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Honors Scholar Theses

University of Connecticut

Year 2007

THE VOICE OF DIONEIO: WOMEN IN
GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO'S
DECAMERON

Caitlin E. Williams
University of Connecticut, caitlin.e.williams@gmail.com

**The Voice of Dioneo: Women in Giovanni Boccaccio's
*Decameron***

I. Preface

Giovanni Boccaccio, who is considered the father of Italian prose, collected one hundred *novelle* known as the *Decameron*. Originally written during the dawn of the humanist movement in fourteenth century Florence, it differs from medieval literature in several ways; perhaps the most noticeable difference is Boccaccio's decision to write in Italian vernacular rather than the traditional literary tongue of Latin. The collection of *novelle* is contained within one fundamental *cornice*, or frame. The influence of the *cornice* on the understanding of the *Decameron* as a whole text is one of Boccaccio's most remarkable accomplishments, and something that few other authors successfully achieved.

The *cornice* provides a space within which Boccaccio's creativity flourishes. Within this frame, after describing the physical and moral destruction caused by the plague of 1348, Boccaccio introduces seven young women and three young men. Meeting in the church of Santa Maria Novella they decide to flee the city and the devastation of the plague. They travel into the countryside where they engage in ten days of storytelling and merriment. Each of the ten young people is appointed king/queen for one day and is allowed to choose the theme under which all ten Florentines will tell a story, or *novella*. Boccaccio's genius lies in his ability to construct each one of these stories, maintaining a sense of the larger meaning among the other *novelle*. A close reading of these stories often reveals conflicting perspectives or ambiguities. Thus Boccaccio invites us to discover the creativity of what Massimo Forni has called "the principle of complexity"¹ that informs the *Decameron*.

The *Decameron's* inherent ambiguity allows for scholars to constantly debate the ever-complicated and meaningful *novelle* contained in this rich text. In his book, *Ethics of Nature in*

¹ Forni, Pier Massimo. Forme Complesse nel "Decameron." Firenze, 1992, p.8-9

the Middle Ages Gregory B. Stone observes that “Anyone who thinks they can say what Boccaccio intended to say will be saying the opposite of what Boccaccio said.”² Stone goes on to support this assertion by saying that “Boccaccio recognizes that we can always, if we so desire, read theoretically: ‘There is nothing to prevent [the theorist], provided that he twists and distorts sufficiently to give the thing he is seeking...’ In brief, the *Decameron* can be made to mean anything.”³ Stone’s opinions on the multitude of interpretations for Boccaccio’s text confirms the fact that scholars are still engaged in a dialogue with the author and his characters, in an attempt to discover the true meaning of the text.

Concerning, this quest for truth, it is important that the reader be warned before delving any further into the research found here. Boccaccio’s brilliance and elusiveness ensure that the present study provides only one understanding and not an absolute truth regarding the *Decameron’s* meaning. Because of the sheer number of *novelle* and vastness of themes included in the pages of the *Decameron*, I recognize the limitations resulting from the necessity to consider only one portion of this masterpiece, since Boccaccio certainly intended his work to be read as a whole.

² Stone, Gregory B, *Ethics of Nature in the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin’s Press New York, 1998) 173

³ Stone 178

I. Introduction

As the editors Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki note in their introduction to this collection of essays, *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, “First, Boccaccio’s writings are full of statements about women — statements of praise or blame, explicit or implied...Second, Boccaccio repeatedly imagines women as not merely the objects of discourse (as in our first category) but as the producers and interpreters of discourse — as speakers, writers, listeners, readers.”⁴ In order to better examine Stillinger and Psaki’s comments it is necessary to delve into the feminist or anti-feminist writings by Giovanni Boccaccio.

The conflicting interpretations of Boccaccio’s work as being either feminist or misogynistic has been debated time and again by such scholars as Stillinger and Psaki. It has been discussed in classrooms and has even served as conversation over cappuccino. As Janet Levarie Smarr so eloquently writes in her essay *Speaking Women: Three Decades of Authoritative Females*, “the issue of Boccaccio’s attitudes towards women has evoked considerable debate, especially in the last decade. Arguments are easily found for both cases: that Boccaccio was a feminist ahead of his time, and that he shared the traditional or even misogynistic views of his era.”⁵ Stories praising women for their wit and aggressive action, especially in situations of lust or love, serve as evidence that Smarr’s former statement is true — Boccaccio is a feminist whose views transcend the views of contemporary society. Yet, the text is also laced with stories portraying a more misogynistic view of women, thus proving Smarr’s latter assumption to be true. To add to the confusion, Boccaccio also makes sure that the reader

⁴ Stillinger, Thomas C. and F. Regina Psaki. Introduction. *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki. Vol. 8. (North Carolina: Annali d’Italianistica, Inc, 2006): 2-3

⁵ Smarr, Janet Levarie. “Speaking Women: Three Decades of Authoritative Females.” *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki. Vol. 8. (North Carolina: Annali d’Italianistica, Inc, 2006): 29

will not be able to pin any *novella* down to a certain meaning, so the feminist stories can be interpreted as misogynistic as well as the other way around.

Boccaccio employs the voice of his narrator Dioneo to represent his ideas on the tension between masculinity and femininity. Boccaccio's views of women seem revolutionary at first. Yet, after careful consideration it becomes clear that he does not choose to directly condemn or to be an advocate for women. Boccaccio's choice to propose these ideas of liberated women to the group of *amorse donne* to which this work is dedicated becomes especially important when considered in the context of Dioneo's tales. Ultimately, while Dioneo excites the members of the *brigata* and recognizes women for their unique skills and independent ideas, he concludes the *Decameron* with a story reminiscent of the society from which these young aristocrats escaped, revealing misogynistic overtones. Through Dioneo's novelle it becomes clear that, as David Wallace wrote, "Boccaccio is a detached observer, but not an indifferent one: he speaks as a survivor of the plague (and survivor of love) who records the desperate strategies of those trapped in the wrong place at the wrong time."⁶ Boccaccio uses each of these ten narrative voices to share his many thoughts and by concluding each day of stories with Dioneo's tales he summarizes his feelings on the themes, society and the small group of the *brigata*.

While Boccaccio's ideas are represented in some measure through several narrators from the *brigata*, they are most uniquely expressed through Dioneo. Through Dioneo Boccaccio is able to explore the gender disparity which is inherent in 14th century Florentine society. His intentions are to inform the reader of his observations, but not to influence social change. After each of Dioneo's tales the *brigata* responds with laughter and praise as any attentive audience would hopefully respond to Boccaccio himself. Dioneo's final story concludes the *Decameron* and it appears to be the most misogynistic of all the *novelle*. Boccaccio's strategy is to use

⁶ Wallace, David. *Giovanni Boccaccio Decameron*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 19

Dioneo, his main voice, to remind the *brigata* of the rules and practices regarding the ethos of women in contemporary society. Therefore the meanings of the *Decameron*, especially with respect to women in society, are most controversial and thought provoking through the voice of Dioneo.

Giovanni Boccaccio was born in Florence or Certaldo in the year 1313. He was raised predominately by his mother and according to New Advent Encyclopedia he was a “steadfast” son who greatly admired his mother and looked upon his father with some disdain.⁷ Not much is known about Boccaccio’s childhood and as a result conflicting reports are cited regarding Boccaccio’s relationship with his father. Most sources, however, converge on the idea that Boccaccio was very close to his mother. The importance of this relationship cannot be underestimated in the context of his writing and provides an insight into his reasons for wishing to focus most of his life’s work on women. During his life Boccaccio fathered several children illegitimately. In contrast to his less than perfect loves, many of his writings are dedicated to an idealized love like the kind he held for Lady Fiammetta. In light of these experiences we can better interpret the *Decameron*, as noted in the New Advent Encyclopedia, as a medium for a “close analysis of all shades of feeling and passion, from the basest to the noblest.”⁸

Giovanni Boccaccio’s opinions on love and his resulting writings are influenced not only by Boccaccio’s personal past, but also by the Florentine society of which they are a direct product. In the *Decameron* it is not difficult to see the prevailing effects of the *black death*, or the plague, as the context in which Boccaccio’s *novelle* are constructed. In his article “The Plague as Key to Meaning in Boccaccio” Aldo S. Bernardo writes: “In short, the plague in the *Decameron* resembles the voice of Augustine in Petrarch’s *Secretum* reminding his protégé not only of the fragility of the human condition but of the fearfulness of the final moment of life and of the evanescent nature of human love.”⁹ This observation is particularly relevant because Boccaccio’s ideas of ideal love are very similar to those opinions of his friend Petrarch.

⁷ *Giovanni Boccaccio*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02607a.htm> (March 2007)

⁸ *Giovanni Boccaccio*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02607a.htm> (March 2007)

⁹ Bernardo, Aldo S. “The Plague as Key to Meaning in Boccaccio.” *The Black Death*. Ed. Daniel Williman. (New York: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1982): 39-64

However, in the *Decameron* Boccaccio does not find himself burdened by the same Christian constraints and influences of writers like Augustine within the *Decameron*. This break from a more idealized view of love and literature is what allows Boccaccio to be more of an observer of society and painter of a realistic portrait of love.

Gregory B. Stone also observes Boccaccio's break from representations of ideal love in his book *The Ethics of Nature in the Middle Ages*. He writes that "Boccaccio has already stripped his book of its aura: his writing is not, like a museum-piece classical sculpture, meant to be passively admired nor to be gazed at; it is, rather, ink still in the well, yet to be written."¹⁰ Stone's observation reminds the reader that Boccaccio's work is meant to portray society in its most realistic form. Boccaccio's work presents a very realistic view of love, and more specifically, of the interactions between men and women in society. Boccaccio's *Decameron* is presented as an interactive piece of literature which actively and aggressively explores society's purest and ugliest forms.

Boccaccio's writing certainly does not evade encounters with the gruesome or foolish aspects of society. Rather, Boccaccio represents these elements of early Renaissance society directly within his *novelle*. Within the *Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* its editors and translators Mariangela Causa-Steindler and Thomas Mauch remark that Boccaccio loved to experiment and was not afraid to challenge traditional bounds. They continue by commenting that "his trust in the freedom of fantasy made him unafraid of the overstatements of the grotesque."¹¹ There is evidence of the truth in this statement both in *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* and throughout the introduction and *novelle* in the *Decameron*.

¹⁰ Stone 183

¹¹ Causa-Steindler, Mariangela and Thomas Mauch. Introduction. *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*. Ed. and Trans. Mariangela Causa-Steindler and Thomas Mauch. (Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) xi

Boccaccio introduces the *Decameron* with his dedication to the *amorous* ladies. He goes on to describe the current situation in Florence and the effects of the plague on the lives of both him and his fellow Florentines, including those characters for whom he creates the *brigata*.

Boccaccio writes:

“Even in these circumstances, however, there were no tears or candles or mourners to honour the dead; in fact, no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats. For it was quite apparent that the one thing which, in normal times, no wise man had ever learned to accept without patient resignation (even though it struck so seldom and unobtrusively), had now been brought home to the feeble-minded as well, but the scale of the calamity caused them to regard it with indifference. Such was the multitude of corpses (of which further consignments were arriving every day and almost by the hour at each of the churches), that there was not sufficient consecrated ground for them to be buried in, especially if each was to have its own plot in accordance with long-established custom. So when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships' cargo, each layer of the corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top.”¹²

This description of the devastation of the plague in Florence serves not only to provide a graphic setting for Boccaccio's collection of *novelle* but to introduce his style of writing. Boccaccio presents the details of the plague and its ravaging through the city of Florence as an observer, rather than someone affected directly by the plague. He uses this same approach to stories of love and lust as they are told by his narrators, as well as descriptions of the tensions between men and women. Boccaccio's work allows him to function creatively as an observer, to record society in all its distorted ideas of truth and love, without directly advocating for any one position or opinion.

In Boccaccio's introduction one also discovers his direct admission of a lack of personal sentiment included in this collection of *novelle*. While a thorough reading of Boccaccio allows the reader to see many personal references and evidence of Boccaccio's voice—especially in the

¹² Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. G. H. McWilliam. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 11-12

introduction to the first day, in which he narrates the tale of Filippo Balducci, and in the author's epilogue, but also through the narrator Dioneo—Boccaccio is careful to refrain from directly admitting the connection of these stories to his personal life. In continuing to describe the plague he states that “the more I reflect upon all this misery, the deeper my sense of personal sorrow; hence I shall refrain from describing those aspects which can suitably be omitted, and proceed to inform you that these were the conditions prevailing our city...”¹³ Thus all of Boccaccio's personal experience with love and lust, pain and destruction culminate in this statement where he clearly asserts that he will omit his personal anecdotes regarding these *novelle* and proceed to allow the *brigata* to entertain the reader with their tales. The irony here is that Boccaccio indeed employs the entire the *brigata* in some way to voice his opinions, Dioneo being the dominant expression of Giovanni Boccaccio, the author himself, within the *Decameron*.

The interplay between author and narrators, narrators and readers within the *cornice* has been asserted to be the place where Boccaccio's true genius lies. In order to completely understand Boccaccio's predominant role in the *Decameron* through the voice of Dioneo, it is necessary to fully appreciate the interactions between Boccaccio and his narrators. In fact, the narrators in Boccaccio's collection of stories serve as the first group of readers whose reactions are shared throughout the *Decameron* with the secondary readers. Corradina Caporello-Szykman writes about these relationships in her work, *The Boccaccian Novella*. She discusses Boccaccio's relationship with the *brigata* saying,

“as the members of the lieta brigata listen to the stories, they become the first-level receivers of the work. Through them and their reactions to the novella Boccaccio paints his model reader; one who, even though occasionally naïve and perhaps unsophisticated, is free from conceit and prejudice, capable of laughter and sorrow, so young and yet so mature, so tolerant of human frailty and yet inexorable judge of the evils of corruption and stupidity. The world of the *Decameron* is, therefore, magnified through a continuous exchange and

¹³ Boccaccio 13

movement of messages sent out by Boccaccio to his public, and received back by him in the form of certain of his readers' criticisms."¹⁴

This is important in understanding the *Decameron* because Boccaccio intends with the reactions of the *brigata* to provide the guidelines which Caporello-Szykman describes, in order to steer his readers into understanding how he intends his sometimes crude twists of the tragic and comic elements within the *novelle* to be interpreted.

Boccaccio's first audience of the *Decameron's novelle* is in fact constituted by the members of the *brigata*, who are dominantly women. Boccaccio's work is dedicated to women and the stories which are received with much affection are frequently the pro-feminist tales of Boccaccio's protégé, Dioneo. Caporello Szykman writes of the young women's presence from the outset of their introduction into the *novelle* using a reflection on Dioneo's, or Boccaccio's, opinions about their leadership. She writes, "The decision to leave the city is made by the young women, as is the one to ask the *giovani valorosi* to be their escort." Caporello-Szykman continues to describe this scene by writing that, "Dioneo pays homage to their power of initiative when, once arrived in the country villa he states...And from now on, the women of the *brigata* will act and be treated as complete equals to the young men, establishing a new order for society after the dissolution caused by the plague."¹⁵ This explains Dioneo's realization that once the *brigata* leaves Florence they are also leaving behind, in theory, the hierarchical gender convictions present in society, on a quest to live for a time in something of a utopia in the countryside. It is interesting to note that Dioneo, serving as Boccaccio's voice, also tells the last story of the *Decameron* which functions as a rapid return of the old ideas about gender in Florentine society, bringing the *brigata* back into the society from which their ten day solace afforded them an escape. Therefore, Dioneo both happily receives the ideas of acknowledging

¹⁴ Caporello-Szykman, Corradina. *The Boccaccian Novella*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 1990) 86-87

¹⁵ Caporello-Szykman 53

women as equal as well as reinstitutes society's expected gender roles at the close of the *brigata's* journey. Dioneo is therefore rather explicitly taking on the ideas of Boccaccio regarding tensions between the early Renaissance women and the women of the *Decameron*.

Boccaccio is not creating what today we would call a feminist work within the construction of the *Decameron*. He chooses to document the lives of women in the early Renaissance as well as praise them for independent acts of wit and intelligence. However, he does not directly choose a position advocating or condemning these women. Boccaccio seeks to explore the dynamics between men and women in society without choosing to create any such position to encourage social change. In her book, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman* Pamela Joseph Benson discusses Boccaccio and his writings about women. She states that, "society is often blamed for having deprived women of moral education, thus indirectly causing their bad deeds, and their heroic acts are attributed to natural female abilities...A persuasive and sensitive profeminist voice emerges from the text, a voice that admires female political, moral and physical strength although it does not endorse a change in the contemporary political status of women."¹⁶ In this way, Boccaccio is able to use the *brigata* to make social commentary and bring to light many realistic elements of the feminine that are ignored by other early Renaissance authors without actually choosing to be an advocate for women, or for social change in Renaissance society.

The women in early Renaissance society are portrayed in a variety of roles throughout the stories in the *Decameron*. These stories alternately portray women as assertive and dominant as well as passive and subservient. Boccaccio's women often are not themselves passive however, but by representing passivity and subservience in women they represent the ideas imparted on

¹⁶ Benson, Pamela Joseph. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1992) 18

the female gender by society. For example, as Ashleigh Imus has observed, “When Filomena introduces the idea that women need male chaperones she introduces this not as her idea but as society’s idea.”¹⁷ This logic further explains the way in which Boccaccio employs his narrators to explain the challenges and tensions between masculinity and femininity in society without directly challenging these beliefs. As Imus explains, Boccaccio does not want to suggest that women are dependent on men, but rather that society enforces the idea that a company of women would not be happy travelers without the addition of some male companions. This is one of countless examples within the *Decameron* in which Boccaccio distinguishes between his *Brigata* and the rules of early Renaissance society.

Boccaccio does however, also include a bit of his own rhetoric in the middle of the *Decameron* to most unmistakably assert the undeniable importance of the interactions between men and women. Through the story of Filippo Balducci, a father who attempts to shelter his son from the pains of love, Boccaccio is able to express that the attractions between men and women are both natural or instinctive and a product of culture. As Gregory B. Stone notes, “for at least half the human species, desire does not come naturally but rather is generated by language.”¹⁸ As Stone further explains, “Boccaccio conceives poetry as the force that originates, determines, or triggers *physis*. Poetry, in other words, is regarded not as the imitation of nature but rather as *natura* herself, as the birth, blossoming, or arising of a previously concealed human *ethos*. Poetry, for Boccaccio, is the event of historical alteration of human nature.”¹⁹ Stone heavily emphasizes the importance of language in this particular context which is not necessarily representative of the full meaning Boccaccio expresses through the story of Filippo Balducci.

¹⁷ Imus, Ashleigh. “Vaga è la donna vaga: The Gendering of *Vago* in the *Commedia*, the *Decameron* and the *Canzoniere*.” *Forum Italicum*. Ed. Michael Ricciardelli. Vol. 40 No. 2. (Forum Italicum, 2006) 219

¹⁸ Stone 74

¹⁹ Stone 36

While it is true that the boy is even more attracted to the young ladies once he learns of their name, the attraction begins in a much more instinctive way. As the boy hears the names of buildings and other objects those names do not evoke the same reaction that the unnamed young ladies do. Therefore while Stone's assertion of the linguistic power Boccaccio conveys in this story is true, it is impossible to suggest Boccaccio meant to deny the presence of any natural instincts. Boccaccio relies on the power of words as the means for society to assert its beliefs on individuals, specifically about women, men, and gender roles in society. Boccaccio also recognizes the natural desires which shape the gender conventions present in society and lead Filippo Balducci to attempt to use language as a means to prevent his son's natural instincts from prevailing.

As Boccaccio tells the story of Filippo Balducci's decision to hide his son from the city and earthly things, only showing him prayers and pictures of angels it becomes evident that eventually his son will want to explore the world further, searching for truth. Once his son is finally taken to the city to see all of these earthly possessions his father thinks that he is old enough to not to be overcome by desire for them and to remain true to God. Boccaccio writes that "When the young man saw the palaces, houses, the churches and all the other things that meet the eye in such profusion throughout the city, he could not recall ever having seen such objects before and was filled with amazement. He questioned his father about many of them and asked him what they were called."²⁰ Boccaccio continues to describe his experience, eventually telling of how "they chanced upon a party of elegantly dressed and beautiful young ladies, who were coming from a wedding; and no sooner did the young man see them, than he asked his father what they were."²¹ Despite telling his son that these women are called "goslings" and are

²⁰ Boccaccio 286

²¹ Boccaccio 287

evil, Balducci cannot prevent his son from wishing for one. Balducci's son explains, "As far as I am concerned, I don't think I have ever in my whole life seen anything so pretty or attractive. They are more beautiful than the painted angels you have taken me to see so often. O alas! If you have any concern for my welfare, do make it possible for us to take one of these goslings back with us, and I will pop things into its bill."²² In addition to the obvious sexual allusions Boccaccio uses this particular tale, which he leaves unfinished, to accentuate the importance of language and natural desire.

Millicent Marcus discusses Boccaccio's approach to women in her article *Misogyny as Misreading: A Gloss on Decameron VIII.7* where she briefly references the often misunderstood impact of Boccaccio's story of Filippo Balducci. Marcus writes that "Boccaccio makes explicit his rejection of misogynous thought in the Introduction to Day IV, not only in his famous five-point defense of his fiction-making, but in the parable of Filippo Balducci, where he transforms a traditional antifeminist exemplum into proof of the naturalness of erotic desire."²³ Marcus' suggestion that Boccaccio points to erotic desire within this parable is another important consideration in the interpretation of this story. The language used by Boccaccio makes distinct sexual inferences within the very language Boccaccio chooses. This is a technique which is used repeatedly throughout the *Decameron* and the erotic desires and sexual attractions that women express in many of the *novelle* are means by which they also assert independence and power. Boccaccio is very interested in these natural, often lustful desires, and Dioneo as the voice of Boccaccio repeatedly uses his *novelle* to explore this particular issue.

Boccaccio creates Dioneo's character to act as a "transgressor" within the text as his *novelle* are featured at the conclusion of each day, and often influence the theme of the following

²² Boccaccio 287

²³ Marcus, Millicent. "Misogyny as Misreading: A Gloss on *Decameron VIII.7*." *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki. Vol.8. (North Carolina: Annali d'Italianistica, Inc, 2006): 29

day. The combination of the positioning of Dioneo's stories with his unique permission to consistently choose not to follow the given theme for the day seem to suggest that not only is Boccaccio's voice coming through Dioneo's stories most strongly, but that he is somewhat the "ruler" of the *Decameron*. Dioneo is not the only narrator who shares the views and ideas of Boccaccio. However, his place of prominence in the text and the approval he consistently receives from the other members of the *brigata* afford him a unique influence within the *Decameron*.

As is explained the article "Dioneo," posted on *www.brown.edu* by Brown University's Italian Department, Dioneo is "the ruling narrator of the *Decameron*, disguising—and at the same time revealing—this is the role through his position each day as the final narrator. That he holds the greatest power becomes clear by way of his effective and confident story-telling."²⁴ It becomes obvious through reading the *novelle* told by Dioneo that not only is he the leader of the *Decameron*, but that he also has an incredible understanding for language and ability to communicate his ideas effectively. He relates to the other narrators on a very natural and human level, all elements both of Dioneo's stories and of Boccaccio's *Decameron* as a whole.

The above article goes on to state that,

"Although he represents the 'pleasure principle,' Dioneo is also the embodiment of a social necessity, he is an integral part of the *brigata*'s "utopian" society. His narration—unfettered as it is by the thematic constraints imposed on others—could fairly be seen as a metaphor for a sort of "liberation of the repressed" within the framework of the *Decameron*, a safety valve of the frustrations and anxiety of his society at large."²⁵

This important consideration of Dioneo's effect on the narration of all stories within the *Decameron* is vital evidence supporting the importance of Dioneo the narrator as the voice of

²⁴ "Dioneo." *Decameron Web*. (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/narrators/1dioneo.shtml, March 2007)

²⁵ "Dioneo." *Decameron Web*. (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/narrators/1dioneo.shtml, March 2007)

Boccaccio. His stories challenge society's restraints and express a sense of freedom which is not present in other *novelle*. In fact, in certain stories by other narrators it can be said that an element of Dioneo is present when their authors' convictions challenge society by twisting the comic and the tragic, or expose "the frustrations and anxiety" of society.

Dioneo is acknowledged as a narrator from the very beginning of the *Decameron*. The reader's attention is drawn to his character because he is able to do something that no other character in the *brigata* is afforded to opportunity to do. Dioneo says to the *brigata* at the close of the first day,

"I would ask you to grant me a special privilege, which I wish to have conferred upon me for as long as our company shall last, namely, that whenever I feel so inclined, I may be exempted from this law obliging us to conform to the subject agreed, and tell whatever story I please. But none shall think I desire this favour because I have a poor supply of stories, I will say at once that I am willing always to be the last person to speak."²⁶

In this dialogue Dioneo separates himself from the rest of the *brigata* and establishes his character as significant in many ways. Dioneo is now able to tell whichever story he pleases, disregarding the rules of the day, and always conclude the day of stories, allowing him to act as a transgressor within the *Decameron*. Similarities are also revealed in this dialogue between Boccaccio and Dioneo. Just as Boccaccio challenges society's typical bounds for stories and literature during the early Renaissance, so does Dioneo challenge the *brigata's* rules.

The theme that Dioneo chooses for the seventh day, when he is appointed king, elicits some criticism from the ladies of the *brigata*, however Dioneo insists that it be discussed. Dioneo explains to the *brigata*,

"I should like for us to talk tomorrow about *the tricks which, either in the cause of love or for motives of self-preservation, women have played upon their husbands, irrespective of whether or not they were found out.*' Some of the ladies felt that it would be unseemly for them to discuss a subject of this sort, and asked

²⁶ Boccaccio 68

him to propose another, but the king replied: 'Ladies, I know as well as you do that the theme I have prescribed is a delicate one to handle; but I am not to be deterred by your objections, for I believe that the times we live in permit all subjects to be freely discussed, provided that men and women take care to do no wrong.'²⁷

After Dioneo explains his desire to use this theme the men and women agree to choose the appropriate stories, regardless of whether they are embarrassing or inappropriate. It is also significant that Dioneo argues to discuss this theme under the pretense that their microcosm of society is free and open to hearing such tales. Dioneo later chooses not to follow his own theme and concludes the seventh day by explaining that the story he intended on sharing was already told and he would therefore need to once again, use his special privilege to tell a story of any theme. This provides a stronger connection between Dioneo and Boccaccio. Boccaccio, like Dioneo in the seventh day, allows the *Decameron* to act as a free space in which he is able to praise women and share ideas that are considered inappropriate in society.

Important connections linking Boccaccio to Dioneo are found throughout the *Decameron*. On the sixth day, Dioneo's story takes place in Certaldo where it is believed that Boccaccio was born. In this sense Boccaccio is using the location of this particular *novella* to make his presence known. Dioneo's flair for language is also a suggestion that he most closely resembles Boccaccio. As David Wallace observes, "...Dioneo's privileged talent for subversion, for flaunting the decorums of storytelling"²⁸ is overwhelming present within the various *novelle* he tells, and the dialogue he shares with the *brigata*.

On the seventh day Dioneo chooses the theme of tricks women have played on men. In his *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron* Giuseppe Mazzotta writes about Dioneo's choice of theme for this day. He describes the way that Dioneo's theme makes very obvious the

²⁷ Boccaccio 478

²⁸ Wallace 47

discontinuity between the scenery and the *novelle* that are shared on the seventh day. All the stories are shared just after the reader hears about the Valley of Ladies, which is often compared to a Garden of Eden. At the root of this disharmony is the way in which these stories, unlike the innocent landscape, are often pornographic. Mazzotta observes that,

“the theme purports, rather, to tell the strategies of simulation which wives use against their husbands either to gain love or to avert violence. The term ‘amore’ in the title page is best understood as sexual pleasure and it is a principle which is overtly the point of departure and arrival of all the stories of the day. Laughter arises primarily from the cluster of libertine pleasures, violence, which is on the verge of breaking out, and from the disguises deployed to contain both violence and to gratify one’s desires.”²⁹

The stories told under this theme which Dioneo prescribes are often filled with tales of sexual pleasure, and it is significant that this plays an important role in the tricks which women play on men. The laughter that often results from these tales is also very typical of the response that Dioneo frequently evokes from the *brigata*. The comic element in these stories serves both Dioneo and Boccaccio as a means through which they can broach what society may consider inappropriate or base subjects.

Dioneo often uses what Mazzotta considers to be the “pornographic in literature” as a means to free women. Dioneo considers sexual desires and the power of women’s sexuality as a way to enable women to gain power within society. It is also through trickery and cunning wit that women are able to exploit men in the sexual sphere. Mazzotta observes that this pornographic literature, “is the convergence of imagination and desire, an ever elusive mirage whose pleasures are displaced, always somewhere else. The alibi is the constitutive property of pornographic literature: its ‘otherness’ suspends the very notion of its becoming literal, real

²⁹ Mazzotta, Giuseppe. *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*. (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1986)

experience.”³⁰ This explanation for the acceptance of these sexually potent stories within the context of the *Decameron* allows society to realize their relevance while pretending to observe something separate from reality. The *brigata* also exists in a somewhat imaginary reality, therefore allowing stories of this variety to be shared and understood under the guise of fiction.

Sexuality is so important both to Dioneo and to the *Decameron* at large because it is the single most potent area of contrast between genders, even from a biological standpoint. On the ninth day Dioneo shares one of the more pornographic *novelle* of the *Decameron* which tells the story of a peasant couple and a priest. When the priest visits the house of the peasant couple and casually remarks that he will sleep in the stable because his mare becomes a woman at night both the husband and wife are amazed. The wife demands that she also be given such a power because it would save them money and be very practical. When the priest agrees to create such a miracle he tells the wife, Gemmata, “to remove all her clothes and stand on all fours like a mare, likewise instructing her not to utter a word whatever happened, after which he began to fondle her face and her head with his hands...”³¹ The priest continues this process of transforming each of Gemmetta's body parts to become the mare until her husband, who has been looking on this entire time, yells at him not to put the tail in. After this, the priest explains that because the magical transformation was interrupted she can no longer become a mare and Gemmetta curses her husband for being so foolish. The involvement of the priest and the passivity of the husband are both very reminiscent of the way in which Dioneo is able to twist and contort such a sexually explicit story into an array of possible meanings.

This story is one of the most pornographic within the collection of *novelle* and has been analyzed by John Ahern in his article “Dioneo's Repertory: Performance and Writing in

³⁰ Mazzotta 130

³¹ Boccaccio 697

Boccaccio's *Decameron*." Ahern asserts that this tale acknowledges the struggle for man and animal to coexist. Ahern also suggests that all of the characters in this story are fools because no one is better off than when the story began. He explains that the woman neither wants nor receives sexual pleasure, the husband is never able to fully understand the situation and the priest is left without any strong motivations behind his actions, nor any gratification or condemnation for them.³² This story really typifies the way in which Dioneo, acting as Boccaccio, plays the role of the observer. He does not choose to advocate any type of morality, nor condemn any character for his actions. Rather he explains the perverse as an inclination or inherent desire possessed by all humanity.

Throughout the *Decameron* it becomes clear that this issue of women's sexuality and extra-marital relations becomes an important element in Dioneo's understanding and portrayal of women and relationships. In fact, as Mary-Michelle DeCoste boldly asserts in her article "Filomena, Dioneo and an Ass": "Dioneo insists that men who believe in their wives' fidelity are deluding themselves...Filomena suggests that actual events support the moral she gives her story...and Dioneo adopts the same strategy to insist that most wives are unfaithful."³³ Boccaccio, through the character of Dioneo, does not mark this suggestion as necessarily immoral however. Through Dioneo's tale of Ricciardo da Chinzica in fact, Dioneo suggests that women's infidelity is often warranted and that it is best for women to be assertive and act on their sexual desires because they will be happier as a result. This evidence is one of the ways Dioneo appears to be an advocate for women's freedom, however it is more accurate to describe his position as realistic however detached. He narrates this *novella* turning the tragic into the

³² Ahern, John. "Dioneo's Repertory: Performance and Writing in Boccaccio's *Decameron*." *Performing Medieval Narrative*. Ed. Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado and Marilyn Lawrence. (D.S. Brewer: Cambridge 2005) 52

³³ DeCoste, Mary-Michelle. "Filomena, Dioneo, and an Ass." *Heliotropia* (scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia: 2004, Vol 2. Issue 1) 4

comic however Dioneo's tale lacks any moral lessons or convictions, allowing him more freedom for observation and preventing him from making any judgments on the actions of his characters.

In the story of Ricciardo da Chinzica, which concludes the second day of storytelling, Dioneo describes an old lawyer who takes a beautiful young wife named Bartolomea. Unable to be satisfied by her husband, she ends up living with a young man named Paganino. When her husband comes to beg her to come back to live with him she refuses. Bartolomea tells Ricciardo,

“‘you showed very little sign of knowing *me*, when I was living with you, because if, either then or now, you were as wise as you wish to pretend you should certainly have had the gumption to realize that a fresh and vigorous young woman like myself needs something more than food and clothes, even if modesty forbids her to say so. And you know how little of that you provided. If you were more interested in studying the law than in keeping a wife, you should never have married in the first place.’”³⁴

Dioneo's story therefore praises Bartolomea for her strength in rejecting her husband in favor of following her natural desires. The *brigata* also finds this tale very favorable and at its conclusion Boccaccio writes that, “this story threw the whole company into such fits of laughter that there was none of them whose jaws were not aching, and the ladies unanimously agreed that Dioneo was right...”³⁵ Dioneo's story not only pleased his company, but it supported his assertion that when women are unfaithful they are only following their natural desires rather than malicious intentions.

Most of Dioneo's tales of sexuality rely heavily on the comic element to please the ladies of the *brigata* and to voice Boccaccio's own opinions of women without advocating for social change. The final tale of the *Decameron* told by Dioneo is so shocking to the reader because it challenges Dioneo's previous praise for women and turns the comic element which pleases the

³⁴ Boccaccio 183

³⁵ Boccaccio 186

brigata so often into the most misogynistic and tragic tale of the *Decameron*. As the final tale in this collection Boccaccio chooses this particular theme for Dioneo in order to bring the *brigata's* fantasy to an end, and reintroducing the misogynistic views traditionally held by early Renaissance society. Roberta Ricci describes this phenomenon in her article "Sex? Love? No, Let's Talk About Marriage" where she writes, "if this last story can be read...as the hegemonic representation of the idealization of the woman that dominates the period, that is, the denial of the being of any individual woman as a historical category, then this last act completes the polarization discussed throughout the *Decameron*..."³⁶ Through Dioneo's final story the *brigata* and the readers alike are reminded of early Renaissance society and the role of women in that context. Boccaccio is also ensuring that his literature is understood as observations and stories of women during this time and not a plea for social change. The story of Griselda is arguably, the most vital *novella* in the *Decameron* in order to fully appreciate the unique position that Boccaccio takes in understanding women through Dioneo.

In order to understand the story of Griselda within the context of the *Decameron* it is important to acknowledge that the goal of this story is not to condemn women, but to bring the reader and the members of the *brigata* away from their fantasy-filled adventure in the countryside and back to the reality of early Renaissance society. Michael A. Calabrese explains this concept best in his article "Feminism and the Packaging of Boccaccio's Fiammetta" when he writes, "despite the basic medieval sexism that leads Boccaccio in this work to depict women, at times, as weaker than men, intellectually sluggish, and in need of vigilant protection, he can often be an insightful observer of human sexuality and society."³⁷ These insights are portrayed

³⁶ Ricci, Roberts. "Sex? Love? No, Let's Talk About Marriage." *Misogynism in literature*. Ed. Britta Zangen (New York) 17

³⁷ Calabrese, Michael A. "Feminism and the Packaging of Boccaccio's Fiammetta." *Italica*. (JSTOR: www.jstor.org Spring 1997, Vol 74 No. 1) 20

throughout the *Decameron* and are particularly empowering for women in many of Dioneo's stories. It is important however that Boccaccio also regains a realistic approach to society at the close of this collection of *novelle* and that he employs Dioneo to be his voice of reason, redirecting readers back to the misogynistic, contemporary society.

Giuseppe Mazzotta notes that with the story of Griselda Boccaccio is forcing the *brigata* to return to the ideology of the early Renaissance society. Mazzotta explains that the plot of the *Decameron* moves in such a way so as to completely mimic Florentine society beginning with "bleak and morally uncertain tales" and ending on the tenth day by reestablishing order and society's moral standards within the *brigata*.³⁸ Griselda's relationship with her husband serves as an extreme and somewhat tragic transition back into contemporary early Renaissance society and allows Dioneo to play the role of the transgressor in his powerful, final *novella*.

Dioneo's story of Griselda concludes the tenth and final day of the *brigata's* sojourn into the country for an escape from the plague through storytelling. Griselda is a poor, young woman chosen by Gualtieri, a wealthy young man and Marquis of Saluzzo, to be his wife. After a glorious wedding feast was prepared Gualtieri went to fetch his young wife. Before asking her to marry him Gualtieri asked that, "if he were to marry her, she would always try to please him and never would be upset by anything he said or did, whether she would obey him, and many other questions of this sort, to all of which she answered that she would."³⁹ After this Gualtieri made his new young bride strip naked in front of all the townspeople and then dress again in the clothing he made for her. The young couple lived together from this point on, Griselda bearing a child as well. Eventually Gualtieri wished to test his wife's patience and he thus devised a

³⁸ Mazzotta 120

³⁹ Boccaccio 786

terrifically cruel plot in which the misogynistic overtones of Dioneo's story become overwhelming.

Gualtieri then demands that Griselda and he send both of their children away, supposedly to be murdered, and later decides to test Griselda's patience further by saying that he has obtained permission from the Pope to divorce her and take another wife. He turns Griselda into a slave in his home and through trickery appears to be preparing to marry another woman, who is in fact Griselda's daughter. Gualtieri even goes so far as to ask Griselda what she thinks of his new bride. This cruelty finally ends when Gualtieri explains,

“Griselda, the time has come for you to reap the reward of your unfailing patience, and for those who considered me a cruel and bestial tyrant, to know that whatever I have done was done of a set purpose, for I wished to show you how to be a good wife, and to guarantee my own peace and quiet for as long as we are living beneath the same roof. When I came to take a wife, I was greatly afraid that this peace would be denied me, and in order to prove otherwise I tormented and provoked you in the ways you have seen. But as I have never known you to oppose my wishes, I now intend, being persuaded that you can offer me all the happiness I desire, to restore you in a single instant that which I took from you little by little, and delectably assuage the pains that I have inflicted upon you.”

After this act of utter cruelty, Gualtieri reveals to Griselda that her children are also still alive and Boccaccio writes that everyone was “delighted with the turn that events had taken, and the feasting and the merrymaking were redoubled, and continued unabated for the next few days. Gualtieri was acknowledged to be very wise, though the trials...were regarded as harsh and intolerable, whilst Griselda was accounted the wisest of all.”⁴⁰ This story of cruelty and misogyny told by Dioneo is the way Boccaccio chooses to close his collection of *novelle*, and it is most likely one of the most complex stories told by any narrator within the *Decameron*.

Roberta Ricci explains that the roots of the story of Griselda can be found in the structuring of the *brigata* itself. She writes that, “while still in the church, the *brigata* structures

⁴⁰ Boccaccio 794

itself as a *communitas*, transforming the country into the reversal of the anarchy of the city. In other words, they seek to reestablish order in a time of chaos.” Ricci explains further that the final day is also ruled by Panfilo, the most mature, male narrator of the collection.⁴¹ Therefore beginning from an examination of the *brigata* itself it becomes clear that this story, in just a few pages, is clarifying that the role of women in society has and will remain unchanged with relationship to this text. Ricci adds that this misogynistic tale, “testifies to nothing less than the unresolved hiatus between the garden and the city or, in more metaphorical terms, between narrative and reality.”⁴² It provides the reader with an understanding for Dioneo, or Boccaccio’s intentions to swiftly put the feminist elements of the text back into the context of early Renaissance society and remind women of their traditional roles.

Dioneo begins this story by forewarning readers that his tale will require that a different type of attention be paid to it. He also says, “I want to tell you of a marquis, whose actions, even though things turned out well for him in the end, were remarkable not so much for their munificence as for their senseless brutality. Nor do I advise anyone to follow his example, for it was great pity that the fellow should have drawn any profit from his conduct.”⁴³ This preface explains Dioneo’s need for more artistic freedoms within his narratives, and also suggestions that the following tale won’t result in the same pleasant reaction he normally elicits from the *brigata*. Dioneo also warns the other men and women not to think of repeating the actions of this story, which draws a remarkable attention to the actions that are about to be told. Some pornographic *novelle* or even tales of violence are understood to be fiction and therefore would not be repeated. This *novella*, however, draws a considerable amount of attention because Dioneo

⁴¹ Ricci 18

⁴² Ricci 19

⁴³ Boccaccio 784

makes sure to repeatedly suggest its realistic qualities and relevance to the society that into which the *brigata* is about to re-assimilate.

The relationship between men and women portrayed to the *brigata* is explained by Emma Campbell in her article "Sexual Politics and the Politics of Translation in the tale of Griselda1." She interprets the apparent misogynist elements included in this story by Dioneo both as a way to express the realistic view of the male-female relationship in society, as well as a way to point out its absurdity. Campbell explains that Dioneo, "while implementing a prerogative that reaffirms the 'correct' relationship of male to female, Gualtieri's actions challenge his own, supposedly natural, superiority by associating his superior status as a man with those qualities of willfulness and irrationality more usually associate with women and wives."⁴⁴ This refreshing explanation for Boccaccio's intentions through Dioneo's tale puts the apparently misogynistic tale into a more clear perspective. Campbell explains Gualtieri's extremely brutal actions as both a product of society and a failure of his supposed natural dominance.

Griselda's actions are also important to understanding the dynamics of this *novella* and the way that Dioneo chooses to represent Gualtieri's dominance. Campbell explains that one troublesome aspect to fully interpreting the persons in this final *novella* stems from Griselda's role more as a female body than an actual character. Campbell argues that the undressing and redressing of Griselda serves not to suggest her personal humiliation, but to indicate his ability to see the wise and noble qualities below her exterior. This supports Campbell's philosophy that Gualtieri, as a man, is able to assert himself only through his wife.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Campbell, Emma. "Sexual Politics and the Politics of Translation in the tale of Griselda1." (findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3612/is_200307/ai_n9297251/pg_1: 2003)

⁴⁵ Campbell 1

Campbell says that Dioneo “implicitly dismisses Gualtieri as an unfit ruler and elevates Griselda to the position of a divine spirit.”⁴⁶ This additional perspective allows the reader to understand that underneath the misogynistic overtones in this tale, Dioneo is also praising Griselda. When she is asked her opinion of Gualtieri's new wife she responds without any jealousy or concern for herself. In this way Griselda can in fact be interpreted as being above the earthly passions that plague and control her husband's life. This is one interpretation of Dioneo's tale however, and while there are some facts which stand to reason, there are also some unexplainable elements of misogyny within the text.

While Campbell's understanding of Griselda as an ideal figure, devoid of earthly passion, is important, it is not Dioneo's whole intention to create her as a heavenly figure. As Roberta Ricci points out in her interpretation,

“one may argue that Griselda is not exclusively removed from real events by her husband, but that she contributes to this process as well. When Gualtieri asks her what she thinks of his new bride, she answers with her usual modesty and acquiescence by speaking about herself in the third person as if she were absent from the real discourse of events, endorsing Gualtieri's treatment of her as an object rather than a subject...”⁴⁷

Therefore while Dioneo's story may suggest that Griselda is uniquely capable of not feeling the earthly sins of jealousy she is also not able to speak at all for herself within this tale. Her lack of verbal conviction in combination with her inability to conceive any action against Gualtieri's oppression suggests her submission to male dominance. Griselda's character lacks the qualities that Dioneo praises in women throughout his earlier *novelle*. Griselda's character embodies the early Renaissance woman and her inferiority to her male counterparts. Gualtieri however, is also seen as weak in this *novella* because of his reliance on mistreating his wife in order to assert his masculinity.

⁴⁶ Campbell 1

⁴⁷ Ricci 25

Ricci discusses Gualtieri's reliance on society's approval in influencing his actions. She explains, "Everybody seems content with Gualtieri's behavior and that is what matters to him most. He is consistently desperate in looking for approval by publicly establishing male supremacy in a sexual and social relationship."⁴⁸ Dioneo is therefore presenting not only a vision of what defines women in early Renaissance society, but also where men achieve an understanding for their social position.

Dioneo represents society in a crude interpretation of reality in this story. He explains both the submission of women and the aggression of men in the relationship of Griselda and Gualtieri. This marriage endures, despite the awful sexism that is overwhelmingly present making a distinct correlation between this *novella* and real society. Additionally Griselda and Gualtieri's affairs are very public and unlike other *novelle* the reaction of society is repeatedly included in Dioneo's tale. While society is present though, it never takes an active role with any kind of moral conviction. So while society demands marriage or separation in other stories, it serves merely as a passive observer here. Onlookers remark on the absurdity of Gualtieri and Griselda's interactions however they never make any moral judgments or attempt to intervene in Gualtieri's cruel plot. At the close of the *novella* the members of society praise the marriage for enduring. Therefore Dioneo suggests that while society is aware of the tension between men and women, just as the members of the *brigata* are, most take the role of the passive observer and accept the social practices as they are.

After this final tale by Dioneo the rules of society are re-instated for the *brigata* in the countryside. Ricci writes that,

⁴⁸ Ricci 27

“The *fallace amore* (fallacious love), as natural and physical attraction celebrated by Dioneo throughout the *Decameron*, along with the licentiousness and irresistibility of sexual desire and with the consistent derision of female chastity and church doctrine about the sinfulness of sexuality, is not denied, but consciously set aside. The male narrator is now back to where he started: there is no other possibility but that of the rules established by the husband. The tales, after all, were indeed written in the hope of dissuading women from love. Lovers should now be ready to face society's rigid behavioral codes. Back to the horror and grief of the beginning. Back to reality. Back to misogyny.”⁴⁹

As a result, Dioneo's purpose in concluding this collection with the tale of Griselda becomes clear. Acting as the voice of Boccaccio he is not only reasserting the traditional conventions of society, but in the process he is absolving this collection of any responsibility to advocate for social change.

Marilyn Migiel discusses the concept of women in the *Decameron* with reference to its narrators and the final tale of Griselda in her article, “The Untidy Business of Gender Studies: Or, Why It's Almost Useless to Ask if the *Decameron* is Feminist.” Migiel writes that,

“The *Decameron*, inspired by women who are its muses, seems to be at least proto-feminist because it grants women the power to speak and be “self-governing,” it acknowledges their desires, and it even seems to sanction fulfillment of them. But the wish to find a haven for feminist study within medieval Italian literature has sent readers into a tailspin. Boccaccio and his *Decameron* are not yielding predictable answers...”⁵⁰

As Migiel explains, Boccaccio does not write this work in an attempt to create a feminist text. In the same token neither does the character Dioneo function as Boccaccio's voice advocating for social change. Rather within the complex *novelle* that make up this extraordinary collection Dioneo's tales, and other *novelle* as well, allow Boccaccio a medium to express his observations about women. Dioneo's stories also give the women characters in the *Decameron* as well as the

⁴⁹ Ricci 36

⁵⁰ Migiel, Marilyn. “The Untidy Business of Gender Studies: Or, Why It's Almost Useless to Ask if the *Decameron* is Feminist.” *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki. Vol. 8. (North Carolina: Annali d'Italianistica, Inc, 2006): 219

women of the *brigata* some liberation from the constriction of society, until the final story of Griselda.

On this issue of Dioneo and Boccaccio as a representation of feminism within the *Decameron*, Michael A. Calabrese writes his article "Feminism and the packaging of Boccaccio's Fiammetta." Calabrese says, "If the modern, humanist term "feminist" can at all apply to pre-modern texts, it very well might apply here, for in this work Boccaccio does not neglect the agency of women in history and does not ignore the effects of religious, institutional and cultural power on women."⁵¹ Calabrese feels that Boccaccio provides a space within this collection of *novelle* for the passions and intellect of women to be documented. This is especially unusual for any writing in the early Renaissance, and even modern times. Therefore by acknowledging the presence of these feminist elements even within what at times appears as a misogynistic text it still becomes evident that Boccaccio's work can very well be termed "feminist."

Migiel further discusses this idea of Boccaccio's work as feminist. She describes that, "any feminist expose is inevitably complicated by the fact that the collective ideology that emerges from any portion of the *Decameron* exists in a fictional world."⁵² Boccaccio's fictional character of Dioneo exists only in the countryside with the *brigata* predominately made up of young ladies. Therefore his rhetoric throughout the collection is able to freely flow without traditional societal gender roles being imposed. However, Dioneo's final story is representative of his ability to foresee the *brigata's* return into early Renaissance society although this makes him feel uncomfortable.

⁵¹ Calabrese 20

⁵² Migiel 231

Boccaccio recognizes the gender hierarchy in society and focuses most of his life's work exploiting the tensions that result. He is especially talented at using gendered language in order to best exploit his ideas. Barbara Zaczek in her article, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: the *Decameron* and *The Women's Decameron*" about Boccaccio's use of language as the most powerful tool in his collection. She says, "By imbuing a word with the power to change, even invert, a given situation, Boccaccio draws the readers' attention to the role of language in society, demonstrating how verbal interaction assumes social significance."⁵³ In each of the *novelle*, and significantly especially in Dioneo's tales this assertion can be found to be extremely true. It is, after all, both the source of Boccaccio's ambiguity as well as the richness of his text.

Janet Levarie Smarr, describing Boccaccio and his relationship with women in literature. She writes, "from his earliest writings and until the end of his career Boccaccio gave women a speaking role in his texts, and a role of moral and religious authority at that, while maintaining their presence as "real" physical or historical women and not simply allegorical figures."⁵⁴ Boccaccio is able to create these women using *novelle* told by talented narrators such as Dioneo. Through the eloquent and engaging tales that Dioneo shares with the *brigata* one is able to understand Boccaccio's desire to share stories of all types of women, realistic and true to their nature without directly advocating for social change in society as a result of gender inequality.

Dioneo is Boccaccio's most prevailing voice throughout the *Decameron*. In addition to sharing some of the most provoking and sexualized stories within the collection, he is also able to act as a transgressor, the ruling narrator and with freedoms that are not shared with any other

⁵³ Zaczek, Barbara. "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The *Decameron* and *The Women's Decameron*." *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki. Vol. 8. (North Carolina: Annali d'Italianistica, Inc, 2006): 237

⁵⁴ Smarr 29

narrators. Dioneo tells tales that engross his many audiences, being with the *brigata* itself. Through his talented story-telling and unique way of transforming reality into fictional narrative the women in the *Decameron* take shape. In his final tale of Griselda Dioneo concludes this journey with a reflection on the society that exists beyond this escape to the countryside. He disconnects with the liberating and feminist elements of his previous tales in many ways and reacquaints the members of the *brigata* with the gender tensions that exist in early Renaissance society.

Panfilo, King of the final day, concludes this collection, by explaining to the *brigata*,

“Tomorrow, as you know, a fortnight will have elapsed since the day we departed from Florence to provide for our relaxation, preserve our health and our lives, and escape from the sadness, the suffering, and the anguish continuously to be found in our city since this plague first descended upon it. These aims we have achieved in my judgment, without any loss of decorum. For as far as I have been able to observe, albeit the tales related here have been amusing, perhaps of a sort to stimulate carnal desire, and we have continually partaken in excellent food and drink, played music, and sung many songs, all of which things may encourage unseemly behavior among those who are feeble of mind, neither in word nor in deed nor in any other respect have I known either you or ourselves to be worthy of censure. On the contrary, from what I have seen and heard, it seems to me that our proceedings have been marked by a constant sense of propriety, an unflinching spirit of harmony, and a continual feeling of brotherly and sisterly amity. All of which pleases me greatly, as it surely redounds to our communal honor and credit.”⁵⁵

In this final conclusion Panfilo places a gloss over the *brigata's* journey. He intends to gently remind the men and women who have narrated this exciting collection of tales that the time has come to close their ten day hiatus to the countryside and return to the plague-ridden city of Florence. Panfilo is careful to not only point out the pleasure that the *brigata* was able to enjoy together, but also the harmony that existed. The young Florentines will not only be returning to the gender hierarchy and societal tensions of the early Renaissance, but also to the chaos resulting from the plague. Panfilo also keeps the crown as King until the following day when the

⁵⁵ Boccaccio 796

brigata will depart for Florence. This suggests that the women submit once again to unfair male dominance as they prepare to set off into the city once again. Symmetrically perhaps, at the beginning of the *Decameron* the first ruler was Pampinea, one of the young ladies of the *brigata*.

Dioneo's story of the men's dominance in society serves as the last *novella* allowing Dioneo to act as a transgressor for the final time. While his story elicits less applause from the young men and women, it is nonetheless accepted in stride. Dioneo has liberated and praised women throughout the *Decameron* and in this final tale he relinquishes all claim to being considered an advocate for social change and instead simply returns to acting as the primary voice of the author, Giovanni Boccaccio. Dioneo's tales are essential in not only exploring women and the profane within the *Decameron*, but also in understanding and appreciating Boccaccio's undeniable genius in creating this work. Through the dialogue of Dioneo the reader is able to understand both the role of women in the *Decameron* and the role of Boccaccio's work in early Renaissance society. This is not accomplished however, without perplexity and wonderment, as well as he unexpected insights into the complexities and ambiguities woven into the text as Boccaccio, or Dioneo as the author's voice, speak of woman and her world.

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