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Love Thy Neighbor: Queer Acceptance in *The Decameron*

The tenth story of day five of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which Pietro takes a wife to hide his homosexuality and, when he discovers his wife's affair, agrees to let it continue on the condition that he be allowed to share his wife's lover (169), displays rapid inversions of fortune for Pietro, his wife, and her lover that culminate in three-way happiness through shared knowledge of secrets. The story involves two social transgressions—Pietro's homosexuality and his wife's infidelity—that connect the queerness of Boccaccio's encouragement of pleasure to the other social queernesses of sexuality and gender. Dioneo, the storyteller, presents euphemisms and irony to exemplify a total resolution through pleasure, giving legitimacy to pleasure as a practical tool. Boccaccio generalizes Dioneo's theme, using the story's characters and Dioneo himself as allegories to encourage the reader to accept queerness as a method for societal betterment.

Dioneo's euphemisms for homosexuality and sex strongly characterize Pietro and his wife and highlight how these two aspects drive the story. During the wife's introduction, Dioneo mentions that she "would have preferred to have two husbands rather than one" (169-70). From the start, her main trait is her high libido, which not only becomes the motivator for her affair but also caricatures the existence of human sexuality to convey the consequences of its suppression. Moreover, Dioneo endears the reader to her sexuality, having her refer to sex as "fun and games" (170). He shears sex out of its taboo coat and into a comfortable spotlight as an enjoyable

activity. However, Pietro and homosexuality are not afforded such liberal treatment. Dioneo describes Pietro in othering terms—"wicked" (174); "pervert" (175)—and narrates from his wife's perspective, from which Pietro is a villain. Dioneo's positional description "[Pietro's] inclinations led him elsewhere rather than in her direction" (170) evokes the image of Pietro literally turning his back on his wife's natural needs and depicting homosexuality as a bane to pleasure. Throughout the exposition, Dioneo establishes homosexuality as a foil to sexuality, Pietro as the antagonist to his protagonist wife.

However, through ironic humor in the rest of the story, Dioneo explores how to reconcile these opposing forces of homosexuality and sexuality by their mutual utility for pleasure. When Pietro's wife decides to condemn Ercolano's wife's affair to deflect suspicion from herself (173), the reader already knows, from the story description and foreshadowing, that her lover will accidentally reveal himself. This situational irony evokes recognition of the inevitability of discovery of clandestine things. Right as she has found a solution for her sex deprivation, it is at risk of collapse. However, this wrongdoing at which the reader expects Pietro to rage actually brings about a more lasting solution, precisely because the cat has escaped the bag: Pietro accepts her infidelity because it aligns with another purpose, namely his own desire (175). Pietro's wife convinces herself that she is justified in cheating on her husband by telling herself, "I will merely be breaking the laws of marriage, while he breaks those of Nature as well" (170). Boccaccio invokes the fallacy that two wrongs do not make a right, and foreshadows that the wife's fortune will fall because of the fallacy. By the end of the story, the reader's expectation has been subverted, as it is exactly the two wrongs mentioned by Pietro's wife that make the right. The greatest irony of the story is that it uses the social wrongnesses of infidelity and homosexuality to create a comic ending. The structure of this story aligns clearly with the day's

theme of misfortune in love becoming happiness (142), which is itself an ironic turn. It is tragic that Pietro does not have sex with his wife, and it is happy that each of them has sex in the end. Both the tragedy and the happy ending are achieved by the sexual desires of Pietro and his wife, giving social purpose to pleasure. As Dioneo transforms the social transgressions of the story into a mutually pleasing arrangement that turns the audience in favor of both Pietro and his wife, Boccaccio transforms pleasure from a crime into simply an aspect of humanity, evaluated not for its strangeness but for its capacity to facilitate happiness.

Thus, Boccaccio proposes the *queer solution*, writing Pietro and his wife as allegories for two socially marginalized classes, and the wife's lover as a recognition of shared humanity that allows mutual betterment. The wife feels pressured to have sex because she is young and beautiful (170), articulating the broader social pressure for women's youths not to be wasted with virginity. An old lady at church tells her this, the stigma personified, and convinces her to pursue sex outside of her marriage (170-1). Yet, later, when the affair of Ercolano's wife is a source of negative disruption, Pietro's wife throws Ercolano's under the bus (173), externalizing her own guilt that has just been barely suppressed by the old lady. At once, Pietro's wife is both encouraged by society to have sex outside of her marriage and sexually confined by the social criminalization of infidelity. Boccaccio implies that the true purpose of the dissonant stigmas together is to make women feel guilty, which primes them to perpetuate the stigmas onto other women. Thus, women's sexuality is kept taboo, and women are kept marginalized. Pietro's wife is displayed as a lower class that is used as a tool, by means of guilt, to uphold the very system that suppresses it. As a representative of the other of Boccaccio's treated classes, Pietro distinguishes himself from most of the other men in *The Decameron*: he is not completely overcome with anger upon discovering the affair, but does "nothing worse than abuse her

verbally" and is "delighted to be holding such a good-looking youth by the hand" (174). Boccaccio characterizes Pietro not just as a man but specifically as a homosexual, less aggressive and more willing to compromise than other men. By the end of the story, Boccaccio turns Pietro from the villain into an accomplice in pleasure and reveals the plight of homosexuals as similar to that of women in not being allowed to openly pursue sexual desire. In fact, the recharacterization of homosexuality is foreshadowed immediately after Pietro returns home and describes Ercolano's wife's affair: "our supper was disrupted … I didn't even get to taste it" (172). The frustration of foregoing his supper directly analogizes to his wife's frustration of foregoing sex upon marriage to a homosexual and Pietro's frustration of foregoing sex because homosexuality is condemned. The climax makes explicit the union of homosexuals and women as the wife's lover brings Pietro and his wife together. A new supper, shared between the three and completed in peace (175), reconciles the previous frustrations of the husband and wife. Through each other, they find a reprieve from social pressures: both get to have sex with other men with the approval of their spouses. The lover breaks the cycle of class division by revealing that women and homosexuals have more in common by their oppression than in difference, and that they can advance toward mutual benefit by working together rather than against each other and themselves by perpetuating the oppressive system.

Boccaccio presents Dioneo as a model on which the reader can practice applying queer acceptance and see its results. On the first day, Boccaccio marks Dioneo as an anomaly in the well-defined structure of *The Decameron*, allowing him not only a fixed place in the storytelling order but complete freedom from the theme of the day (43). Dioneo is queered from the beginning. Furthermore, many of his stories treat hardships visited upon women by men: on the second day, a woman abducted by a man (83); the third and ninth, a girl sexually taken

advantage of by a monk (109, 292); the fifth, Pietro's wife hindered by her husband (169); the tenth, a woman cruelly deceived for her husband's amusement (331). These discussions symbolizing real struggles of women signal that Dioneo holds not only sympathy for women, but empathy; he understands and even identifies with them. Dioneo is queer not only for his place in the storytelling routine, but for his femininity. In the introduction to the story of Pietro and Pietro's wife, Dioneo calls out the reader's passivity, urging them to extract the moral rather than take the story as mere entertainment, saying that to read without takeaway is to "pluck the roses, but leave the thorns alone"—to refuse to acknowledge the real impact of queer rejection in the reader's own life and to leave queer people to their "ill-fated, degenerate behavior" (169). The story is Dioneo's cry for acceptance, and Boccaccio's imperative to save Dioneo and queer people from the terrible fate of dissatisfaction that befell Pietro and his wife before the resolution.

The Decameron is a first step to queer acceptance, convincing Pietro and his wife to love each other, and the reader to love those who are queer to society, starting with Dioneo. Boccaccio dispels the radicalism of queerness by placing it in the built space of *The Decameron*, secretly building a queer character in Dioneo and then suddenly wrenching the reader from a preconceived notion of queer rejection onto a new conceptualization of queerness intended to better the human experience. The work actually ropes the reader themself into queerness by making sexuality commonplace for the *brigata* and the reader. Worldbuilding is essential to communicating queer narratives to those who make the narratives queer: it invites the reader to love queer characters and become queer themself, and then generalizes that to acceptance of others.

Works Cited

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron (Norton Critical Editions)*. Translated and edited by Wayne A. Rebhorn, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016.