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## Boccaccio's Portrayal of Medieval Life in 'The Decameron'

Giovanni Boccaccio's medieval work of art *The Decameron* highlights both the righteous and sinful ways of humans, through the telling of short stories. Boccaccio's tales cover a wide array of topics, including adultery, love, devotion, trickery, and attributes of selfish and selfless people. Many commend Boccaccio because of his courage to shine a spotlight upon the distasteful aspects of medieval life, specifically the impartialness to extramarital affairs. Boccaccio's *Decameron* provides a lens into medieval life which was greatly separated by gender disparities, economic divides, and contrasts in social status.

Gender disparities are a very significant portion of Boccaccio's writing, and the different portrayals of men and women are obvious. In the society that *The Decameron* takes place in, women have been trapped in a lower social standing than men. Yet, Boccaccio demonstrates that a woman's lack of social standing does not influence her levels of control in any sort of relationship. In fact, women seem to have an upper hand in many aspects of male-female relationships. For example, Ghismonda's relationship with her father Tancrede in Day IV portrays a bond which the female holds power over the male. Ghismonda, disheartened by her father's stern threats against Guiscardo, held her own life above her father's head as a threat saying, "I certify thee, that whatsoever thou hast done or shalt do with Guiscardo, a thou do not the like with me, mine own hands shall do it" (P. 199). Ghismonda's threats are not those posed without meaning, and they are out of her love for a man. Ghismonda threatened to end her own life to reiterate how important Guiscardo was to her. Ghismonda eventually took her own life to spite her father, showing her blatant disregard for gender disparities.

Boccaccio demonstrated a woman's seemingly unlikely social advantages again when telling the story of the Day VI. The story of a woman accused of murdering her husband, only to be forgiven by her father yet tormented by the judge, testaments to their social upper hand. The young lady, much like Ghismonda, explained that she would rather slay herself than be accused improperly, thus keeping her dignity. She said, "I purpose to abide no longer on life; but, ere I go about to slay myself, I would fain take fitting means to preserve my honor and the secret of the love that hath been between us twain and that the body.." (P. 223). Andre Viola, whom insisted on preserving her dignity, could achieve being viewed as innocent if allowed to take her life. Selfless acts like these are usually performed by women in most of Boccaccio's stories. Ghismonda taking her life to both spite her father and reunite with Guiscardo proved that she had little fear of repercussions, especially by Tancrede. Similarly, Andre Viola, who wanted to preserve his self-image, had little influence on the motivations of men. Andre Viola was influenced by everyone's accusations of her, male or female. Gender disparities are very common in Boccaccio's writing, but often times women are portrayed as selfless and fearless,

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caring not about consequence they may face from a man.

One of the few examples in which a woman does not seem completely advantageous in a situation is in Day V, the story of the knight whom endlessly chases his transgressor. Yet in this story, though the woman may seem like a victim due to her the consequence for her “actions”, both the male and female are being punished, simultaneously. Placing aside the main storyline of the man who moved to Ravenna to be relieved of his anguish, Boccaccio’s story of the knight and his prey contains more important, yet implicit, information. The knight, who feels he is pursuing “divine justice” by chasing after his transgressor says, “I, who once loved her so dear, should pursue her, not as a beloved mistress, but as a mortal enemy, and that, as often as I overtook her, I should slay her with this tuck”. (P. 280). The knight, though he used to be completely enamored by this woman, now must chase after her, never to find that his task his complete. Though the knight felt “wronged” by the woman he adored, he is truly the subject of punishment, because he must chase after her, while never feeling accomplished for her murder. Boccaccio’s inclusion of this story is very crucial to the portrayal of men, as opposed to women. He implies that chasing after women to no end is a waste of energy, especially when a woman is able to readjust herself and keep fleeing from her suitors. It is important to note that Boccaccio recognizes many women as time and energy consuming, with no reward upon their “capture”.

Second, to gender disparities, economic divides play a crucial role in Boccaccio’s tales. A noteworthy story to elaborate upon this is in Day V, the story of the Nightingale. Caterina and Ricciardo, who have been sleeping together on the balcony of Caterina’s home, were caught in a loving embrace. Yet, instead of driving Ricciardo from her father’s home, or murdering him, they were immediately wed. This is due to Ricciardo being of the acceptable social and economic class, suitable for Caterina. Unlike Guiscardo, who was strangled to death for premarital affairs, Ricciardo is described as “a young man of the Minardi of Bertinoro, comely and lusty of his person, by name Ricciardo, who much frequented Messer Lizzio house”. (P. 262). Later, after catching his daughter engaging in lewd acts, Messer Lizio asks Ricciardo, “Do thou, to save thyself from death and me from shame, take Caterina to thy lawful wife”. (P. 264). This exchange is extremely noteworthy when documenting the influence of social class in the perception of the transgressor. The relationship between Guiscardo and Ghismonda, and Caterina and Ricciardo are essentially the exact same amount of sin, lust, and secrecy. Yet, Guiscardo and Ghismonda are dead, yet Caterina and Ricciardo live, due to the difference in economic standards. While Boccaccio was unafraid to portray females as the leads of their own lives, he was apprehensive towards a relationship which was counterculture: one that crossed economic lines.

The only story which was accepting of a relationship with differing economic tiers, was that of the Falcon in Day V. The relationship, as described in the beginning, was one-sided, and the

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woman had little interest in her suitor. She, Madam Giovanna, was a widow with many riches left by her husband. Federigo had little to his name besides his farm and his bird, because he had spent many of his riches away attempting to attract Madam Giovanna. Yet somehow, Boccaccio yields to the yearnings of the reader, allowing the two to be united by their love, rather by their wealth or political premise. Madam Giovanna says to her suitor, “I know very well that it is as you say, but I would liefer have a man that lacketh of riches than riches that lack a man.’ Her brethren, hearing her mind and knowing Federigo for a man of great merit, poor though he was, gave her, with all her wealth, to him” (P 286). Boccaccio elaborated further, essentially explaining that their marriage was successful due to his positive personality traits and their shared wealth. With respect to the other tales explained, this story is particularly odd. Relating back to the tale of Ghismonda, Ghismonda and her lover eventually are laid to rest in the same tomb, because of their vastly differing economic stature. And although Guiscardo was in love with Ghismonda, and she with him, neither could create an outcome near to what Federigo and Madam Giovanna created. It seems as such that since Madam Giovanna had no authoritative male restraining her from pursuing this relationship (i.e. father, husband), she was free to do as she pleased with respect to her wealth and social image. On the contrary, Ghismonda was held back by her father from pursuing the relationship which she wanted, which led to her demise. Perhaps Boccaccio is inadvertently explaining that women are held back from choosing their true love by men, and if permitted, men of lower social status would be their suitor of choice.

In Boccaccio’s tales, intertwined between economic status and gender divides, is the significant issue of political contrasts. Usually, between a woman of higher stature and a man deemed unworthy, these stories do not prove a common ending, yet elaborate upon a woman’s true desires in a lover. Day IV tells the story of the young Lisabetta, described as a “right fair and well-mannered maiden, whom, whatever might have been the reason thereof, they had not yet married” (P. 217). The tale immediately describes Lisabetta as a woman who was not married off by her wealthy brothers, which indicates her social status. Lorenzo, her lover, was described as “agreeable”, but his wealth is not elaborated on. Boccaccio demonstrates women’s preference, yet again, for men of lower status. After Lorenzo is killed, and the basil plant Lisabetta finds solace in (including Lorenzo’s head), is robbed from her, she is inconsolable to the point which she sobs to death. The story, though short, proves that Boccaccio is not an advocate for marrying outside of a distinct social caste. In most of the stories provided, a woman eventually threatens to take her own life, or her life is stripped from her. Boccaccio created this story to be distinctively morbid from the rest of the “forbidden love situations”. When reading the story from a distance, the plot is seen as a wealthy young female who was not permitted to marry a socially downcast male, so she eventually died. Lastly, this story fulfills the criteria created regarding a wealthy or powerful woman seeking to court a young, socially downcast male. Because she has three older brothers who wish to keep their family rid of commoners, the solution found is to murder Lorenzo, and through this, murder Lisabetta.

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Boccaccio's portrayal of the outcome of courting a man outside of a specific social realm is often times morbid and blatantly obnoxious.

Giovanni Boccaccio is very explicit when he describes the plight of pursuing a lover. Often times, if not all the time, women are inhibited from being united with a man due to an authoritative figure who exercises control over her life. Yet, in many stories, Boccaccio's tales exhibit the idea that women are in control of their own fate, especially through their means of death. While women are usually prohibited from being united with a man outside political, social, or economic classes, they can exercise control of their lives by threatening to take their own life, which happens very often in The Decameron. The Decameron, though a masterpiece in emboldening humans' sinful and righteous nature, provides an outlook on women which is very authoritative, and not progressive at all for its time.

#### Work(s) Cited

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