States, women are now able to vote, own property, and marry for love. Yet, while feminism did not become a recognized and structured movement until much later, some stories from *The Decameron* are nonetheless suggestive of proto-feminist thought. Many women in *The Decameron* decide whom they will take as sexual partners, even if these men are not officially sanctified by marriage or their parents. Furthermore, the women enjoy these sexual unions without authorial condemnation. Such female agency, shown primarily by sexual primacy and matrimonial decisions, establishes Boccaccio as a forerunner of feminist literature. Boccaccio's prominent proto-feminist leanings are the focus of this examination.

In *Giornata Quinta, Novella Nona*, the tale of Federigo d'Alberighi's falcon, a well-bred young man showers continual affection on Giovanna. Giovanna is in a precarious situation because she is a widow with a child. In *Doctrine for the Lady of the*

Renaissance, Ruth Kelso writes, “The desire to remarry was taken to indicate some taint of impurity....The virtues of the wife, including modesty, chastity, humility and piety are more important than ever” (133). While childless young widows may eventually remarry, Giovanna is expected to remain faithful to her husband’s memory; however, Federigo’s continual advances place her in an awkward position because she is then also denying a gentleman’s honest wishes. Federigo’s status as an honorable man exacerbates Giovanna’s situation because it gives her no polite reason for rejecting him. Marrying Federigo could tarnish her reputation slightly, but would ultimately reward her because of his wealth and status. Giovanna’s choice to remain single, whether based on societal expectations or not, demonstrates her agency; her situation renders her more than an object because she rejects a man’s advances without being condemned by the



Giornata Prima. In Boccaccio, *Il Decamerone* (Ed. Dolce), Venice: Gabriele Giolito d’Ferrari and brothers, 1552. In Houghton Library, Harvard College Library. *Decameron Web*, Brown University Department of Italian Studies.

man or Boccaccio. She chooses what she desires—to remain widowed instead of gain wealth, status, and marriage to a good man.

Giovanna’s decision to help her son reveals further female agency as well as societal subversion. Her son, who is sick, cries out that only Federigo’s falcon can make him feel better. Giovanna demonstrates awareness of how she has treated Federigo. Nonetheless, she decides to help her son by attempting to procure the falcon. Even in this short story, Boccaccio creates a complex female character by both revealing her desire to remain a single mother and letting her seek the cure for her son by herself. Giovanna does not send a male servant in her stead; she chooses to meet Federigo directly. In the medieval era, when “chastity was the most important virtue” (Kelso 22), such female-to-male requests were usually made via a servant or in the company of a male relation to insure against any negative, reputation-damaging gossip. Furthermore, that she

has to ask a favor of Federigo does not diminish Giovanna's feminine agency and render her dependent—the dignified way in which she asks shows that she does not feel subservient to the falconer. Giovanna is able to approach Federigo as a potential equal and not as a kowtowing, submissive female.

Perhaps the most overt display of sexual primacy is found in *Giornata Terza, Novella Prima*. Also remarkable for its bawdiness, this story shows an abbey¹ of women acting on their sexual desires. Yet it is important to separate current societal conceptions of nuns from the reality of the past. At present, nuns are popularly viewed as women who give up a life of freedom to devote themselves to God. In contrast, in Boccaccio's day, the monastic life was seen as a viable alternative for young women who, while not necessarily engaged with religion, desired an alternative to marriage (Gill 178).

In this story, Masetto deceives an abbey full of attractive young nuns into believing he is deaf and thus mute; the nuns then proceed to take advantage of him sexually, believing there are no possible repercussions from doing so. Aside from the story's obvious roots in sexual agency, Boccaccio here displays a dazzling reversal in traditional medieval sexual roles. Female chastity was often closely guarded by a woman's father or her other male relations. By allowing the nuns to exercise their own sexuality without moral condemnation, Boccaccio invites the reader to see women as sexual creatures who can indulge their urges. In doing so, he demonstrates that sexual desire, power, and primacy are not simply the domain of men. In fact, the literal domination of Masetto by *la badessa*, the abbess, argues that women are just as strongly influenced by lust as men.

One could argue that the nuns are not the ones with the power in this story. After all, it is Masetto's idea to trick them, and the nuns could perhaps be seen as his victims because they ultimately do what he wants. However, the women act on their own desires, making this argument rather weak. After all, the man does not declare his sexual intentions—he simply makes himself available. It is the women who initiate the contact; this agency, both to have relations and to incite them, is traditionally afforded to masculine elements. If still in doubt, one can simply turn to the act of *la badessa*:

Ultimamente la badessa, che ancora di queste cose non s'accorgea, andando un di tutta sola per lo giardino, essendo il caldo grande, trovo Masetto....Ultimamente della sua camera all stanza di lui rimandatolne, e molto spesso rivolendolo, e oltre a cio piu che parte volendo da lui, non potendo Masetto sodisfare a tante...se piu stesse, in troppo gran danno resultare.
(155)

Finally the abbess, knowing of these doings, going all alone to the garden, feeling very hot [sexually frustrated], found Masetto....Ultimately, the man remained in her room, where the abbess always made very exorbitant demands, beyond what had before been asked of him, until it was not possible for

¹ It is worth noting that the Italian title of the prioress or head nun is *la badessa* or *abbess*, suggestive of *la badia* or *abbey*. The word *convent* is slightly more modern in origin (“Convent”).

Masetto to satisfy her any longer...If they did anymore, it would cause damage to them.² (155)

La badessa quite literally makes the man her prisoner and uses him to fulfill her desire. She ultimately exhausts his sexual stamina, prompting him to reveal himself as someone fully capable of speech and hearing. *La badessa* assumes complete power over him in two ways—by rendering him captive and by overcoming his sexual resolve. The tale ends with the mention of *figliuoli* (children) conceived by the man and the nuns. These details suggest that Boccaccio means for his nuns to reign supreme over the man in this tale. Even if this were not the author's intention, the degree of agency the women exhibit is simply remarkable for medieval times.

Another story—less overtly bawdy—is *Giornata Settima, Novella Seconda*. In this tale, Peronella is the unsatisfied wife of a poor man, so she takes a lover. Interestingly, Boccaccio does not condemn her for this decision; he abstains from depicting Peronella as a temptress or whore. Instead, the story focuses on the amusing exchanges between the woman and her husband. Peronella outsmarts her husband by telling him to look inside a giant vase. While her husband is inside the vase, her lover reappears from hiding and ravishes her mere inches away from her husband.

Leaving all sexual content aside, what is remarkable about this tale is the way in which the woman argues back to her husband. While the husband in Boccaccio's tale is irate, he refrains from striking Peronella. And she does not tolerate any emotional or physical abuse; she instead responds promptly to his tirade by saying,

Ohime, lassa me, dolente me, in che mal'ora nacqui, in che mal punto ci venni! Che avrei potuto avere un giovane così da bene e nol volli, per venire a costui che non pensa cui egli s'ha recata a casa. L'altre si danno buon tempo con gli amanti loro, e non ce n'ha niuno che non n'abbia chi due e chi tre, a godono e mostrano a' mariti la lluna per lo sole; e io, misera me!

Oh me, poor me, sad me—I was born in a cursed hour, and came from evil! It was possible for me to have the handsome young man I wanted, instead of this man who thinks to come home early (without money)! I could have had a great time with all my other lovers, and could have had those two or those three, and enjoyed courtship in the sun instead of my husband by the moon—and I'm miserable! (376)

Peronella never sees herself as inferior, and she refuses to respond to her husband as if she were. In fact, she has enough self-worth to think of herself as deserving better. Of course, Peronella also exhibits agency in taking a lover. By outsmarting her husband and obtaining her lover, Peronella demonstrates that Boccaccio's women are complex, more complex than the brevity of their tales might indicate.

Moreover, it is worth noting that even though sexuality and desire play a large role in many of his women's lives, they are not all wanton temptresses, repressed nuns, or unsatisfied wives: *Giornata Quinta, Novella Quarta*, presents a young woman who is

² The author's translations from the original Italian were made with the help of Dr. Cristina Francescon.

more tenderhearted than the aforementioned nuns, but equally powerful. That Boccaccio is able to incorporate the tale of this young woman into his collection of stories speaks to the breadth and depth of his literary abilities.

Giornata Quinta, Novella Quarta is a story with which Western readers may be more comfortable. Two young people, Ricciardio and Caterina (most likely teenagers), are torn by desire for one another. The young man, Ricciardio, finally confesses his love to Caterina. Alas, she, like many women in tradition, has her virtue closely guarded by



“Ricciardo e Caterina.” In Boccaccio, *Il Decamerone*, illustrated copy, 15th century, in Bibliotheque de l’Arsenal, Paris, France. Reprinted in *Folia*, <http://www.foliomagazine.it/la-novella-della-buonanotte-genitori-moderni/>

her family. Ricciardio is understanding and does not approach her until she herself comes up with a plan for them to be together. Ricciardio is noble enough to ask about and respect Caterina’s feelings for him. By considering the woman’s feelings, Ricciardio (and Boccaccio) suggest that her feelings are valid. And, while it is the male’s desire this time that prompts the story, it is Caterina who plans their encounter: she makes a bed

above the garden and describes to Riccardio the walls to use to reach her. After their passionate tryst—when Caterina’s father finds them—she pleads for Riccardio’s safety, which her father graciously grants on the condition that Ricardio marry her to preserve her virtue. The story concludes with this sentence:

...e poi con lei lungamenta in pace e in consolazione Uccello agli usignuoli e di notte quanto gli piacque.

And with her, they lived a long time in peace and made the nightingale sing as many times a night as they liked.³ (305)

By remarking on the sexual union that comes after the story, Boccaccio reaffirms that his women are sexual creatures. They are at least equal to, if not greater than, their male counterparts in emotional complexity. Boccaccio demonstrates here, as in many of the other stories in *The Decameron*, that a man’s noble behavior toward a woman whose family is of a higher social status raises the status of the man himself.

In conclusion, Boccaccio’s stories are funny, touching, and entertaining, but also provide insight into the author’s complex attitude toward women and demonstrate their agency via their sexual primacy or interactions with matrimony. Through the deeds of his various heroines—each of whom is a complex, clearly defined person—Boccaccio reveals his proto-feminist attitudes. The women in *The Decameron* exhibit their own personal agency, either sexually or otherwise. They all participate in the stories and serve as more than simple objects to be sold, bought, or won.

Works Cited

- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Il Decamerone*. Crescere: Grandi Classici, 2014. Print.
- “Convent.” *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, 2015. Web. 1 March 2016.
- Dean, Trevor, and Kate Lowe. “Introduction.” *Marriage in Italy, 1300-1650*. Eds. Trevor Dean and K.J.P. Lowe. Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1998. Print.
- Gill, Katherine. “*Scandala*: Controversies Concerning *Clausura* and Women’s Religious Communities in Late Medieval Italy.” *Christendom and Its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000-1500*. Eds. Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Kelso, Ruth. *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 1956. Print.
- Tal, Guy. *Witches on Top: Magic, Power, and Imagination in the Art of Early Modern Italy*. Diss. Indiana U. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2006. Print.

³ *Nightingale*, or the word *bird* (*uccello*) in general, was a common medieval Italian euphemism for *penis* (Tal).