

# Religion and deception in boccaccio's the decameron



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The word "faith" in reference to religion emphasizes the uncertain nature of religion. By definition, if one is religious, they must trust and take a leap of faith to come to a conclusion about their gods, spirits, or idols. Faith is predicated upon the notion that there may never be undeniable proof about a certain religious figure or idea. Rather, one must believe regardless of shaky or nonexistent evidence. One must trust their religious institutions, the word of those with religious authority, or the experiences of those deemed to be trustworthy. This an idea the Boccaccio explores, tests, and violates his book, *The Decameron*, influenced by literature's movement towards secular realism. When it came to religion, people especially in the time which Boccaccio wrote, had the reflex to believe rather than refute. Through the secular lens of Boccaccio, it is clear to see that this reflex sets people up for deceit. This theme that religion causes susceptibility to delusion can be best seen in key stories of the *Decameron*: the story about Saint Ciappelletto and the story about Friar Alberto.

In *The Decameron*, after the group of travelers have gotten settled as they flee the plague that has infected Florence, they begin to tell stories. The queen of the day, Pampinea, elects Panfilo to begin with one of his stories, allowing him to speak on whichever topic he prefers. Before embarking on his story, Panfilo spends a considerable amount of time talking about God, saying "everything done by man should begin with the sacred and admirable name of Him that was the maker of all things" (Boccaccio 68). He goes on for another page or so, describing the grace and good deeds of his god, describing him as "He from whom nothing is hidden" (69). This phrase is crucial, as it sets up early on in the narrative of both the story and the

book as a whole God's inability to be tricked or deceived. This not only underscores the character's trust in God, but also prepares the reader to expect a great deal of trickery to occur throughout the book to which humans are susceptible. Panfilo continues, emphasizing that God's omniscience regardless of the motives of the supplicant or ignorance of intercessor. Leading into his story, Panfilo says that all of God's virtues " can clearly be seen in the tale I propose to relate; and I say clearly because it is concerned not with the judgement of God but with that of men" (69). By emphasizing the purity of God and inevitable inaccuracy of mankind, Boccaccio preps the reader to pay attention to how one's own humanity in a religious context can lead to deceit or wrongdoing.

Following this preface, Panfilo begins his story with a man called Ciappelletto, which means little chapel, although his name was really Cepparello which refers to a log (70). It is significant that the main character of the story's name means chapel, because we are led to dislike this character. He is described as a " mighty blasphemer of god and his saints", specifically " cheerfully assaulting or kill people with his own hands" and " losing his temper on the tiniest pretext" (71). The irony that he has a holy name and being a bad person, while also serves a comedic purpose, also serves to show Boccaccio's dislike of the church. If one imagines reading the Decameron in Italian, and the reference to a little chapel is painfully clear every time Ciappelletto's name is mentioned, especially when in a negative context. It seems as though Boccaccio is priming the reader to carry a negative sentiment towards the institutions of religion, like a little chapel.

When Ciappelletto became mortally ill, he requested the “ holiest and ablest friar” for his final confession (73). This request in itself is counterintuitive. If Ciappelletto was truly a bad man, why should he request the presence of a friar in the first place? Or, why would he ask for the holiest friar who would condemn him for his wicked life? The answers to these questions soon become clear, when Ciappelletto begins a series of false confessions which lead the friar to believe that he was in fact a deeply pure and spiritual man which contrast with his true personality. Ciappelletto’s trick quickly becomes clear as the friar believes his every word, praising “ how nobly you have lived!” (74). The false stories which Ciappelletto tells about his life are bold. His “ sins” are so overwhelmingly perfect; he says he is a virgin (74), that he fasted regularly (74), that he only loses his temper when people commit blasphemy (76), that he has never lied in the entire duration of his life (77), and so on. As good of a liar that Ciappelletto might be, it is hard to believe that a holy and rational man that we assume the friar to be would believe claims so brazen as these. It is even harder to believe when we remember that the friar practices in Burgundy, whose people are described as “ thoroughly bad and unprincipled set of people” (70).

In order to understand why the friar was so eager to believe Ciappelletto and preach his saintly reputation one must recall the aftermath of Ciappelletto’s death. People were so excited about Saint Ciappelletto that “ everyone thronged round the body”(80) at the church of the friar. People even “ began to make votive offerings and to decorate the chapel with figures made of wax” (81). The church at which Ciappelletto was buried, the church of the friar, gained a great deal of fame. With fame comes people, with people

comes increased reputation, and when the reputation of a church increases, so does the amount of offerings and money the church receives. This is where Boccaccio's theme about the susceptibility to deception that religion induces becomes clear. The friar may very well be the "holiest and ablest friar" that anybody could hope for (73). Regardless, he so desperately wanted Ciappelletto to be a saint, knowing the fame that a saint at his church might bring, that he tricked himself into believing Ciappelletto's audacious lies. His faith made him gullible to Ciappelletto's trick.

The gullible behavior of the friar is not forgotten on the fourth day, when Pampinea prefaces her story by stating that she aims to "illustrate the extraordinary and perverse hypocrisy of the members of religious orders" (343). Her accusation continues, saying that "they are pulling a passive confidence trick, of which they themselves, if they really believe what they say, are the earliest victims" (343). This sentence directly applies to the friar in the story about Ciappelletto, who allowed himself to be tricked into thinking he was in the presence of a saint, and whose religious authority impressed this lie upon people far and wide. It is also important to note that Pampinea applies the blame to the friar and those in charge of religious institutions, not religion itself. In fact, she looks to God, without the interference of a human or institution, to "punish [the friar's] lies" (343).

Pampinea's story also deals with a friar, however her friar is more forward about his intention to deceive. She introduces a "crooked" (343) man named Berto della Massa, who changed his name and outward persona to "the most Catholic man who ever lived" (344), Friar Alberto. He tricks a beautiful and vain woman named Monna Lisetta into sleeping with him by <https://assignbuster.com/religion-and-deception-in-boccaccios-the-decameron/>

saying that the Angel Gabriel has fallen in love with her, so he'd like to use the Friar's earthly body to fulfil his desire (345-347). Whenever he wishes, the Friar Alberto visits her in his angel disguise, and Monna Lisetta happily obliges.

Though the audience is not meant to perceive the lady Lisetta in the most positive light, she is introduced as "frivolous and scatterbrained" (344), we also must remember that she is a religious woman. She went to be confessed by the Friar who was held to be a one of the best friars available to her. Not only that, but her confession was thorough, as evidenced when Boccaccio writes that "she had only gotten through a fraction of her business, kneeling all the time at his feet[...]" (345). She was also particularly devoted to the Angel Gabriel, "she never failed to light a fourpenny candle in his honour" (347). This religious trait of hers is crucial when it comes to the deception she fell for at the hands of Friar Alberto. She had no reason not to trust Friar Alberto, nor did she have any reason to doubt that the Angel Gabriel might be in love with her, as she was devoted to him in particular. In fact, her vanity and devotion provided her great motivation to believe the impossible idea that an angel had fallen for her. She greatly wanted to be special and holy, so she allowed herself, just like the friar in the previous story, to be tricked. The Friar used his religious authority, knowing the expectations of Catholicism to make judgements of faith without irrefutable evidence, to deceive an innocent albeit "half-wit" (345) woman.

The first half of this story echoes the previous story discussed. The distrust of religious institutions, like Ciappelletto "little chapel", and understanding a <https://assignbuster.com/religion-and-deception-in-boccaccios-the-decameron/>

friar's humanity allow this new story, that is so outwardly judgemental towards Catholicism, to take place. Different from the story about Saint Ciappelletto, though, the conclusion of this story is much more violent. When it is revealed that somebody disguised as the Angel Gabriel had been sleeping with Monna Lisetta, Friar Alberto is forced to flee. After a series of events, a man described exclusively as "honest" (351) tricks the Friar into walking through the town square on a leash covered in honey and feathers (352). Friar Alberto is recognized and ridiculed, the townspeople "jeered at him in unison, calling him by the foulest names and shouting the filthiest abuse" (352). In this story, justice is served, and the Friar is punished for his deception. It is important to note, though, that his punishment, although administered by an "honest" man, was dependent upon deception. Friar Alberto believed him in his desperation. This small part of the story is an important example of deception because it proves that people are deceived not because the trick played upon them was impossible to refute, but because they need to believe. This notion parallels and supports that those who want to believe, like people do with religion, are likely to be deceived.

The story ends when the other friars of the town came to save Friar Alberto by covering him with a cape and escorting him away (353). They then lock him in his room, and "there he is believed to have eked out the rest of his days in wretchedness and misery" (353). The friars did not publicly condemn him, nor did they kick him out of their church. Though he is not returned to his former glory, he is not convicted nor is he held as an example. The friar's silence about the matter of his deception serves as an acceptance of his actions. Their responsibility for the outcome of the narrative is emphasized in

the final line story, “[m]ay it please God that a similar fate should befall each and every one of his fellows” (353). It becomes clear that “his fellows” refers to the other friars in the story. By using the term “fellows” rather than something more specific, this condemnation can also be applied all other priests and friars who lie, deceive, and pretend to know the word of God. This is crucial because it solidifies the assertion that it is not just particular instances of trickery that happen to coincide with religion. Boccaccio clarifies that the institution of religion allows people to be tricked and makes believes susceptible to delusion.

That the word of God must pass through a human who is not immune to sin or mistakes makes instances like these inevitable. People are willing to believe because the very foundation of their religion is based on faith rather than proof. With this in mind, it becomes clear why it is easy and common to lie by preying on religious beliefs. This proven in the story about Saint Ciappelletto and the friar who wanted so badly for Ciappelletto to be a saint that he believed his outrageous lies. His point is further complicated in the story about Friar Alberto. By proving that not just supplicants can trick and intercessor’s believe, but a friar too can use his influence to deceive. This instance is, in some ways, more dangerous, as friars are supposed to be trusted. In each of these stories, Boccaccio refrains from criticizing spirituality as a whole. Rather, as emphasized by the condemnation of friars in the Friar Alberto story, Boccaccio’s criticism is directed towards the institutions, the friars, and chapel, (Ciappelletto). In showing his that religion and Catholic institutions make people susceptible to delusion, Boccaccio establishes the humanist theory secularism. This turn towards humanism,



and therefore secularism, became crucial in the history of literature and academics. Through this secular lens, it is clear to see Boccaccio's criticism of the reflex to believe in religious matters unquestionably, and how the practice of religion of the time and norms of religious institutions sets people up to be deceived