

Boccaccio's pre-renaissance implications on morality and censorship in the decame...

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Writing in Italy during the 14th century, Boccaccio is caught in the historical dichotomy between the blind adherence to the Church that permeated the Middle Ages and the emerging Humanism that characterized the Renaissance. It is clear that Boccaccio chooses to look forward, as he embraces frivolity and gives scathing portrayals of churchmen and women. He brings up the issue of obscenity in his epilogue anticipating a response of moral objection to his stories. While Boccaccio does acknowledge in his epilogue that his stories can be perceived as amoral, he ultimately argues that morality is not the purpose of his book, and that readers can avoid being offended. Nevertheless, Boccaccio does uphold certain values in his short stories, namely a personal morality of action and the significance of trifles and humor in life. Boccaccio's epilogue is essentially a defense against the charge of obscenity in his work. He first claims the instances of obscenity are slight and do not make the work immoral. His occasional " trifling indiscretion of speech," he argues, is similar to using words that can have amoral connotations such as " mortar" and " sausage," a practice which he states is common in speech. He also attacks those who might have a problem with his work, calling them " precious prudes, who weigh words rather than deeds, and are more concerned to appear, than to be, good" (005). This is significant because he attacks those who say his stories have immoral values by claiming the attackers may be more immoral. He does this by saying that readers who are offended are superficial people who are more concerned with the appearance of morality than they are with true moral action. It is difficult not to consider that this may be an attack specifically on the church, given his numerous stories of religious people

leading privately sinful lives. He also compares his work to wine, fire, arms, and even the bible, all of which are good for humans but also bad “ being put to a bad purpose, may work manifold mischief. And so, I say, it is with my stories” (012). He then offers a few pragmatic and perhaps superficial ways to avoid the problem, noting that those stories that may be offensive to a particular reader can simply be skipped since the stories are independent and disconnected. And “ none may be misled, each bears on its brow the epitome of that which it hides within its bosom” (019). Until this point it seems that Boccaccio mainly tells his audience that the obscenity is not important and can be avoided. Now he shifts to express the purpose of his work, contrasting it with more serious pursuits and claiming that his audience is comprised of ladies passing time. There is also evidence at this point that his defense is shallow in the sense that he does not actually believe simply skipping an offending story makes his work unoffending. In this way, the epilogue can be seen as formality for Boccaccio and a chance for him to subtly name those who he thinks are actually immoral. He says his work was not written seriously nor intended to be (ironically) part of scholarly study, rather “’twas to none but leisured ladies that I made proffer of my pains” (021). It is quite interesting that he states his work has no intellectual purpose and is only intended to be read by ladies to pass time. Boccaccio apparently does not mind having lowering his standards, as he does not consider a purpose of passing ladies' time to be intellectually degrading or insulting. However the reader does get a sense that Boccaccio is providing a snide response when he takes his claimed lack of seriousness in the work to a comic extreme:” I affirm that I am not of gravity; on the

contrary I am so light that I float on the surface of the water; and considering that the sermons which the friars make, when they would chide folk for their sins, are to-day, for the most part, full of jests and merry conceits, and drolleries, I deemed that the like stuff would not ill beseem my stories, written, as they were, to banish women's dumps. However, if thereby they should laugh too much, they may be readily cured thereof by the Lament of Jeremiah, the Passion of the Saviour, or the Complaint of the Magdalen" (023-024). Moreover, this is the first instance in which Boccaccio portrays people in the Church as potentially immoral. His defense feels superficial through his exaggeration and comedy, and there may be a lack of sincerity implied by telling the reader to skip the obscene parts and not take his work seriously. And his reversal of these accusations can hint that he does take some issue with the idea of morality. We get the sense that while Boccaccio outwardly claims this is a frivolous work, he may attach a kind of value to his stories. This forces us to examine the specific stories for indications that Boccaccio did have a regard for not only morality but also had a purpose for his work other than a trivial pastime. First, there is evidence that Boccaccio does value a base kind of morality in terms of human action in a few of the tales. A number of stories have people who seem to either be rewarded for leading moral lives or punished in the end for leading amoral lives. These characters are rewarded or punished in their actual life, and not the afterlife. In the Second Tale of the Fourth Day, a brother by the name of Alberto receives public humiliation and is permanently confined after seducing a lady under the guise of being an angel. The Ninth Tale of the Fifth Day exemplifies this kind of morality based on action. In this tale, a gentleman

named Federigo falls in love with a beautiful, wealthy lady named Monna Giovanna. He spends his savings unsuccessfully courting her, until after he has given up and is living in the country, she seeks as a favor his beloved falcon for her ailing son. Federigo, unaware of this request and having nothing else to serve her, has already served his falcon to Giovanna for breakfast. Eventually and as a result of his unwavering benevolence toward her, Giovanna marries Federigo to honor him. The morality that Federigo illustrates is unwavering despite his lowered circumstances, and he is in the end rewarded for this morality. It is clear that this morality is not a result of faith or piety, but rather simple ethical action. Similarly, Giovanna, as justification for marrying the poor Federigo, states “ I had rather have a man without wealth than wealth without a man” (043). This stratification echoes Boccaccio's statements attacking those “ who weigh words rather than deeds, and are more concerned to appear, than to be, good” (005) discussed earlier, allowing us to assume that Boccaccio is indeed a proponent of this kind of morality. Moreover, Boccaccio tends to portray many of his characters that are part of the church as immoral by their exploitation of their status of the church. Brother Alberto, as previously mentioned, uses his status as a priest to seduce a woman. In addition, he makes his mistress believe that the Archangel Gabriel is in love with her and is coming to her through his body. In this sense he directly uses figures of the Church to help him sin. The First Tale of the First Day is another important example of a sinful character that exploits the church. Ser Ceperello is a scoundrel who leads a corrupt and sinful life, only to give his last confession as such a virtuous man that he is ironically revered and becomes a saint. Although

Boccaccio does say that Ceperello “ ought rather to be in the hands of the devil in hell than in Paradise” (090), it appears that Ceperello suffered no earthly consequences for his actions, and is moreover prayed to by humans who believe he can perform miracles. This manipulation of the Church system indicates that Boccaccio views the Church as superficial and more importantly that reverence in the Church does not necessarily mean actual morality. In this sense, morality for Boccaccio is not centered around the Church, but rather the individual. Yet Boccaccio's morality does not come through in all of his tales. Most of the stories, in fact, do not end with a heavy moral retribution in terms of a reward or punishment for actions. Rather, they emphasize a trivial aspect of life or end in a comedic note. And perhaps the two morality and frivolity are not mutually exclusive for Boccaccio. We see this with the sainthood of Ceperello or the marriage of Giovanna and Federigo, ironic conclusions which can certainly be seen as entertaining. Other stories feature sexual impropriety with no moral qualms or ramifications, such as the Sixth Tale of the Ninth Day, where a fellow and his friend sleep with the wrong women and boast to the wrong man. This almost leads to disaster but rather comically resolves with a cover-up account. In stories like these, it seems that Boccaccio's sole purpose is to entertain. In conclusion, Boccaccio addresses morality in *The Decameron* first by deflecting claims that his work is amoral in the epilogue, then by giving the reader a sense that he values human action as a kind of morality more than the corrupt veils of Church morality. But in the end, addressing morality is not the central issue of the work. Recognizing the importance of escapism and frivolity is the central issue. This not only matches his original

description of the work as a pastime but also matches the nature of the framework that the stories are being told in: escapism. As a literal escape from the plague, the ten men and women flee the city and isolate themselves. They then figuratively escape the wait by telling fictitious stories that make up *The Decameron*. So these stories are not only intended to be entertaining and humorous to the audience, but also to the nine others listening to the tale within the context of the work. In this sense, the work lauds the frivolity of man as an important aspect of life, and Boccaccio promotes this value by writing stories that are for the most part purely entertaining. Both this value and the kind of morality apparent in the tales parallel the Humanism movement perfectly.