

# Dioneo: narrator of controversy in the decameron



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At the beginning of Boccaccio's Decameron, both the male and female narrators hesitate to discuss the seemingly lewd topic of sexual relations. On Day I, the Florentines discuss various topics, yet only one narrator is brave enough to introduce sex as a theme: Dioneo. This male narrator quickly develops himself as the most daring of the Florentines, happy to push the invisible limits the group has set when it comes to sex. This gives him a particularly important role in the first half of the Decameron as he successfully encourages the other narrators to discuss illegitimate sexual relations. Having accomplished his goals as a narrator and mediator of discussion, Dioneo becomes less controversial and his stories less distinctive in Days VI, VII, and VIII of the Decameron in favor of a presence outside of his stories. Known now as the Decameron's controversial narrator, it is Dioneo's actions outside the stories that speak to us more on these days. Nonetheless, his role in the first three days of the Decameron are essential to developing the open discussion of sex and more taboo topics considered lewd in the first day, and to the fascination the ten Florentines have with various sexual illegitimacy. On Day I, Dioneo immediately stands out to the reader by discussing sexual relations with surprising openness. His story (I. 4) introduces a monk and abbot, both guilty of having sex with a young peasant girl. The shock of this story comes first from our knowledge of both the monk's and abbot's supposed holiness. For monks, having sex is a grave sin, because it contradicts their complete devotion to God. The monk recognizes this "heavy penalty he had incurred", which Dioneo also refers to as a "misdemeanour" (40). As holy men, both the monk and the abbot recognize the implications of their actions with the young woman, yet they appear to completely forget their devotion to God in favor of consistent sex.

At this point, the narrators have only heard three stories previous to Dioneo's, some of them potentially controversial. The first story, which speaks of Ser Cepparello's defiance of Christianity, could certainly have offended the narrators. The female narrators, however, find Dioneo's story more controversial than any of those previously heard because of its open discussion of not only sex, but forbidden sex. The three stories told before Dioneo's received only praise and laughter. Dioneo's story also receives laughter, but in addition to another reaction: it "at first caused the ladies some embarrassment, judging by the modest blushes which appeared on their cheeks" (42). The fact that the ladies' first response is embarrassment shows the shock that this story gave them. We sense that sex is a sensitive subject for the women in the Decameron, which the primary narrator confirms when saying that "they had reproved him with a few gentle words, in order to make it clear that such stories should not be told when ladies were present" (42). After reading this, one would expect that stories of sex should stop completely, yet the effect is the complete opposite: sex becomes a subject of increasing interest for the narrators. By choosing to discuss illegitimate sex on the very first day, Dioneo has opened a vast new theme for the Florentines: a theme that perhaps overcomes all others. Already we can tell that he will play a major role in either initiating new discussions or discussing others. In the Day I Conclusion, Dioneo sets himself up as an essential character and storyteller when he requests to speak freely of whatever topic he chooses, and to speak last each day. He boldly defends this request to speak last by saying "so that no one may think that I ask this favour because I do not have many tales to tell, I am content from now on to be always the last to speak" (57). Dioneo takes pride in his storytelling, and

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is anxious to prove this to the others. He requests to tell his stories last to prove his aptitude as a storyteller. The Queen honors his request, “ well aware that he only asked this favour so that he might divert the company with some funny story, if they should tire of the common theme” (57). By granting Dioneo this right, however, she essentially gives him a position of power that no one else, not even the King or Queen of the day, can have. Only Dioneo has the complete freedom to discuss whatever he wants, and he quickly takes advantage of this right. Interestingly, the Queen thinks that his request is simply to tell amusing and funny stories. While Dioneo certainly does this, he also has his own agenda: using his freedom to present stories that challenge the limits the group had seemingly set. Dioneo’s openness with sexuality on Day I encourages some of the narrators to do the same on Day II, but the majority of the female narrators still refrain from speaking of sexual encounters. Marilyn Migiel also recognizes this in her essay, “ Beyond Seduction: A Reading of the Tale of Alibech and Rustico (Decameron III, 10)”, in which she says “ on Day II, it is the three male narrators and Pampinea (never to be outdone by one of her male companions) who tell of sexual encounters” (161). Only the two other men and Pampinea—the oldest, most confident woman—feel daring enough to follow Dioneo’s example. Filostrato starts this with his scandalous tale of Rinaldo d’Asti (II. 2), who has sex with an unknown woman already committed to someone else. Pampinea, after listening to Filostrato’s story, speaks of young Alessandro (II. 3), who unknowingly has sex with the King of England’s daughter and then marries her. Panfilo speaks of Alatiel who hides her sexuality from her father and marries the King of Algarve (II. 7). Looking back to the aftermath of Dioneo’s first story on Day I, we remember that he had been scolded only by the

ladies. There was no mention of men, and thus we see the men (and Pampinea, who has challenged standard female gender roles from the very beginning) taking Dioneo's side. They pursue a subject that the ladies see as taboo. Most of the women stay true to their Day I beliefs about sexuality in Day II by refraining from discussion of it. They tell funny stories that entertain the narrators, such as the day's first story, and many encouraging stories that follow the theme of overcoming misfortunes, but speak nothing of sexuality. Nonetheless, the sexual stories that appear on Day II show that Dioneo has started to break down the foundations of modesty and what the Florentines consider appropriate for discussion. The tale of Alibech and Rustico on Day III is the peak of Dioneo's importance as a narrator within the Decameron. By the third day, sex has become a common subject for the narrators, and almost all of them—both male and female—discuss it. The supposed modesty of the women on Day I has disappeared; there is no more scolding for stories of illegitimate sex, and the narrators consistently laugh in response to these stories. Migiel agrees, saying “ by Day III, when the group moves to a lovely enclosed garden, the desire to tell stories about sex—but especially about illicit sexual relations—has spread like the plague” (161). Nonetheless, Dioneo still seeks to push the boundaries of their discussions, and he does so in his tale of Alibech and Rustico, which is perhaps the most controversial story yet in the Decameron. It overshadows any of the other stories of Day III in its blatant sexuality. The explicit metaphor of putting the Devil back into Hell as symbols for sexual genitalia, along with the subtle implications of rape and child molestation, pursues the notion of sexual fantasy and illegitimacy to a new extreme. It is not surprising that Dioneo has told this story, considering his position as the most daring of the narrators.

Still, why has Dioneo decided to go so far in his sexual story? It seems almost as if at this point, it is a competition: who can create the most scandalous story? After the majority of the stories discuss illicit sex in Day III, only Dioneo is left, and since he was the one that began these sexual stories, he must take his one step further to show his leadership in the matter. As a result, the tale of Alibech and Rustico proves to be extremely lewd and unethical in nature, and we still consider Dioneo the most daring and controversial of the narrators. After Day III, however, Dioneo's role as storyteller progressively becomes less important as others begin to tell more controversial stories in his place. On Day IV Dioneo tells the story of a doctor's wife and her lover. Following his previous trend, he should have spoken openly about their sexual encounter, yet Dioneo barely mentions it. He says only that they "enjoyed themselves" (290), which is so quickly mentioned that one easily misses it (as I had done reading it the first time, thinking that he refrains entirely from sexual discussion). The subtlety of this sexual encounter is surprising, mostly because previously Dioneo would speak extensively of sex. Day IV's sexual subtlety shows a new Dioneo: a narrator that perhaps will not always speak openly and controversially about sexuality, which foreshadows his position as a figure outside the *frametale* more than a storyteller on Days VI, VII, and VIII. He has already pushed the group into speaking as freely as he does in regards to sex, so even though he continues his previous themes of illegitimate sex in his Day V story, we see from Day IV that Dioneo begins to refrain. On Day V, Dioneo reminds us of his earlier role in the *Decameron* when the Queen asks him to sing a song in the Conclusion. The other narrators, when asked, would simply begin singing with no question. Dioneo however, presents quite a challenge to the

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Queen (Fiammetta) when he refuses to take her seriously and chooses to make a joke out of the question. He offers the Queen only crude songs, to which she responds initially with laughter but then grows increasingly annoyed. Dioneo suggests songs such as ““ Monna Aldruda, come, lift up your tail, The news that I bring you will please you no end”” (361), a blatantly obscene song. He also offers many other songs of the same nature. In this section of the Decameron, we see Dioneo as we remember him in the first three days: one that is not afraid to push boundaries when it comes to the ladies’ sexual modesty. We also see that Dioneo loves the attention he receives, because the ladies’ laughter only encourages him to continue offering his bawdy songs. He ends up singing a more serious love song, however, because the Queen forbids him to continue with his silliness. This shows that while the ladies have become more accepting of sexual fantasies within the stories, they are not eager to continue such discussions outside of their tales. It seems that Dioneo has reached his limit with sexuality here, which perhaps explains why he finally settles with a serious love song. This love song marks Dioneo’s transition from controversial storyteller to a controversial figure within the frame tale. Between Days VI and VIII, we see that Dioneo has left his previous role of narrating particularly controversial stories, and instead he now stands out to us outside of his stories, especially when becoming King on Day VII. His choice of theme immediately elicits a response from some of the ladies: “ tricks which, either for love or for their own preservation, ladies have in the past played upon their husbands, with or without their husbands’ knowledge” (391). By choosing this theme, Dioneo almost asks for stories of illicit sex. These tricks include only husbands, not men in general, which means that the women of the stories

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will commit major sins against their husbands even for just playing tricks on them. The reaction of the ladies reminds us of Dioneo's familiarity with controversy. Several of them protest this choice so much that Dioneo feels the need to give a speech just to settle the matter. In his speech, Dioneo again challenges the modesty of the women. He says "if your modesty permits you a little freedom in your speech, not in order to encourage anything improper but merely to amuse yourselves and others" (391). Dioneo continuously wants the women to challenge their own modesty and to follow his own example in speaking freely simply for amusement. By picking such a controversial subject for Day VII, the female narrators can do so. Looking at Days IX and X, we find that Dioneo's preoccupation with being a figure within the frame tale has disappeared in favor of controversial storytelling again. We know that his stories on Days VI, VII, and VIII are not particularly controversial, yet on Day IX and X his stories pick up again on controversy. Dioneo's story on Day IX harkens back to his story of Alibech and Rustico on Day III: a religious figure preys on an unsuspecting woman for sex, using a metaphor to mask the true nature of the situation. In this story, we find the metaphor to be turning Gemmata into a "fine mare's head" (567) using a tail (an obvious metaphor for his sexual organs). The controversy again comes from the fact that Gemmata does not understand Don Gianni is taking advantage of her sexually, similar to Alibech with the Devil and Hell metaphors. Since we know that III. 10 was very controversial in the beginning of the Decameron, Dioneo follows a similar theme and reminds us of his role as a storyteller. When Dioneo finally ends the storytelling of the Decameron and his role as storyteller with another controversial story (X. 10, discussing the Marquis of Saluzzo and his cruelty),

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we see that he has returned as the Decameron's iconic storyteller of controversy. By making these last two stories controversial, Dioneo wants to leave a legacy both for the narrators and for the readers. He wants us to perceive him as the most controversial narrator of the Decameron. We see from all of this that Dioneo's goal is to motivate the women to speak as freely as he does. When the women finally do so, he changes his role into a figure within the *frametales*, but then returns to controversial storytelling to create his own image as the Decameron's most dramatic narrator. Having started the tales of illegitimate sex, Dioneo pushes these boundaries not only because he enjoys pushing boundaries, but also because he wants the women to speak more freely. We see that Dioneo does not like modesty, both from his stories and from how he encourages the women to ignore their modest tendencies. In the second half of the Decameron, many of the controversial stories—both with illegitimate sex and without—come surprisingly from the women. Largely because of Dioneo, we see the female narrators of the Decameron speak more openly than they perhaps would not have otherwise. Despite this, Dioneo makes a comeback on the last two days with his scandalous stories, reminding us of his place in the Decameron. Throughout the work, he speaks of sexual illegitimacy and sexual crimes with such ease and frequency that in the end, we know that Dioneo is the Decameron's token narrator of controversy. Works Cited Migiel, Marilyn. "Beyond Seduction: A Reading of the Tale of Alibech and Rustico (Decameron III, 10)." *Italica* 75. 2 (1998): 161-77. JSTOR. org. American Association of Teachers of Italian. Web. 12 May 2013.