

Giovanni boccaccio's decameron essay sample



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During the fourteenth century, both in literature and art, there emerged a new fidelity to nature and to personal experience in the everyday world. This close, objective attention to human society and social interaction is evident in the lively vernacular tales that make up Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron, written in Florence around 1350. The framework for the Decameron is provided by the plague itself: Eager to escape the contagion, seven young women and three young men retreat to a villa in the suburbs of Florence, where, to pass the time, each tells a story on each of ten days.

The stories, designed to distract the listeners from the horrors of the pandemic, are in effect, amusing secular entertainments which Boccaccio intended for women of leisure. They do provide the modern reader insight, however, into the social concerns and urban affairs pertaining to men and women in fourteenth century Renaissance Europe. One of several issues Boccaccio elaborates upon in his Decameron recounts the differences in the relationship between men and women in fourteenth century society. Clearly, Boccaccio views women as the weaker sex, both physically and mentally.

In the preface of the Decameron, Boccaccio goes into detail about how men and women differ in their ways of dealing with heartache and love, especially the pain many felt after losing loved ones to the plague. He expresses his opinion that men are stronger with regards to their emotions and do not need consolation as much as women because they have numerous ways of removing painful thoughts. Women, on the contrary, "are less able than men to bear these discomforts" Boccaccio writes, because they are usually confined to a bedroom where they have nothing to distract their minds from dwelling on the sorrow.

Another example which unmistakably illustrates Boccaccio's view that women are the weaker sex is found in the introduction of the Decameron, when the seven noble women are conversing in the church. Here, Filomena says, "... Remember that we are all women, and any young girl can tell you that women do not know how to reason in a group when they are without the guidance of some man who knows how to control them. We are fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, timid, and fearful..." (Bondella and Musa p. 74).

Then Boccaccio's character, Elissa, further supports this position with her statement, " Men are truly the leaders of women and without their guidance, our actions rarely end successfully. " Moreover, women in Renaissance society were not considered capable of participating in duties outside the home. In the third day, ninth story of Boccaccio's Decameron, an example of the so called inadequacy of women as legitimate professionals remains clear. In this story, Giletta goes to cure the King of France of a tumor, and the King thereby dismisses her competence as a medical doctor because she is a woman.

Boccaccio writes, " How can a young women like this know how to do what the best doctors in the world couldn't" (p. 110), implying that she did not have the intelligence to heal the King because of her sex. This story further demonstrates the view held by both the author of the Decameron and men in general during this period that the woman's role was in the home, not in the public life. However controversial this viewpoint may seem in modern twenty first century, men in fourteenth century Europe did not share the opinion that women could successfully participate in society.

Furthermore, Boccaccio also presents to the reader insight into the matter of marriages and dowries, which was an important aspect of Renaissance society. From the Decameron, the reader catches a glimpse of the fourteenth century European's unprecedented preoccupation with differences in class, gender, and the importance of the family. On account of the magnitude Europeans of Boccaccio's era placed on one's position in society, marriages were often prearranged by the parents, sometimes from infancy, with formal written agreements which indicated the dowry size.

Men and women generally did not marry for love, especially those who were wealthy; conversely, families joined in marriage for the sole purpose of improving their social status. A classic example found in the Decameron is the third day, ninth story about Giletta. As a reward for curing the King of France of his tumor, Giletta is granted her request to wed Beltramo di Rossiglione. According to the story, Beltramo was adamantly opposed to this betrothal because Giletta was not of equal social status.

Even though he marries Giletta against his will, he does not acknowledge her as his wife by reason of her status. Instead, he travels to Florence to join in the fighting, and falls in love with a poor noble woman. Due to her meager financial status, she does not have a dowry in which to wed. While Beltramo is away in Florence, his wife tends to his estate and brings everything to perfect order. In the end, Giletta impersonates her husband's love interest and bears him two sons; as a result, Beltramo finally accepts her as his wife.

Interestingly, Boccaccio illustrates the divisions in social status and how they pertain to marriage, as well as the woman's role in the marriage to be

completely submissive to her husband and bear him many children, thus keeping the family lineage intact. In addition to the importance placed on social status and prearranged marriages, Boccaccio's Decameron also reveals much about the manner in which men expected women to behave in society. Without question, men in Renaissance society thought it essential for women to be absolutely obedient and subservient in every way.

Examining Boccaccio's final narrative (tenth day, tenth story) allows one to explore this idea in greater detail. In this story, vassals to the Marquisate of Sanluzzo request him to find a wife in order that he is not left without an heir. He chooses to marry one of his peasants whom he considered very polite. When he arrives at her small home on the day of the wedding, he asks the peasant girl if she would "always try to please him, and would she never become angry over anything he said or did and if she would always be obedient..." (p. 154).

Boccaccio's story of the patient and submissive wife is one of amusement to the modern reader, however, one gains enlightenment as to the ways of thinking of men in Boccaccio's day. To be sure, women in Renaissance Europe did not enjoy the same advantages and status socially speaking as their male counterparts; however, as Boccaccio vividly depicts throughout his Decameron, both women and men experienced a high level of sexuality therefore implying a loosening of morals in Renaissance society.

The fourth day and first story in Boccaccio's Decameron is one of numerous stories which depict sensuality among men and women in this era. A story of tragedy, Boccaccio tells of a woman who becomes a widow and later desires

to satisfy her sexual appetite. She observes various men and eventually falls in love with a man of humble birth, with whom she takes to her bed regularly until her father discovers her sin. The father has the lover killed, and because of this, the daughter commits suicide. Boccaccio shows that not only men of this time, but women as well were full of passion and lust.

The tale of Madonna Filippa further demonstrates Boccaccio's view that women were passionate creatures. Caught in the act of committing adultery by her husband, Madonna Filippa was sent before a judge. She candidly confesses that she has a lover; however, she bitterly protests the city ordinance that serves a double standard of justice. Filippa's proposal that women should not waste the passions unclaimed by their husbands but, rather, be allowed to enjoy the surplus with others rings with good humored defiance.

She boldly defends her right to sexual independence, and fearlessly challenges and exploits fortune to serve her own designs. Without a doubt, Boccaccio illustrates his point that women of the Renaissance were not old maids; rather, they were lively, and passionate, and had an array of sexual desires and needs. Even though Boccaccio wrote his fictional work as a means of distraction from the terrors of the plague, the Decameron is filled with illustrations of Renaissance life and gives us clues as to the important issues of that day.

His anthology of classic tales includes a variety of types including comic, tragic, fantastic, realistic, moral and sensual. Realistically conceived, Boccaccio's characters enlighten us to the way men and women of

fourteenth century Europe lived their lives. Without question, Boccaccio's Decameron is the great Renaissance story bank, fascinating to both the literary doctinaire as well as the average reader setting sail on the great sea of stories.