THE TRADITIONAL AND THE UNCONVENTIONAL: BOCCACCIO’S
REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE DECAMERON

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The Traditional and the Unconventional: Boccaccio’s Representation of Women

in the Decameron

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I dedicate this thesis to my nana and my uncle, may you both rest in peace. Thanks for all your support, love, and encouragement. You both will forever be remembered.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Traditional and the Unconventional: Boccaccio’s Representation of Women in the Decameron

by

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This M.A. thesis is an attempt to elucidate medieval representations of women by analyzing medieval notions of female sexuality. Giovanni Boccaccio’s the Decameron can help distinguish sexual identities through its representation of sexual behavior. My thesis argues that women were kept in traditional roles but admired because they were unconventional. In Chapter 2, the Decameron is analyzed to demonstrate the facets of Boccaccio’s conventional women: women as possessions, women as meek and controllable, women as naïve, women engaged in sexual affairs, women as greedy and manipulative, women as lovers of the clergy, women as victims of abuse, and young women as unsatisfied brides. Chapter 3 discusses the four traits that Boccaccio found admirable in women: their willingness to do anything for love, their admirable qualities, their pursuit of passion, and their faithfulness in love. Historical sources analyzed were Boccaccio’s De Mulieribus Claris (Famous Women), Dino Compagni’s the Chronicle of Florence, the letters of Alessandra Strozzi and the religious writings of Angela of Foligno and Saint Catherine of Siena. These sources suggest that men valued women for their beauty and wealth, associated them with nature, considered them meek and submissive, and thought of women as emotional and as causing fights and war. A textual analysis of the Decameron is important because it illuminates medieval constructions of women and describes female sexuality. A comparison of Boccaccio’s conventional and unconventional views of women to those of his contemporaries is significant and necessary in order to rethink the negative tone of much modern scholarship. Approaching the Decameron from a historical perspective helps bridge the gap between literary and historical sources.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

In Lombardy a prominent convent is recognized for its “piety and holiness.” Among the nuns of this famed convent is a young woman, Isabetta, of “noble birth” and “phenomenal beauty.” Isabetta falls madly in love with a “handsome youth” who serves as a companion to her visitor and soon the young man finds an “opportunity” to visit her in the convent. The other nuns of the convent become aware of the young lovers’ trysts. During one of the lovers’ sexual encounters, the nuns decide to tell the abbess of Isabetta’s indiscretion. Yet the abbess is involved in a love affair of her own with a priest. Upon hearing the commotion of the nuns, the abbess hurries to dress and mistakenly wears the priest’s pants on her head instead of her veil. The abbess confronts Isabetta and “addresses her” in “opprobrious terms” and claims that the nun’s “disgusting and scandalous” behavior will “defile the holiness and honor” of the convent. The young nun advises the Reverend Mother to “tie” her “bonnet-strings” and it is clear to the abbess what Isabetta is referring to and she changes her speech. The abbess claims that it is “impossible to resist the lusts of the flesh” and advises the rest of the nuns to “feel free” to take a lover. After everything is
settled Isabetta and the Reverend Mother return to bed, one with her young man and the other with her priest.¹

An analysis of the *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio can illuminate medieval attitudes regarding women and sexuality. Boccaccio’s work is crucial because it helps to distinguish sexual identities through its representation of sexual behavior. Such a textual analysis is useful because it can demonstrate the way that men thought of women and their sexuality. According to Boccaccio, women were kept in traditional roles but admired because they were also unconventional.

**WOMEN’S SEXUALITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

Sexuality in the Middle Ages was usually thought of in terms of one’s actions toward another. Medieval Christian theologians defined sexuality in terms of behavior imposed on men and women. Individuals in the Middle Ages viewed sexuality as something someone “does unto another.”² In the Middle Ages “sexual identities” did exist but differed from modern sexual identities.³ Medieval sexual identities were based on sexual behavior and sexual conduct was perceived as a means for expressing and experiencing sexuality. Individuals in the Middle Ages dealt with the complexities of sexuality by determining and imposing acceptable social roles on men and women. These social roles were strict and although there were discrepancies the testing of the boundaries was not approved.


³ Karras, 26-27.
Men were given the active role in which they penetrated women and by default women were given the passive role. Passivity was also meant to dictate a woman’s social role. The idea that sexuality was comprised of active and passive partners was imposed on both men and women. Gender “was fundamental” in the organization of sexuality. The active partner was the person performing the action and the passive partner was the one to receive the action.

Historically most medieval Christian writers connected women to evil and the devil. Women were viewed as more lustful than men and “prostitution fostered the connection between female sexuality to venality and sin.” Furthermore, Christian theologians augmented hatred towards women because they portrayed Eve as the reason for the loss of Paradise and for the introduction of evil and sin to humanity. Superstition in the western Church intensified the association of women with demons. Early church figures like St. Augustine believed in angelic and demonic corporeality because they believed that the fall of angels had been due to a “sexual offense.” Christian Inquisitors and theologians desired to assuage the anxieties of the Christian faith and end disbelief in the spiritual world and in order to do so they needed to make the concept of demons taking human form real. Dyan Elliot claims that persons in the medieval era conceived of “women as the fallen body.” By

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4 Karras, 26-27.
6 Dyan Elliot, Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 128.
7 Elliot, 4.
their very nature women were more susceptible to evil and demons. Christians believed the body was divine but it was the flesh that corrupted the purity of the body. Women as representation of perdition and by their very nature as sexual led to the medieval construction of the witch. According to Walter Stephens, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was “written to prove that demons” because of their “sexual copulation with witches were real.”

Women were portrayed as being more lustful than men and because of their sexuality women were responsible for the corruption and temptation of men. Christian theologians utilized the Bible to connect women’s sexual appetites to sin because it led to Eve’s disobedience in Paradise. Eve was condemned for her desire to taste the fruit, a desire so strong that she disregarded a divine order from her Creator. Women’s sexual desires were sometimes even regarded as “monstrous” and they were depicted as “bloodsuckers.”

Medieval medical writers viewed women as “vampiristic” because they “constantly suck out men’s life-blood” during sexual intercourse. Many Christians believed in the succubus, a demon that drained the semen of men at night. The belief in the succubus gave way to the conceptualization of the medieval witch.

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11 Bildhauer, 105.
Yet there was an alternative way of looking at women in the Middle Ages. Chastity, viewed from a religious and social perspective, was considered the ideal sexual identity for women. At the same time, its role was problematic. Through the story of the nuns of Lombardy, it is obvious how elusive the medieval concept of chastity was. The historian Sarah Salih places chastity “within the context of virginity” because a woman’s virginity could have both “religious and secular facets.”¹² Virginity was seen as a “holy state and way of life” because it was an “imitation of Christ” and in the world after the Fall, it was through virginity that the “flesh was transformed into the vessel of the divine.”¹³ Furthermore, it reflected a spectrum of meanings and representations: it represented “a stage in a woman’s life, a bodily state, a social identity, a religious vocation, and it could either be temporary or permanent.”¹⁴ According to Salih, chastity had an “additional meaning” as being “sexually appropriate” because it also referred to the good of marital state.¹⁵

Nuns were thought of performing the ideal sexual identity: chastity. Women who took vows abstained from sexual intercourse. The behavior of enclosed women, nuns, was important because the chastity of nuns served as a status symbol. Chastity elevated nuns and demonstrated by their modest conduct the model by which to live one’s life. Vows of chastity were an expression and experience of sexuality as well as a sexual behavior, and therefore, chastity was a sexual identity and sexual role traditionally applied to medieval

¹³ Salih, 21.  
¹⁴ Salih, 16.  
¹⁵ Salih, 16.
women. Nuns with their virginity as a “religious marker” became “united with other virgins” and they also became part of the monastic community and were separated from the “sexual individual” that was the “marker of secular life.”16 Nuns, enclosed within their convents, were supposed to remain virginal by avoiding sexual liaisons.

Nevertheless, the sexual identity of nuns was also problematic because there were nuns who broke their vows by having sexual intercourse. The problem with nuns was twofold: in one aspect each nun was an individual and in another, nuns as a whole represented their religious community. Nuns did not always live the ideal way of life. The predicament was that it was difficult for nuns to solely identify with their monastic identity. The deeper meaning of chastity was crucial for nuns because not all nuns entered the convent at a very young age and some nuns were widows who were sexually experienced. Nuns were women and they also had sexual needs that could not always be ignored or controlled.

Heloise, a twelfth-century abbess of the Oratory of the Paraclete, in a letter to Abelard, a renowned medieval French philosopher and logician, described the division between the inner self and the physical body. Heloise was secretly married to Abelard but they were separated due to tragedy. She wrote that “men called [her] chaste” but that she was indeed a “hypocrite” because “her pious demeanor concealed sexual desires.”17 Furthermore, Heloise argued that a nun was without a doubt a “disciplined virginal body” but that the “spiritual

16 Salih, 124, 126.
17 Salih, 123.
turmoil could breach a disciplined body.”\textsuperscript{18} The arguments that Heloise made were important because she personally knew how it felt to discipline the physical body and experience inner chaos that could taint the chastity of a nun. Chastity was regarded as an outcome of sexual conduct and it was of utmost importance that nuns remained closed off from secular life and lay persons.

Another possibility for women’s sexuality in the Middle Ages, both within and outside the cloister was in homoeroticism. Eroticism between women offered women the opportunity for women to explore their sexuality with one another without losing their virginity or a cause for transgression as long as it remained hidden. Yet female eroticism with other women was troubling for medieval society because sexuality was realized as an action done by a man to a woman and same-sex relationships between women did not fit within this model. The historian Helmut Puff provides the example of Katherina, a woman who was executed in the fifteenth century for the crime of sexual intercourse with other women. Puff argues that Katherina was put to death because she was seen as a “man in both behavior and physique.”\textsuperscript{19} Katherina used a dildo to penetrate her lover and she had a lot of sexual stamina. According to the medieval construction of sexuality, the active partner had to be a man who was performing an action onto the passive partner, a woman. Katherina defied this model of sexuality because she actively penetrated her lover. Katherina was an

\textsuperscript{18} Salih, 123.

example of the fear that men and women in the Middle Ages had in regards to women and their sexuality.

For most medieval women, sexuality was experienced within marriage. In the Middle Ages marriage was important because it served as a means for procreation and it legitimized children for purposes of inheritance. Payer argues that having children was “one of the four traditional reasons to have intercourse” and that “marriage was the only means by which sexual relationships are legitimized.” Furthermore, in places where “Europe’s commercial revolution” was happening, land and property were the “principal medium of the marriage exchange.” Since land rights and property were important aspects regarding marriage, it was imperative that a wife not tarnish the honor of her husband with lewd behavior.

Even though the ideal sexual state for women was chastity, wives could in some sense be chaste because it was thought that chastity was beyond the physical body. Chastity and virginity alluded to many things and an individual’s chastity and virginity were not dependent on the body remaining physically intact. The sacrament of marriage was a means for women to satisfy their sexual desires while maintaining their chastity. An unbroken hymen was not a requirement for a woman to be considered virginal and chaste. Salih argues that medieval medical treatises claimed that a “woman’s virginity” was a product of a

20 Payer, 79, 81.
“woman’s modesty”; therefore, virginity could be “inferred by behavior.”\textsuperscript{22} A wife who modeled the typical behavior admired in a woman could claim to be chaste even though she had sexual relations with her husband.

Adulterous women were seen negatively because they could not control their sexual needs and because of it they damaged the honor of the family and placed doubt in the paternity of their children. Medieval Christians saw adulterous women as problematic and they were punished more strictly than men. Women who engaged in sexual indiscretions outside of marriage were seen as destroying the honor of the family and especially that of their husbands. An adulterous wife brought dishonor to her family because a woman’s “honor and virtue were sexual.”\textsuperscript{23} The wife who participated in an extramarital affair lost her honor because a woman’s honor was tied to a woman’s sexual conduct. Heirs were another reason why adulterous wives were problematic. The legitimacy of children was important for the succession of titles and land. A husband wanted to be certain that his heirs were his own children and not those of another man. A wife who committed adultery became a problem because she “cast doubt” on the “paternity of her children.”\textsuperscript{24} The fear man felt about an adulterous woman was one more cause why these types of women were difficult. Men feared disloyal wives because often in medieval society there were “substantial opportunities” for both aristocratic and bourgeois women to “wield power.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} Salih, 21.
\textsuperscript{23} Karras, \textit{Sexuality in Medieval Europe}, 87.
\textsuperscript{24} Karras, 89.
\textsuperscript{25} Karras, 89.
Widows also held precarious statuses because they were seen as chaste. Even though the ideal state for widows was to dedicate the remaining years to religion, it was understood that many women either chose to remarry or take lovers. Church officials advised widows “not to marry” but if “social and economic necessity dictated otherwise, widows were encouraged to remarry as soon as possible.”26 The chaste identity of widows was dependent on the honor of their late husbands.

Another way in which women might transgress medieval sexual roles was by prostitution. Prostitutes were seen as a necessary evil because they both tempted and fulfilled the sexual needs of men. Accordingly, although Christian theologians viewed prostitution as immoral and spreading corruption it was mostly tolerated. Licit brothels were established in many towns in order to “maintain the social order.”27 Prostitutes were seen as immoral women, but they were expected to service the sexual urges of men to keep men from sin. In other words, the services that prostitution provided were vital to medieval society because the prostitutes had already damned their souls and if they serviced men, then the wives of these men would remain respectable and chaste. The historian Ruth Mazo Karras argues that women who worked “low paying” and “low status” jobs like domestic service were


27 Karras, Common Women, 32.
“suspected of engaging in sexual irregularities for money.”28 Karras’ argument illustrates the negative view of women.

Sexual desire in the Middle Ages depended on the outward expression of gender. Gender dictated medieval notions of sexuality and defined the active and passive roles that dominated medieval construction of sexuality. James A. Schultz argues that clothing was a precursor for desire. Schultz argues that the “conventions of clothing create gendered bodies” that then can be desired by the opposite sex.29 Schultz further argues that in the Middle Ages it was difficult to tell the sex of a person and often mistakes concerning gender occurred. Not being able to distinguish a woman from a man was problematic because it confused the views regarding sexuality. Persons were supposed to feel desire for the opposite sex but it was difficult to do so if individuals could not tell the difference between a woman and a man. Schultz discusses the idea that bodies also revealed social class. He argues that “beautiful bodies” did not disclose their “sex,” but “lordly bodies” did divulge their “class” even in difficult times.30 The relation of clothes to the body is another side to the concept of clothing. It was not enough to wear clothes to create desire, but the manner that the clothes fit the individual was important because they also created a gendered body. Clothes fit differently on men than they do on women. The manner in which clothes related

28 Karras, 54.
30 Schultz, 94.
to the body was significant to medieval society because it helped to define the parameters of male and female desire as well as the subject and object of desire.

A study of the sexuality of women in the medieval era is important because it brings to the surface the complexity of the sexual behavior of women. In general women were thought to be submissive to men and they were supposed to be the passive partner in sexual matters. Even though women were forced into socially acceptable roles to be seen as traditional, Boccaccio’s Decameron provided examples of women who were unconventional. The scholarship on medieval sexuality shows the precarious position of women in medieval society as well as the different types of sexual behavior.

INTRODUCTION TO GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO AND THE DECAMERON

Giovanni Boccaccio was born the illegitimate son of Boccaccio of Chelino, a prominent businessman, possibly in Certaldo but most likely Florence in 1313 and he died in Certaldo in 1375. Boccaccio was educated by the renowned grammarian Giovanni Mazzuoli da Strada, father of the well-known Zanobi, a translator and correspondent of Petrarch. In 1326 Boccaccio was sent to Naples to practice banking with the famous Florentine Compagnia dei Bardi (Company of Bardi), and he also studied canon law but disliked both. During the 1330s Boccaccio studied in the French influenced court of King Robert the Wise of Naples, where he met his poetic muse, Maria, the married daughter of the king. While at court, Boccaccio completed the works Filostrato, Teseida, Il Filocolo, and La caccia di Diana. Boccaccio returned to Florence in 1341 where he finished two other works: Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine and the Amorosa visione in 1342. Boccaccio returned to Florence again
in 1348, during the onset of the plague, to defend his half-brother Jacopo from legal

The *Decameron* was written between the years 1349 and 1353 in Florence and
revised in 1370-71.\footnote{Sapegno, “Boccaccio, Giovanni.”} The text is set against the backdrop of the plague that ravaged Western Europe including Florence. Boccaccio began the text with a description of the historical calamity and how society broke down. At the onset of this turmoil, seven young women are meeting in a church and are joined by three young men and together they have decided to escape the horrors of the plague and decide to retreat to a villa on the hills outside the city. After arriving at the villa, the oldest of the women, Pampinea, dispatches their servants and decides that they should tell stories to pass the time. Pampinea asks each person to tell ten stories in the span of ten days. Within those ten days, each person will take turns leading the storytelling by choosing a theme for that day in which he or she will reign.

Literary scholarship on the *Decameron* alludes to Boccaccio’s representation of the medieval nature of women. Regina Psaki argues that Boccaccio juxtaposed “collective male knowledge and power” in relation to “issues of female knowledge and power.”\footnote{Regina Psaki, “Women Make All Things Lose Their Power: Women’s Knowledge, Men’s Fear in the *Decameron* and the Corbaccio,” *Heliotropia* 1, no. 1 (2003): 2.} Boccaccio portrayed female knowledge in four ways and these strategies are all geared toward demonstrating the corruption and control of men. Psaki also argues that the “male
characters” in the *Decameron* perceive the “nature and force of female sexuality” as the “ultimate secret of women.” According to Psaki, Boccaccio depicted men as being afraid of the secret knowledge that all women possess. She implies that Boccaccio created women empowered with female knowledge who could dominate a man and because of this reason men fear women in his stories. Furthermore, Marga Cottino-Jones also argues for the superiority of women’s verbal wit that outshines that of male characters. Cottino-Jones argues that Boccaccio’s characters in Day 6 “rely upon verbal skill and wit to overcome the pitfalls of everyday life.” The women in Day 6 must outsmart with words the males and their society in order to escape harm.

Another scholarly argument relates the plague to the several transgressions in the stories that Boccaccio told. Jessica Levenstein argues that following social devastation is the collapse of traditions. According to her, the *Decameron* implies that “the collapse of the family follows” the plague, and it “leads to the impurity of women.” Levenstein’s argument is interesting because individuals in the Middle Ages placed much of the honor of the family on the virtue of women. Wives who committed adultery brought dishonor to their family. Levenstein describes this medieval tradition and introduces its reverse: if there is no family to protect then a woman has no reason to deny her needs. According to Levenstein, the *Decameron* plays with the ideas of enclosure, escape, and boundaries. Most persons in

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34 Psaki, 10.


the Middle Ages preferred to keep women within closed spaces in order to safeguard their virtue. Nuns and convents were an example of enclosure and boundaries. Nuns seldom participated in the activities of secular life and yet their chastity was in danger. Boccaccio claimed the opposite will keep women from sexual indiscretion. After the plague and the breakdown of traditions and of the family, escape was the only option available to women to keep them from immorality. Boccaccio’s Pampinea represents “escape as salvation” and “enclosure as sin” and through Pampinea Boccaccio implied that to “remain in Florence” after the plague was to “risk disonesta [dishonor].”

Scholarship on the Decameron also focuses on the concept of desire, rape, foreplay, and voyeurism in the stories that Boccaccio told. This scholarship emphasizes the settings of the stories and how they reflected medieval notions of sexuality. Tobias Foster Gittes makes the argument that Boccaccio attempted to “redeem sexual desire” through a “renovation of the loci of rape,” that includes “the theater, the wooded tarn, and the pleasance.” Boccaccio combined the three places where rape happened most often into his valley where the seven young Florentine women spend their leisure after storytelling. His valley also makes appearances in the stories that the ten young Florentines tell in ten days. According to Gittes, Boccaccio replaced the “culmination of sexual desire found in rape” with a “voyeuristic fulfillment.” Boccaccio alluded to the medieval concept of sexuality in that the man takes

37 Levenstein, 319.
39 Gittes, 155.
the active role in sexual matters. The women in the stories were being observed for pleasure by men. Women in the medieval era were objects to be desired and there was nothing that women could have done to change the circumstances. Gittes relies on Barolini’s hypothesis that states that “the metaphorical language” in the Decameron “empower[s] women” but argues that the “enacted metaphor” is a “replacement for sex.”

Boccaccio portrayed women as cleverly escaping detection while at the same time finding fulfillment of their pleasures. Pampinea and the other six women escape the horrors of the plague and they manage to entertain their desires through storytelling and other activities in the valley.

Desire, an important aspect of medieval sexuality, also reveals medieval views regarding the sexuality of women. Women desire from afar and were objects of a man’s desire. This notion of women is prominent in Gittes’s description of Boccaccio’s valley. Gittes argues that the valley serves as a place where women are “trained to entertain” and this performance becomes “erotic foreplay.”

This version of foreplay also functions as a form of voyeurism for the young men who accompany the women when they fled Florence as well as for the readers of the text.

The Decameron described stories where women were both the subject and the object of desire. It also provides examples of stories where women with cleverness avoid being caught in flagrante delicto and manage to safeguard their chastity. Medieval Christians tended to believe that women were able to satisfy their lust while they kept the false

\[40\] Gittes, 164.
\[41\] Gittes, 160.
impression of their virtue intact because they were clever. Boccaccio claimed that he wrote his stories to help women who were “confined by their families” to find “pleasure and advise” in the “pleasant distraction” that his stories provided because he knew how much more difficult it was to “control suppressed desires” and if the ladies “found that their spirits have risen” he wished them to give “thanks to Love.”

Boccaccio’s desire for women to find pleasure from his stories implied that he was satisfied with women like Isabetta who finds her pleasure and is able to keep the appearance of chastity. The setting of his stories that was the onset of the plague caused a “reversal of the binary” that “escape equals salvation.”

Boccaccio echoed the medieval understanding of the nature of women in the *Decameron* and this understanding reveals the medieval view of female sexuality. In order to offer a representation of female sexuality, it is necessary to show how medieval society regarded women. Women were considered to be greedy, overly sexual, and vain and Boccaccio demonstrated these views in his stories. Women who were overtly proud of their beauty and physical appearance would succumb more easily to their sexual desires. Female sexuality was connected to the beauty and appearance of women. Cosmetics were considered to comprise part of what men called “female knowledge” and cosmetics was a strategy women used to hide imperfections that allowed a woman to “control a man.”

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42 Boccaccio, 4.
43 Levenstein, 319.
44 Psaki, 3.
desired women who were beautiful and women who made themselves available to be seen became the objects of desire. Marilyn Migiel argues that in the stories of Day 2 Boccaccio characterized women as the “bearers of the look that is used to entice men.”\(^{45}\) Christians believed a woman left her home to be seen in public; she would be desired. In the Middle Ages it was believed that women who appeared in public insinuated a sexual purpose and women who “made themselves beautiful did it to attract a lover.”\(^{46}\) Vanity led women to spend a lot of money, and so sumptuary laws were enacted to curb this vice. Sumptuary laws regulated “the clothing” that women in “different social classes could wear” and in several Italian towns only “prostitutes could wear expensive garments.”\(^{47}\) These laws and regulations were enacted to differentiate between respectful women and prostitutes. Medieval persons took measures to make sure that respectful women were protected and were not accosted by men who were not their husbands.

The *Decameron* embodies many aspects of medieval sexuality. Sexual desire, female cleverness, and the medieval view of the nature of women are all representations of female sexuality in the stories. The stories are important because they express medieval views regarding female sexuality that is necessary in order to establish medieval representations of women. The stories describe medieval women as being desirable, quick thinking, and sexual. According to Karras, a woman’s virtue depended on her sexuality. Boccaccio’s


\(^{46}\) Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 89-90.

\(^{47}\) Karras, 90.
stories illuminate female sexuality that helps to identify men’s views of women in medieval society. Through Boccaccio it can be determined that persons in the Middle Ages did place a woman’s sexual conduct as the marker of chastity. In the stories of the Decameron, Boccaccio saw women who were submissive as traditional and women who pursued their passion as unconventional and admirable.
CHAPTER 2

BOCCACCIO’S CONVENTIONAL VIEWS ON WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

INTRODUCTION

*The Decameron* includes stories where women are deemed to be conventional. Boccaccio depicted seven aspects that are stereotypically associated with women: women as possessions, women as meek and controllable, women as naïve, women engaged in sexual affairs, women as greedy and manipulative, women as lovers of the clergy, women as victims of abuse, and young women as unsatisfied brides. Women in the *Decameron* who are presented as conventional possess these traits or are depicted in situations that make them behave according to the traditional representation of women. Furthermore, Boccaccio implied that women who are conventional are dependent on the whims of men. Many women were seen as the playthings of men and Boccaccio portrayed this notion in his stories.

WOMEN AS POSSESSIONS

Women are portrayed as possessions: objects that could be coveted, stolen or traded, and owned. Boccaccio used the characterization of male characters to convey a traditional view regarding women as possessions or objects. For example, in Day 2, Story 7 the male characters pursue a woman as an object to be owned and desired. Boccaccio characterized the woman in the story as the “fairest woman on earth” and, furthermore, she is the daughter
of a sultan.\textsuperscript{48} Alatiel’s portrayal as a beautifully shaped and sought after woman suggests that she is an object that the males in the story desire to possess. Two shipmates who happened to be brothers hear of her beauty and they feel desire for her. The brothers decide to murder her current lover and protector and they remark that “love might be a subject for shareholding.”\textsuperscript{49} All of Alatiel’s lovers have felt lust for her before they meet her. Boccaccio stated that upon seeing Alatiel, her male suitors come to the conclusion that she will belong to them and they proceed to murder one another in order to get her. Alatiel represents the conventional view of women as possessions. The men in the story think of Alatiel as an object to be desired and possessed and they act accordingly. Alatiel is also referred to as a “plaything of fortune” that alludes to her status as a possession.\textsuperscript{50} Alatiel’s value is dependent upon her desirability and that is a factor that is left to fate. Even though Alatiel is passed around and is no longer a maiden, the man she had been arranged to marry still wants her because of her beauty. The king of Africa views his fiancé as an object that he desires to own first as a favor for his service to the sultan of Babylon and secondly because of the praise she receives after her ordeal.

\textsuperscript{48} Boccaccio, 113.
\textsuperscript{49} Boccaccio, 118.
\textsuperscript{50} Boccaccio, 127.
WOMEN AS MEEK AND CONTROLLABLE

Another stereotypical traditional view, one depicting women as meek and controllable, is given in the stories of Boccaccio. Boccaccio expressed a customary view about women through his male characters. In Day 9, Story 9 two young men seek the counsel of Solomon on the treatment of their wives. Joseph, one of the young men, is told that he should follow the example of a man who beats his animal into submission. Joseph’s wife does not heed her husband or show any respect for him and that is why he sought counsel. His wife does not represent the traditional view of women; rather, she is a woman who is defiant and evil. Joseph describes his wife as the most “perverse and wayward woman in the world.” Joseph listens to the advice and beats his wife and the next day the wife is submissive. The male characters in this story show that a good wife is one who submits and if she does not it is acceptable to abuse her physically.

Another example of a woman being controlled is conveyed in Day 4, Story 2. Lisetta was characterized as a beautiful but stupid woman. A friar falls deeply in lust because he finds Lisetta easy to influence. Brother Alberto characterizes Lisetta as “feather-brained” and “conceited.” Brother Alberto likes to control his women and he knows he can use her physical attractiveness to manipulate her. The friar feels desire for Lisetta because she is silly and she is “fertile soil ready for digging.” Lisetta is representative of the habit of

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51 Boccaccio, 589.
52 Boccaccio, 589.
53 Boccaccio, 266.
54 Boccaccio, 267.
regarding women as overly concerned about their physical appearance and their attractiveness as a means to hold power over them. Boccaccio expressed this view through the character of the friar. The friar justifies his affair with Lisetta’s vanity and with her ease to be manipulated.

Boccaccio’s traditional view of women as meek and controllable is significant because it implied a play with power. Joseph’s portrayal provided the example of the notion of the perfect woman is one who is submissive to her husband. Submission is essential to the conventional notion regarding women in medieval society. Women are expected to obey their husbands or male relatives and not be outspoken or defiant. Joseph’s wife represents the view of the imperfect woman and her beating is conveyed as the appropriate method to achieve her submission.

In contrast, Lisetta demonstrates the idea that silliness and beauty are desirable traits in women. Foolishness and beauty are qualities that made Lisetta the ideal woman to be controlled. Lisetta’s attractiveness is due to the fact that she can easily be manipulated. The male character of Brother Alberto provides an example of the men who like women who can be controlled because of their physical attractiveness. Beauty is a great tool that could be utilized in order to have power over women. It is a conventional concept that women place a lot of importance on their appearances and Boccaccio emphasized this old-fashioned idea. Boccaccio stressed the traditional notion that women needed to be submissive to their husbands and if they were not then being abused physically was the right measure to get their behavior controlled. He also argued that manipulating and controlling women was easier if men play on women’s physical desirability. Women were traditionally considered vain and if a man needed to control his woman her beauty was the perfect tool.
WOMEN AS NAÏVE, EMOTIONAL AND IRRATIONAL

Emotions, naiveté, and irrationality were characteristics commonly associated with women. The Decameron provided examples of several stories of women who possessed these socially acceptable traits yet were overtaken by their emotions and became irrational. These women represented the traditional view of women in the Middle Ages. In Day 3, Story 6 Catella is described as the “city’s paramount beauty” and a “virtuous wife.”\(^5^5\) Despite being the perfect wife, Catella also demonstrates negative qualities: a possessiveness and jealousy that overcome her rationality. Catella becomes disloyal to her husband and begins a lasting affair with a suitor she used to rebuff. Boccaccio’s Catella gives an example of an intelligent and a good woman who was transformed into the conventional, emotional, and irrational evil woman because of her jealousy. Catella’s undoing was her anger and jealousy towards her husband. Boccaccio implied that jealousy was a trait accompanied by gullibility.\(^5^6\) Catella is easily led to believe that her husband is unfaithful and she became angry. Her infidelity and disloyalty are a result of her anger. Catella is a representation of what happens to a woman who wants to take revenge; fate plays a trick on her and she becomes what she despises: disloyal.

In Day 2, Story 8 Boccaccio gives the example of a woman of rank as a “young lass and fresh as a daisy.”\(^5^7\) The princess of France is intelligent and beautiful but becomes

\(^{55}\) Boccaccio, 201.  
\(^{56}\) Boccaccio, 203.  
\(^{57}\) Boccaccio, 133.
irrational, vindictive, and manipulative. She is a young wife who happens to fall prey to the “urges of the flesh and the power of love” and approaches the count of Antwerp, who rejects her because of his friendship with her father, the king of France. The princess does not take the rejection well and accuses him of rape and causes him to flee with his children. In order to protect his family, the count finds suitable homes for his children and then abandons them. Once again the princess serves as an example of an unconventional woman who becomes conventional. The princess is a woman who possesses intelligence and beauty, but lets her emotions take control and her behavior becomes irrational.

A wealthy young woman who is scorned by her lover and so gives into anger and becomes irrational is found in Day 4, Story 3. Ninetta falls in love with Restagnone, “a man of good birth but no means,” and together they plan to rob the wealthy suitors of Ninetta’s younger sisters. Restagnone becomes bored with Ninetta and finds a new lover. Feeling betrayed and angry, Ninetta murders both Restagnone and his lover. The death of Maddelena and the fleeing of Bertella tragically follow Ninetta’s actions. Boccaccio described Ninetta as “becoming possessed of a cold fury” that leads to her “love for Restagnone turning to loathing.” Ninetta characterizes the type of woman who possesses intelligence and cleverness, but whose actions are irrational because she allows herself to be overtaken by her emotions, especially anger.

58 Boccaccio, 134.
59 Boccaccio, 274.
60 Boccaccio, 276.
Another conventional quality associated with women is naïveté and Alibek portrays this characteristic in Day 3, Story 10. Alibek is a non-Christian woman who is delightful and beautiful. She harbors a desire to learn of Christianity and she is sent to a young hermit, Rustico, to be taught Christianity. Boccaccio described Alibek as “comely and young” and possessing “charming manners.” Rustico feels an attraction for Alibek because she exhibits stereotypical traditional qualities associated with women. Alibek is young, charming, inexperienced, and does not defy male figures. Rustico feels attracted to Alibek and, without her knowing, he seduces her and they become physically intimate. Alibek believes their actions are part of Christian worship and submits to his demands. Boccaccio stated her naïveté as a conventional trait given to women. Alibek is an intelligent woman but one who is not accustomed to Christian ways and because of her inexperience she is easily fooled.

Through these women, Boccaccio described several conventional views and characteristics given to women. He characterized these women as having both intelligence and beauty but also being overtaken by their emotions, becoming the traditional irrational women about whom men are warned. These women are not submissive to men and they act on their own. The male characters in these stories do not have control over the women. Women who are or feel betrayed turn to anger and in doing so become irrational. Irrationality was a typical traditional trait associated with women that gave men the upper hand. Rustico is the only man to have control over Alibek because she does not comprehend

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61 Boccaccio, 241.
him. Alibek is easily fooled and manipulated not because she is irrational but because her naiveté does not allow her to comprehend Rustico’s actions.

**WOMEN WHO PURSUE SEXUAL AFFAIRS**

Boccaccio included stories of widows who engage in secret affairs as is demonstrated in Day 2, Story 2. The widow of Castel Guglielmo offers refuge and comfort to a young merchant, Rinaldo. Boccaccio described the widow as a “woman of matchless beauty.”

The widow is a beautiful and intelligent woman who is told by her maid that Rinaldo is a man of means. This is shown by Rinaldo wearing the attire of the widow’s late husband. She makes up her mind right away that Rinaldo can satisfy her needs because her husband is dead. Rinaldo is characterized as a man who does not waste an opportunity and instantly takes advantage of his attraction to the widow. Both Rinaldo and the widow partake in a night of passion until the morning when he discretely leaves her home. Boccaccio argued for the importance of being discrete because widows were expected to safeguard their reputation. Although the widow acts in a conventional manner she is described as an unconventional woman because she is intelligent and clever.

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62 Boccaccio, 71.
63 Boccaccio, 74.
WOMEN AS GREEDY AND MANIPULATIVE

Greed and manipulation are negative traits that were commonly associated with women. The *Decameron* includes stories where women who were not in the sex trade behave in the same manner and exhibit the same negative traits as women who were prostitutes. Boccaccio demonstrated these negative qualities through several female characters. In Day 7, Story 2 Boccaccio described Peronella as a “pretty and engaging young girl.”\(^{64}\) Peronella is also represented as a greedy and manipulative woman. Peronella is having an affair and is caught by her husband who returns home early from work. She cleverly schemes a viable excuse and pretends to be selling a barrel to her lover, Giannello Scrignario. Peronella is characterized as being greedy because she does not love her lover and she uses him to make a monetary profit. She is engaging in a sexual affair because she wants money. Peronella does not show any remorse at being disloyal; rather, she takes much pleasure in her infidelity. Boccaccio implied that Peronella takes great pleasure in being unfaithful because she allows Giannello to “achieve total satisfaction” in allowing him to continue intercourse in front of her husband.\(^{65}\) Furthermore, she is described as being successful at the art of manipulation because she manages to benefit from her situation: she fools her husband, finds satisfaction with her lover, and earns a profit.

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\(^{64}\) Boccaccio, 423.

\(^{65}\) Boccaccio, 426.
In both Story 1 and 2 of Day 8, women are characterized as greedy. Story 1 portrays Ambrogia as a “great beauty.” Gulfardo, a friend to Ambrogia’s husband, Guasparruolo, propositions her because of her attractiveness and they become lovers. She readily accepts when he agrees to her demand, that he must pay her two hundred gold florins. Gulfardo’s desire for Ambrogia becomes disgust because she is greedy and accepts to be his lover not out of passion but because of greed. He does not like her “straightforwardness” and he thinks she is “shameful.” Boccaccio made an example of Ambrogia as a traditional woman who possesses negative qualities. She is greedy and disloyal to her husband, Guasparruolo, and she deserves whatever fate has in store for her. Gulfardo loses interest in Ambrogia because she acts of her own accordance and is not shy to ask for what she wants. Ambrogia is not a woman who submits to her husband and Gulfardo needs to put her in her place, which he does when he gives Guasparruolo the two hundred gold florins he borrowed from him, and which he had promised to Ambrogia.

Belcolore’s portrayal in Story 2 is also that of a greedy woman. Boccaccio described Belcolore as having a “sturdy little body” and being a “luscious, fresh-faced, olive skinned country wench.” She agrees to become a priest’s lover if he can give her money in order to get back her good clothes because she has pawned them. Her lover realizes he does not have the money and plays a trick on her, but ultimately both continue their affair for a long time.

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66 Boccaccio, 475.
67 Boccaccio, 475.
68 Boccaccio, 478.
even though she does not receive her payment. Nonetheless, she does benefit from her liaison with the priest. The priest gives Belcolore a new “parchment and jingle for her tambourine” and she is pleased with her gifts.\textsuperscript{69} Belcolore possesses the negative characteristic of greed that is commonly associated with women. Boccaccio implied that it was a conventional notion that both of these women deserved the trick played on them because of their greed. Even though Belcolore is given gifts, it is implied that she did take sexual pleasure from her lover because she has “several sessions of slap and tickle” afterwards with the priest.\textsuperscript{70} Both Ambrogia and Belcolore are victims of fate and of the whims of their male lovers. Ambrogia was not as lucky with her lover as was Belcolore. Their stories were examples of the notion that women were objects that men could do with as they please.

In Day 8, Story 10 Boccaccio described Jancofiore as “undoubtedly a beauty” because Salabaetto could not stop looking at her.\textsuperscript{71} Salabaetto’s lover is another usual traditional woman tricked by fate because of her greed and manipulation. Jancofiore is a prostitute and she deceives Salabaetto out of his money. She pretends to be in love with him and has sexual intercourse with him. When Salabaetto gives her the money she asked for, Jancofiore stops being amorous towards him. Jancofiore is a conventional woman because she is greedy, manipulative, and deceitful. Jancofiore trades sexual favors for money and she

\textsuperscript{69} Boccaccio, 482.
\textsuperscript{70} Boccaccio, 482.
\textsuperscript{71} Boccaccio, 544.
is shameful because she delights in her profession. She represents the standard traditional evil woman who brings disgrace to men. Boccaccio implied that she is deserving of any evil consequence that her actions bring about and this is shown when Salabaetto tricks his former lover and returns to Naples with more money than that which he lost to Jancofiore. Jancofiore represents a woman who is defiant of male figures and needs to be controlled. Women like Jancofiore could be controlled through their greed because they would always want more. When Salabaetto learns this, he uses Jancofiore’s own weakness against her.

**WOMEN AS NUNS AND LOVERS OF THE CLERGY**

Boccaccio demonstrated a traditional attitude toward nuns as women who were expected to abstain from worldly pleasures but who actually satisfied those needs. In Day 3, Story 1 a convent renowned for its chastity is full of nuns who are satisfying their sexual needs with a man named Masetto. Boccaccio described the nuns as “mere youngsters” and “keen.” He implied that medieval society held nuns to a different standard when it came to sexuality. Even though nuns had to abide by certain rules, the concept of women satisfying their sexual desires by whatever means possible was a traditional one. According to Boccaccio, nuns were also conventional women because they shared these traits with other women. Nuns do not seem to be under the control of any man and they do as they please because they are separated from the secular world. Both nuns and secular women have the potential to be defiant or submissive and Boccaccio utilized Masetto to show how a man

72 Boccaccio, 173-174.
might benefit from the nuns’ amorous attentions. Masetto, in using the sexual desires of the nuns against them, is able to gain the upper hand, resulting in his having wealth in his old age. Boccaccio implied that the vows of chastity were absurd because of the nuns’ defilement of their vows. It is of no consequence for women to be disloyal to their vows. Boccaccio implied that nuns involved in sexual liaisons are attempting to be a part of the secular experience that is lost to them because they are enclosed within the convent.

Another stereotypical concept Boccaccio illustrated is that women were used by the clergy for sexual affairs. In Day 1, Story 4 a young woman is caught by the abbot with a monk and instead of the monk suffering any punishment the abbot becomes his accomplice. Boccaccio described the lover of the clergy as a “ravishing young girl.” The woman enjoys sexual trysts with both the abbot and the monk on many occasions. Boccaccio argued that although the clergy were supposed to be celibate they were not and their misdeeds did not bear serious consequences. Women who are involved in amorous liaisons with the clergy are the ones who bear the responsibility. If these women are exposed they are the ones who will be shamed and found at fault. Furthermore, the young woman becomes the plaything for both the abbot and the monk. They are the ones who decided what will happen with the woman. Her fate is dependent on the whims of both her lovers. She would be brought back to the monastery as long as she continued to inspire lust and desire within the abbot and the monk.

73 Boccaccio, 42.
In contrast, the misdeeds of the clergy are applauded as Boccaccio shows in Day 3, Story 8. Boccaccio portrayed Ferondo’s wife as a “gorgeous, refined, and beautiful” woman.\textsuperscript{74} The abbot desires Ferondo’s wife and in order to have her he agrees to help her cure her husband of his jealousy. Together they scheme to get rid of Ferondo and he is made to appear dead and then they hide his body somewhere privately. During this time an accomplice to the abbot pretends to be a demon from hell and tortures Ferondo. Ferondo is in purgatory for a long time while the abbot and Ferondo’s wife enjoy one another. When she becomes pregnant they decide it is time for Ferondo to come back. Miraculously the abbot brings Ferondo back from the dead and everyone, including Ferondo, admire and hail the abbot as holy. Boccaccio implied humor at Ferondo’s idiocy and the cleverness of the abbot and the wife. Although Boccaccio praised the wife’s clever manipulation, she does not escape the consequences of her actions: the unplanned pregnancy. Boccaccio implied that the woman’s deceit worked because her husband was an oaf. The abbot manipulates and controls his lover because he promises to cure her husband and return her status as a virtuous wife. It is for this reason and the pleasure she derives that Ferondo’s wife continues with the abbot’s deceit and as the abbot’s occasional lover. Boccaccio demonstrated how women who had affairs with the clergy were manipulated and controlled. The lovers of the clergy are the ones who bear the consequences while the clergy remained free to do as they please.

\textsuperscript{74} Boccaccio, 224.
WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF ABUSIVE HUSBANDS

The notion of women being beaten into submission is a typical traditional view of women and Boccaccio expressed this idea in some of his stories. In Day 3, Story 9 Giletta is a smart and beautiful woman of humble birth who cleverly schemes to marry the man she loves, Beltram, who is of noble blood. Giletta is characterized as “beautiful” but also as a “woman who practices medicine.” Beltram, angry at being married off to a woman of low social status, abuses Giletta and does not accept her as his rightful bride. Giletta has to suffer her husband’s disdain, abandonment, and his infatuation with another woman. She has to trick her husband into consummating their marriage. Boccaccio showed admiration for Giletta who he considered an unconventional woman because she is smart, knows about medicine, and possesses the qualities of women of rank. Although Giletta is an unconventional woman, she is placed in a conventional situation. Beltram expects Giletta to remain home waiting for him as punishment for attempting to control him by forcing marriage. Beltram appears as the typical man who wants to control his wife and he despises Giletta because she has the upper hand. To regain control and keep his wife in submission Beltram imposes abuse as the perfect tool to achieve her submission. Although Giletta is abused by Beltram, she does live happily with her husband.

In Day 10, Story 10 Griselda, a woman of humble origins, is married to a man of royal stature and he abuses her. Griselda is characterized as a “shapely lass with a pretty

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75 Boccaccio, 234.
The marquis of Saluzzo decides to test Griselda to see if she is worthy of being his wife. After several years of humiliation, neglect, abandonment, and abuse he sees that Griselda is a woman to admire and finally accepts her as his rightful wife. According to the marquis, Griselda responds to every test as a wife who wants only the happiness of her husband. Griselda feels pain at the cruel treatment of Gualtieri but she deals with it as best she can because she always continues to believe that Gualtieri made a mistake in marrying her and one day would come to realize it. Griselda is a representation of the ideal woman and wife in the Middle Ages. She is docile, patient, submissive, and in control of her emotions. Griselda follows Gualtieri’s orders without question and does not speak or think badly of him. Griselda acts as the archetypal passive woman because she is under the control of her husband. Although both Giletta and Griselda are considered to be conventional, Boccaccio implied admiration for both because they are intelligent women who overcome impossible and cruel situations.

**WOMEN, AGE, AND SEX**

The idea that love and sexuality are matters better suited for young women and young men was a traditional one. In Day 10, Story 6 Boccaccio offers as examples two young twin sisters who attract the attention of an older man, King Charles of Anjou. Ginerva and Isotta, who are only fifteen years old, are portrayed as “angels” with curly “blonde hair like spun

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76 Boccaccio, 671.
gold.” King Charles is besotted with both because he cannot tell them apart, and therefore, he does not know which one he loves. King Charles receives advice from a friend and ends his infatuation. He realizes that Ginerva and Isotta have him under their control and he knows that he is behaving irrationally. Irrationality is a trait reserved for women while both Ginerva and Isotta enjoy the qualities of sensibility and practicality. It is the king who is acting the fool and not the young girls.

The notion that young wives are left unsatisfied by older husbands is also expressed in the stories. In Day 7, Story 9 a young bride falls in love with a younger man. Lydia is characterized as “spirited and beautiful” and in “the first bloom of youth.” She falls deeply in love with Pyrrhus, the young and handsome trusted servant of Nicostratos, her husband. Lydia summons Pyrrhus to her side but he declines. Pyrrhus wants Lydia to perform three tasks that would prove her love for him. With the tasks completed the lovers find a way to consummate their love without Nicostratos finding about their affair. Pyrrhus and Lydia trick Nicostratos into believing both Pyrrhus and his wife are the most virtuous individuals. Lydia feels justified with her affair because Nicostratos “does not give her joy in the one thing girls like best of all.” Boccaccio implied that women were allowed to be disloyal if their husbands did not fulfill their duties towards their wives.

77 Boccaccio, 624.
78 Boccaccio, 458.
79 Boccaccio, 458.
In Day 2, Story 10 a new young bride decides to leave her husband. Bartolomea is described as “the prettiest and most enchanting young woman.” Bartolomea’s husband, Ricciardo, loses his bride to a young pirate after she is kidnapped while he is fishing. Ricciardo finds his bride and hopes to return home with her but she declines to return to him and decides instead to live in sin with her lover, Paganino. Ricciardo, deeply saddened at losing his new bride, blames himself for marrying a much younger woman and dies shortly after returning to Pisa alone. Bartolomea justifies abandoning her husband because he cannot satisfy her needs or fulfill his rightful duty as a husband. Bartolomea despises her husband’s need to “observe feast days” instead of paying attention to the “needs of his wife.” Ricciardo is to blame for his fate because he married a younger woman and expects her to be submissive to him. Boccaccio implied that these women were unfaithful because they seek to satisfy the sexual needs that their husbands are not able to meet.

In Day 5, Story 10 the wife takes a lover because she is given advice by an older woman in satisfying her needs. The young woman is portrayed as “sturdy” and a “redhead with the complexion to match.” The old woman allows the young wife to pursue her passion because her husband, interested in men, cannot satisfy her sexual urges and they become a threesome. The young wife states that she is “a woman like all others” and she “desires and wants what they want” and if Pietro cannot give her what she needs she will find

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80 Boccaccio, 159.
81 Boccaccio, 163.
82 Boccaccio, 373.
it elsewhere. Boccaccio in this story implied given permission because the husband does not reprimand her and in contrast he becomes involved in her affair. According to Boccaccio, these women represented a traditional view of women. Certain women who have older men for their husbands will be unhappy and uncontrollable because their husbands do not satisfy them. These types of women were not blamed because they only seek what they are not given by their husbands.

**CONCLUSION**

Boccaccio provided examples of several facets of a conventional woman: either controlled or abused by men, submissive to men, emotional, vain, greedy, or wanton. These women continued to be at the mercy of men and male authority. The women whom the clergy took as lovers are solely responsible for the consequences of the affair. Women who try to manipulate men are seen as deserving of a cruel fate or deception by their lovers. Widows, young women, and even nuns stereotypically pursue sexual passion in order to find sexual gratification. Furthermore, women are meek and under the control of their husbands. Men control women through their vanity and use their need to be seen as beautiful against them. Conventional women are victims of abuse because abuse is considered a satisfactory means for controlling women. Women who are defiant were made to suffer and Boccaccio depicted this notion in his stories.

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83 Boccaccio, 380.
The notion of women as objects to be possessed was an old-fashioned idea that Boccaccio showed in his stories. Men fall prey to the physical beauty of women and women were dominated by men because of their attractiveness. If women are considered objects in men’s possession, it is not a stretch to see them as submissive and weak. The traditional view of woman is that the woman was submissive to her husband. It was considered acceptable to abuse physically a woman who was defiant to her husband or any male authority.

Irrationality and emotional were traits associated with conventional women. Women in possession of these qualities were considered to be overtaken by their emotions that override their rationality. Boccaccio described women who are intelligent become emotional and irrational because they succumb to their emotions. These smart women thus become the stereotypical woman about whom men were warned.

Boccaccio showed widows and young women as conventional women because they are the only ones whose affairs are justified. Their sexual liaisons are allowed because their desires are unfulfilled. Widows have no husbands to take care of their marital needs and Boccaccio permitted them to find satisfaction as long as they are discreet. Young brides are justified in taking lovers either because their elderly husbands are not fulfilling their marital duties or like Pietro they will not. Boccaccio argued that love should be left for young men and women because older men could not provide for their young wives.

Greed and manipulation are negative qualities associated with conventional women. These women are conventional because they seek a monetary gain from their affairs.

Boccaccio argued that these women pursue sexual affairs not because they are unsatisfied but because they are greedy. According to Boccaccio, these women deserve whatever fate they
Women who are the lovers of the clergy are also seen as traditional because they act like secular women. Nuns, like secular women, have desires and they partake of sexual affairs in order to satisfy them. Boccaccio implied that women who are nuns or lovers of the clergy are also dependent on their male lovers. These women depend on their lovers because they are the ones who bear the responsibility and not the men.
CHAPTER 3
BOCCACCIO’S UNCONVENTIONAL VIEWS ON
WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

INTRODUCTION
The Decameron provides examples of stories of women who are not traditional. Boccaccio gave four basic reasons why these women were unconventional: their willingness to do anything for love, their admirable qualities, their pursuit of passion, and their faithfulness in love. According to Boccaccio, women who illustrate a willingness to do anything for love also demonstrate the following characteristics: loving by reputation alone, not submitting to male authority, defying family wishes, ignoring social positions, transcending traditional roles, and overcoming obstacles to achieve love.

Women who are unconventional possess admirable qualities in the Decameron. Women who do not fit the standard traditional expectations possess the qualities of cleverness and intelligence. Faithfulness in love was one of the reasons some women were seen as not being conventional. These women are remarkable because they overcame obstacles, they are faithful and loyal, they succumb to death because of grief, and they live virtuously.
WILLINGNESS TO DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE

Boccaccio implied that the willingness to do anything for love is an admirable quality especially in women, and this characteristic is one of the four things that make women unconventional. The women he portrayed cleverly scheme, manipulate, defy their families, and escape with their lovers. He applauded the women who do anything in order to pursue their passions and he gave them the opportunity to do so. For example, in Day 4, Story 4 a princess of Tunis loves Gerbino, the grandson of Guglielmo II, who is the king of Sicily. The princess is described as the “most beautiful creature ever formed by nature” as well as a “maiden of impeccable virtue and sublime nobility.”

Since the young lovers have never met in person, they fall in love with each other’s reputations alone. Friends and servants send secret messages and gifts to one another so that they can declare their feelings. The princess is engaged to the king of Granada and must defy her father’s wishes to be with Gerbino. The king of Tunis, aware of his daughter’s feelings, asks the king of Sicily for his oath: Gerbino must not interfere in the proposed marriage. Since the princess is “willing to defy her father and escape to join her love,” Gerbino decides to ambush the princess’ escorts but they murder her in front of Gerbino as punishment for his defiance and disobedience.

The king of Sicily has his grandson beheaded as a show of good faith to the king of Tunis. The princess and Gerbino defy their kings for love but fate is cruel and does not allow the lovers to be together. Boccaccio implied admiration for the princess because she was not

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84 Boccaccio, 279.
85 Boccaccio, 280.
submissive to her father. She chooses love over her fate and she pays the ultimate price, which is death. The examples of the princess and Gerbino imply that the physical consummation of their feelings is not necessary in order for their love to be valid. Both decide to betray their families to be with one another without having met and becoming intimate with each other. According to Boccaccio, their mutual sentiments are enough to defy fate and both the princess and Gerbino are proof of it. The princess is a woman to be admired because she does not let traditional ideas and roles associated with women stop her. Her love for Gerbino is stronger and more important than what her father had decided for her.

Death as the culmination of a lovers’ affair is also another tragic result for women who were not submissive. In Day 4, Story 7 Pasquino, the lover of a woman named Simona, dies and she joins him in death. Simona is characterized as a “pretty young wench” who is “graceful in her humble way.”\(^{86}\) Both Simona and Pasquino are of humble beginnings and they become lovers. Simona consummated her love with Pasquino in a garden and the garden became witness to the lovers’ many trysts. During one of those secret meetings in the garden Pasquino dies and Simona is left to grieve over her beloved. Simona is accused of Pasquino’s death and the punishment for murder is her life. Overcome with grief over the loss of Pasquino, Simona does not care about her own life; she only wants to be with her love.\(^{87}\) Simona sets out to prove her innocence because she wants to know exactly what

\(^{86}\) Boccaccio, 294.

\(^{87}\) Boccaccio, 296.
happened to Pasquino and she follows his steps in the garden and dies from rubbing a poisonous sage leaf on her lips. Simona’s death clears her of any wrongdoing and of murdering Pasquino, and the lovers are buried together. Simona represents a woman who is willing to do anything for her love because she ultimately dies. Simona’s death is a result of her wish to be with Pasquino and her desire to prove her innocence. Boccaccio implied that Simona was unconventional because she cared more about her lover than she did about herself. Being overtaken by emotions is a good thing in this story because it signifies the strength of Simona’s love for Pasquino. Simona is admirable because she does not act in accordance with the traditional role given to women. The quality she possesses is that of intelligence and she demonstrates a willingness to die for love. Boccaccio portrayed Simona favorably because she pursues her passion. The story suggests that Simona becomes an investigator or a detective because she looks for clues for the cause of her beloved’s death when it was not her place to do so. Simona transcends her woman’s role because of her love for Pasquino and in the process dies herself in order to be with him again. Although Simona dies Boccaccio sees her as being unconventional because he recognizes her actions as a willingness to die for love.

Overcoming obstacles to be with one another is a characteristic that lovers are willing to do for love. In Day 5, Story 2 Costanza and Martuccio embark on an adventure because of love and they must overcome the challenges to be with each other. Costanza is portrayed as
the “most beautiful young woman” from one of the “leading families.” Martuccio, Costanza’s beloved, is not from the nobility and because of his poverty he is denied Costanza’s hand in marriage. Costanza, “afflicted beyond measure” at the prospect of having to live without her lover, willingly chooses death. Fate intervenes and the lovers are not granted death but instead are separated. Enduring a grueling journey, both lovers suffer more because each believes the other dead without realizing that they are close to one another. Martuccio and Costanza are reunited and they are still deeply in love. Costanza is allowed to marry Martuccio because Martuccio gave the king of Tunis sage military advice. Martuccio and Costanza return home and they are welcomed. Boccaccio implied admiration for Costanza because she defies her traditional role as a young woman of the nobility. Costanza does not care about Martuccio’s financial shortcomings; she loves him despite his lack of fortune. The love for Martuccio gives Costanza the strength she needs in order to defy her family and fight for her love. It is her love for Martuccio that enables Costanza to choose death, which ultimately leads her to find happiness, with her lover. Costanza is a woman to admire because she chooses love over her family as well as over her life. The feelings Costanza has for Martuccio provides her with the necessary strength to overcome the obstacles she faced.

Defying families is something that lovers in the Decameron must be willing to do for love. In Day 5, Story 3 Agnolella and Pietro must find a way to be together despite their

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88 Boccaccio, 328.
89 Boccaccio, 329.
families’ wishes. Agnolella is described as a “beautiful and charming young woman” who is the daughter of a “man of the people.” Due to the social standing of Agnolella’s father, Pietro is not permitted to be with her. Agnolella, desiring to be with her lover, ignores her father’s order; Gigliozzo Saullo has declined Pietro’s plea for marriage. Both young lovers choose to ignore their families and they elope. Shortly after, they are ambushed and the lovers are separated. Without knowledge of each other’s whereabouts, each one believe the other dead. Seeing the love between Angolella and Pietro, the wife of Liello di Campo di Fiore intercedes on their behalf and they are married. The young lovers return home where their marriage is accepted and they are welcomed. Praise for Agnolella is implied by Boccaccio because she does not succumb to her surroundings. Agnolella does not let her distress at losing Pietro overtake her and she manages to escape harm. Boccaccio found Agnolella laudable because she defies her father for love of Pietro. Agnolella willingly leaves the security of her family for the uncertainty of an elopement and that is something most young women would not do.

Furthermore, social standing or financial security does not appear to bear any consequences for young lovers. In Day 5, Story 7 Violante is not concerned with the fact that her lover is a slave. Violante is characterized as a “pretty and dainty creature waiting to be married off.” Teodoro and Violante bring to a physical culmination their feelings for each other and she wants to marry him. Knowing it would be impossible because her social

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90 Boccaccio, 334.
91 Boccaccio, 356.
position is above that of Teodoro, Violante decides to lie about her pregnancy. Violante lies to her father because she wants to protect her lover. The promise made to Teodoro is broken by Violante in order to “defend her baby and Teodoro’s life.” Teodoro is sentenced to die and Violante is given a choice by her father as to the way she wants to die. Fineo, an ambassador from Armenia, recognizes Teodoro as his long lost son, and demands his freedom and his marriage to Violante. Violante happily accepts to marry her lover, the father of her child, and they live happily. Boccaccio looked favorably on Violante because she loves Teodoro the man and not his rank or wealth. Violante is an unconventional woman because she risks her life in order to save the lives of her child and lover. Although she does not keep her promise to Teodoro, it is broken for an utmost important reason, and that is for the life of their child. Violante’s love for Teodoro and their child gives her the strength to stand up to her father. Boccaccio implied great respect for Violante because she does not cower before her father and she fought for the lives of the two most important persons in her life. Violante willingly risks everything to be with Teodoro and it is all worth it.

**ADMIRABLE QUALITIES IN WOMEN**

Cleverness and intelligence are qualities that Boccaccio found commendable in women. The women in these stories cleverly scheme in order to overcome obstacles that stand in their way. For example, in Day 2, Story 3 a woman uses a disguise in order to accomplish her goals. A princess of England is to be married to an older man she does not

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92 Boccaccio, 359.
love. She ventures out dressed as an abbot to escape her marriage and in doing so she satisfies her desires. During her journey, the princess meets Alessandro and she falls deeply in love with him. The abbot offers to share his bed with Alessandro for the night and the princess sees this as an “opportunity to answer her desire” and proceeds to touch intimately Alessandro.\footnote{Boccaccio, 79.} Alessandro is confused and strangely pleased at the turn of events but he feels strange in allowing the abbot to touch him. The princess notices Alessandro’s confusion and sets him at ease by showing him her breasts and allowing Alessandro to touch her. The princess is described as “exceedingly beautiful” as well as “rich and nobly born.”\footnote{Boccaccio, 80.} Alessandro returns her feelings and they consummate their relationship. Boccaccio described the princess as a woman who possesses intelligence because she manages to outwit male authorities. The princess is pardoned by the pope because she blames herself and her youth for her rash actions. The princess is not a typical woman because she dresses as a man and leaves the safety of her position and family to travel with men. Boccaccio considered the princess as exemplary because she risks everything for her satisfaction, defies male authority, and uses her wit and intelligence to accomplish her desires.

Using a disguise as a means to overcome obstacles is considered clever by Boccaccio. In Day 2, Story 9 a woman is accused of infidelity by her husband and is sentenced to death. Ginerva is characterized as a “model of grace, competence, and discretion” and her husband

\footnote{Boccaccio, 79.} \footnote{Boccaccio, 80.}
Bernabó, a merchant, praises and admires his wife.\textsuperscript{95} Ambrogiuolo does not believe a woman is capable of possessing any of the good qualities associated with men and he plans to demonstrate it to all by seducing Ginerva. Ginerva, who is faithful and loyal, does not succumb to his advances and he is upset to find that Ginerva is all that Bernabó said she was and more. Ambrogiuolo is able to sneak into her bedroom and steals some of her possessions, including a ring, which he shows to Bernabó as proof of Ginerva’s infidelity. Bernabó is distraught to find that Ginerva is not the good and loving wife he believed her to be. He asks his servant to kill her, but Ginerva begs for her life and is set free. She disguises herself as a seaman by “cutting her hair short” and “turning her chemise into a pair of hose” as well as “altering and shortening her jerkin.”\textsuperscript{96} Ginerva eventually protests her innocence before the sultan. Ambrogiuolo is sentenced to death for his deception and dishonoring of Ginerva. Ginerva returns to Bernabó and they lived happily. She uses a disguise that allows her to flee and in doing so she is able to prove her innocence and regain the trust of her husband. She demonstrates her worth and admonishes her husband for not giving her the trust and respect she deserves. Admiration for this woman is apparent because she is intelligent and she is not passive. Boccaccio regarded this woman favorably because she is not constricted by the role assigned to her by society. Ginerva is a clever and intelligent woman and she proves those qualities by escaping death and proving her innocence.

\textsuperscript{95} Boccaccio, 147.  
\textsuperscript{96} Boccaccio, 153.
Cleverly scheming in order to find satisfaction with their lovers is an admirable quality in women of the *Decameron*. In Day 5, Story 4 a young woman sleeps on a balcony in order to be with her lover. Caterina is described as the “fairest and most engaging young lady in the neighborhood.” Ricciardo is a young man from a wealthy and noble family and he is attracted to Caterina. The young lovers want to be together but Caterina’s father is very protective and Caterina is never alone. Ricciardo concludes that the only way for them to be together is if she sleeps on the balcony so that he can climb up to it to be with her. Caterina cleverly schemes and complains about the heat to her mother and her inability to fall asleep because of the temperature. She tells her mother that “young girls get hotter than older women” and her mother agrees with Caterina’s statement. The only solution, according to Caterina, is for her to make her bed outside on the balcony where there is fresh air and where the sound of the nightingale will put her to sleep. Caterina is able to fulfill her desires with Ricciardo all night. The father finds Caterina and Ricciardo together and he forces Ricciardo to propose marriage. Everyone is satisfied with the situation. Boccaccio expressed praise for Caterina because she cleverly manipulates her parents into letting her be with her lover. Caterina uses the argument between older and younger women successfully against her mother. Caterina is a young woman who is not deterred by a traditional and overprotective father. In contrast, she uses his own ideas about young women against him.

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97 Boccaccio, 340.
98 Boccaccio, 341.
Cleverness is shown on Day 7, Story 7 when a woman prevents her husband from doubting her and finding out about her affair. Beatrice is characterized as a “sheer beauty” who captures the attention of a young man.99 Beatrice wins the affections of Anichino, a young nobleman, who becomes the trusted servant of her husband, Egano, in order to be near to Beatrice and confess his feelings. Beatrice feels so deeply for Anichino’s situation that she cannot help but fall in love with the young man. In order to be with Anichino, Beatrice devises a plan. Beatrice tells her husband that Anichino has “asked for her favors” and that she “agreed to meet him in the garden after midnight” but she persuades her husband to go in her stead, disguised as her.100 When Anichino arrives, because he knows Beatrice’s plan, he pretends that he has confessed his love as a test to Beatrice, and he criticizes her for being disloyal to Egano. Thereafter, Egano believes that he has the most faithful of wives and the most loyal of servants and he turns a blind eye to Beatrice’s and Anichino’s affair.

Cleverness is a quality that Beatrice possesses because she is able to manipulate her husband and keep her affair a secret. Beatrice, in light of her relationship with her lover, is represented as the most faithful and loyal of wives. Boccaccio regarded Beatrice favorably because she satisfies her needs and manages to escape the binds of society’s traditional role for women without endangering her image as a good wife and woman.

Furthermore, on Day 9, Story 6 a woman who is clever manages to manipulate the situation to prevent her husband from finding out about his wife’s and daughter’s affair. The

99 Boccaccio, 446.
100 Boccaccio, 449.
The wife of an innkeeper is characterized as “very pretty” and his daughter, Niccolosa, is described as a “lovely and graceful creature of sixteen summers.” The daughter has managed to attract Pinuccio, a gentleman, and, since both were in love, they wasted no time to be together. Pinuccio decides to escape with the girl but he first needs to be invited into her home by her father. Travelling with his friend Adriano, both are given an invitation to spend the night before continuing on their trip. Hearing a noise, the wife gets up to investigate but she accidentally climbs into bed with Adriano, who moves the baby’s cradle when he gets up to take care of a personal matter. Adriano does not waste the opportunity and has sex with the wife. Pinuccio does not want to be caught with Niccolosa and so decides to go back to bed with Adriano. He feels the baby’s cradle and retreats, accidentally getting into bed with his host and telling him of the pleasures he had with his daughter. The host, angry, starts yelling, and his wife, deducing what had transpired, moves into her daughter’s bed. The wife tells her husband that he “drinks too much in the evening” and because of it he starts “dreaming and sleepwalking” and that he is a “plain ass for believing Pinuccio” when she is the one sleeping in Niccolosa’s bed. Both Adriano and Pinuccio are intelligent young men and think of the wife as clever due to her quick thinking and both confirm her story. Boccaccio considered this woman commendable because she uses her cleverness and intellect to prevent a scandal. Because of the darkness and the close proximity of the beds, the wife and daughter of an innkeeper had sex with two guests, though

101 Boccaccio, 578.
102 Boccaccio, 581.
the wife’s quick wit is able to prevent a tragedy and the dishonor of her husband and family. Once again this woman takes matters into her own hands. She possesses the qualities of cleverness, quick thinking, and initiative that Boccaccio admired. The wife cleverly deflects blame onto her husband because of his drinking. She is able to avoid shame and she keeps her and her daughter’s honor intact.

The use of sexual satisfaction and a husband’s duty to his wife as a justification for an affair is clever. On Day 6, Story 7 a woman blames her husband’s inability to satisfy her as an excuse for her adultery. Philippa is portrayed as a “beautiful and exceptionally love-struck” woman. Philippa is in love with Lazzarino, a young man, who can sexually satisfy her needs. Rinaldo finds his wife, Philippa, in bed with Lazzarino and decides to charge her with infidelity. She is summoned to court the next day. Philippa bravely states that she has been having an affair with Lazzarino and that they are in love. She does not deny the truth of the charges brought against her. Furthermore, Philippa claims that the law is unfair by which a cheating spouse who is found guilty can be murdered. Philippa states that “no woman was consulted” when the “iniquitous law was enacted” and if the logic of the law is to be followed then she is not to be blamed for her indiscretion because she never “denied her husband his marital right” but “her pleasure” was not being satisfied. The defense that Philippa presents is clever and it results in her pardon and a change in the law. Philippa is a remarkable woman because she is clever and intelligent as well as beautiful and brave. She

103 Boccaccio, 398.
104 Boccaccio, 399.
confronts the judge and does not deny her love. Philippa is praiseworthy because she is able to get herself pardoned for infidelity and changed the law of her city. Furthermore, Philippa blames her husband’s inability to satisfy her sexual needs and claims she is justified in finding sexual fulfillment even if it is not with her husband. Boccaccio implied that it is the deflection of blame and the satisfaction of sexual urges that forms the crux of her argument and that made it a clever and intelligent defense. Once again, Philippa is a woman who transcends her traditional role and it is this transcendence that makes her a woman to admire.

Having a husband who is a moron and playing off his lack of intelligence is another clever women’s tactic. On Day 7, Story 3 a woman who is having an affair with a friar utilizes her husband’s lack of intelligence to evade being found out. Agnesa is described as a “most beautiful woman” who has caught the attention of Brother Rinaldo, a young friar from a good family.105 Rinaldo is unable to get close to Agnesa to confess his feelings and so he takes advantage of an opportunity by becoming the godfather of Agnesa’s newborn child. Rinaldo, as the child’s godfather, now has the perfect excuse to be seen visiting Agnesa’s house without raising any suspicions. Agnesa has rejected Rinaldo before, but she eventually becomes intimately involved with him. During one of his visits, her husband comes home early and Agnesa decides to tell her husband that his son is sick. Agnesa claims that their son has “worms and they are making their way to his heart,” and that Rinaldo has been performing a “spell” to kill them.106 Agnesa possesses cleverness and because of it she is

105 Boccaccio, 426.
106 Boccaccio, 429.
able to keep the image of her honor intact. Agnesa successfully manipulates her husband into believing the friar is saving his son’s life and in consequence her husband is in debt to Rinaldo. The son’s father praises his wife as a great mother and wife and praises the friar as a savior. Boccaccio implied that Agnesa’s actions are laudable because she uses her husband’s own shortcomings to keep her affair a secret. Agnesa’s adept handling of the situation is praiseworthy.

**WOMEN IN PURSUIT OF THEIR PASSION**

According to Boccaccio, women who do anything and everything in pursuit of their passion are commendable. These women transcend roles and boundaries and they manipulate and evade being found out. The stories about women who pursue their passions seek to satisfy their sexual desires. For example, on Day 3, Story 4 a woman who is not sexually fulfilled by her husband finds another man to satisfy her. Isabetta is conveyed as a “pretty young woman” who is “fresh as a daisy” and as “plump as an orchard-grown apple.”¹⁰⁷ Don Felice, a friar, is helping Puccio, Isabetta’s husband, to reach heaven. Isabetta catches the attention of the friar and she gives into Don Felice when she realizes that he can satisfy the needs that her husband will not. Isabetta and Don Felice are satisfying one another one night as Puccio prays; he notices the shaking of the bed and asks Isabetta about it. Not wanting to be discovered, Isabetta responds that “supperless to bed, up all night.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Boccaccio, 191.
¹⁰⁸ Boccaccio, 194.
Puccio believes his wife, knowing that he has been requiring her to fast. Isabetta continues to find fulfillment every night with Don Felice. Puccio does not satisfy Isabetta and he is not performing his duty as a husband. Accordingly, in Boccaccio’s story she is allowed to find satisfaction elsewhere without being judged.

Women are given the opportunity to find pleasure with someone else if their husbands are jealous and overbearing. On Day 7, Story 5 a woman falls for a young man whom she knows and who lives next door to her. The wife is portrayed as “exceedingly beautiful” and because of her attractive physical appearance her husband is extremely jealous. The wife is able to confess to Filippo her love for him and she devises a plan. There is a hole in her wall that connects to Filippo’s room and there they spend many nights with each other. The wife wants to meet her lover in person and tells her husband she wants to go to confession. Being extremely jealous, the husband dresses as a priest and hears his wife’s confession. The wife, who knows what he is planning, tells him that she is having an affair with a priest who comes to her house every night. That same night the husband goes outside to wait for this priest and Filippo is brought secretly into her house and bed and they take pleasure with each other. The husband demands the name of the priest but the wife tells him that she knew it was him in confession and that she “gave him what he was looking for.” Feeling guilty, the husband apologizes and decides not to keep his wife locked up. The wife gains more freedom, and spends many nights with Filippo without worrying about

109 Boccaccio, 436.
110 Boccaccio, 441.
her husband’s mistrust. Boccaccio described the wife as having had an affair because of her husband’s behavior. The husband neglects his duty as a husband because he is blinded by jealousy and mistreats his wife. The wife is a remarkable woman because she uses her husband’s own faults against him and she deflects any blame and doubt from falling on herself. The wife is allowed to pursue a sexual relationship with Filippo because she is not getting what she needs from her husband.

Continuing the trend of unsatisfactory husbands is Day 7, Story 6 in which a woman has two lovers and manages to evade detection by her husband. Isabella is described as a “young lady of gentle birth” and of “ravishing beauty” whose husband “left the lady somewhat unsatisfied.” Isabella falls in love with Leonetto because her husband neglects her and the young man satisfies her. Another man, Lambertuccio, whom Isabella does not like, desires her because of her beauty and because he frightens her she reluctantly becomes his lover. Taking advantage of her husband’s absence, Isabella invites Leonetto to her home. Lambertuccio also arrives at Isabella’s home, demanding to be seen. Isabella hides Leonetto and attends to Lambertuccio. Isabella’s husband comes home early and she tells him that Lambertuccio has chased Leonetto into her home and the frightened young man “pleaded for his life” and hid there. Her husband does not doubt Isabella and escorts the young man back home safely. Isabella is free to pursue sexual fulfillment elsewhere because her husband cannot provide it for her. Boccaccio praised Isabella because she cleverly handles a

111 Boccaccio, 442.
112 Boccaccio, 444.
situation that could have been tragic. Isabella manages to satisfy her needs without getting caught by her husband.

Neglectful husbands as the reason for their wives’ extramarital affairs is a theme expressed in several of Boccaccio’s stories. On Day 7, Story 8 a woman is caught having an affair by her husband but due to the woman’s clever scheme she is spared and not found guilty. Sismonda is described as a “young gentlewoman” who is married to Arriguccio Belinghieri, a merchant, who is below her station. Accustomed to being left alone, she begins an affair with Ruberto, a young man who used to court her. Sismonda and Ruberto are so happy to be together that Sismonda stops taking precautions to keep the affair secret and Arriguccio becomes jealous. Sismonda wants to spend the nights with Ruberto and comes up with a plan that will allow her to do so. Arriguccio is a heavy sleeper so Sismonda ties a string around her toe that will be long enough for Ruberto to pull. Sismonda lets Ruberto into her bedroom as soon as her husband falls asleep. Arriguccio hears the knocking of the door and starts to chase after the man. Sismonda switches places with her maid and when Arriguccio returns he beats up the servant, thinking it is Sismonda. Arriguccio then goes to Sismonda’s family to accuse her of infidelity and reveals to them what has transpired. Sismonda denies it all and tells Arriguccio that “he never beat her” and everyone including himself are “witnesses to the fact that she does not look like she received a pummeling.” She adds that if Arriguccio attempts to beat her “she will make some changes to his anatomy.”

113 Boccaccio, 451.
114 Boccaccio, 455.
Having escaped detection, Sismonda is able to enjoy further pleasures with Ruberto. Boccaccio did not judge Sismonda for her pursuit of passion outside of marriage because she is neglected by her husband. Furthermore, Boccaccio implied that Sismonda is justified because her husband is a merchant and is always travelling and leaving his wife alone. Sismonda is permitted to find her satisfaction with someone other than her husband, and she is not found guilty of the crime she is accused of committing. Sismonda is a clever woman because she is able to trick both her husband and her family. Boccaccio admired Sismonda because she physically threatened her husband if he dared to beat her. Sismonda is a brave woman who takes many risks to be with her lover and she does not allow the fact that she is married to stop her.

Some women pursue their passions even though they are enclosed in a convent or nunnery and have taken vows. On Day 9, Story 2 a young nun becomes the lover of a man. Isabetta is a young nun who is portrayed as a “phenomenal beauty” as well as a “young woman of noble birth.”115 Isabetta falls in love with a male visitor to her convent and both are unhappy until they are able to find a way to be together. During one of their many amorous encounters the nuns discover Isabetta with her lover and take them both to see the abbess. Unknown to the nuns, the abbess herself is entertaining a male visitor, the priest. Dressing in a hurry, the abbess does not realize that she accidentally has put the priest’s breeches on her head instead of her veil. The abbess discovers Isabetta with her lover and starts to admonish Isabetta when the young nun realizes the abbess’ mistake and brings it to

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115 Boccaccio, 560.
the attention of all of the nuns.\textsuperscript{116} The abbess then confesses how hard it is to resist the temptation of the flesh and she tells her nuns that they are free to find their pleasure with whomever they want. Both the abbess and Isabetta continue their sexual relationships. Boccaccio did not find fault with Isabetta or the abbess because these women are denied what men and other women are readily given. Isabetta and the abbess are both women and they also have sexual desires that need to be satisfied and these desires are unfulfilled. Boccaccio applauded Isabetta because she finds a young man to love and satisfy her and she cleverly escapes being punished for her transgression. The other nuns are given the same freedom to find someone to fulfill their needs because of Isabetta. Boccaccio allowed these women to pursue their passions without the need to feel guilty or judged.

\textbf{Faithful in Love}

Boccaccio described women who were faithful in love in his stories. The women who represent this ideal were admirable because they overcome many obstacles to be with the one they love. For example, in Day 3, Story 7 it is thanks to a married woman’s lover that her husband is saved from death for a crime he did not commit. Ermellina is described as a “commendable lady” and she attracts the attentions of Tedaldo, a noble young man.\textsuperscript{117} Tedaldo is so upset at being rejected by her that he flees the city heartbroken. He returns only after several years, disguised, and learns that everyone believes he was murdered by

\textsuperscript{116} Boccaccio, 562.

\textsuperscript{117} Boccaccio, 208.
Aldobrandino, Ermellina’s husband. Ermellina confides in a stranger, who happens to be Tedaldo, the real reason she dismissed her lover years before. It was because a “friar heard her confession of love for Tedaldo” and the “damnable friar frightened her” to such an extent that she refused him but “he has never been ousted from her heart.” Tedaldo reveals that he is her lover thought dead and he goes to the prison to set everything right. Thereafter, with her husband’s blessing, Ermellina accepts her love for Tedaldo. Boccaccio admired Ermellina because she is loyal to her heart and it is her faithfulness to Tedaldo that saved her husband. Ermellina honestly loves Tedaldo, but gives him up out of fear, though she never forgets him. According to Boccaccio, Ermellina encompasses the concept of faithfulness in love because she overcomes many obstacles in order to be with her lover.

Many of Boccaccio’s stories of being faithful in love end with the death of one or both of the lovers. Boccaccio thus suggested that true lovers’ commitment to each other is strong even after death. In Day 4, Story 5 a young woman wastes away, pining over her dead lover. Lisabetta is described as a “very pretty girl of gentle manners” who fell in love with a young and handsome but humble man named Lorenzo. The two spend many nights in each other’s arms, until one of Lisabetta’s brothers discovers the romance and tells her other brothers, who murder Lorenzo in order to save their family’s reputation. Lisabetta notices Lorenzo’s absence and she questions her brothers but receives no answer from them. But Lorenzo comes to Lisabetta in a dream and tells her about his murder and the exact place

118 Boccaccio, 212.
119 Boccaccio, 283.
where he is buried. Lisabetta takes Lorenzo’s head and reburies it in a big planter used for basil, watering it with her tears. The brothers find out that the plant holds Lorenzo’s head, and they flee in fear of their crime becoming public. Lisabetta continues to weep for her beloved plant until she dies. Lisabetta represents faithfulness in love because she never forgets her beloved Lorenzo. Boccaccio considered Lisabetta to be a remarkable woman because she stands up to her brothers, transcending her traditional role as a woman, and because she stood steadfast in her feelings for Lorenzo even after his death.

A woman faithful in love even after death is also conveyed in Day 4, Story 8. Salvestra is described as a beautiful young girl and a tailor’s daughter whose “friendship turned to love.”120 Girolamo grows up with Salvestra and falls in love with her. Girolamo’s guardian sends him away to prevent a marriage. Salvestra marries another man, but after several years Girolamo returns. He is devastated and attempts to find a way to get close to her. Girolamo manages to get into her bed and Salvestra allows him to rest there for a while so her husband will not wake up, but he dies in her arms. During Girolamo’s funeral Salvestra’s heart “melted at the last moment” and she throws herself over him “died over his dead body.”121 Both Salvestra and Girolamo are buried together in the tomb. Boccaccio implied that Salvestra is faithful in love because her heart never forgets how she feels about Girolamo. Salvestra is commendable because she could not be with her love, Girolamo, in life but in death they are together. Salvestra is faithful to Girolamo because she proves her

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120 Boccaccio, 298.
121 Boccaccio, 301.
love and loyalty in dying. Boccaccio represented Salvestra as an unconventional woman because she is faithful to her love. Salvestra is not greedy or manipulative; she is a woman in love.

Another facet to the concept of women’s faithfulness in love is the life of the lover who did not die. On Day 4, Story 6 a woman loses her lover and she continues to live a virtuous life. Andreuola is described as a “very pretty young girl” who falls in love with a “charming young man of humble station but impeccable conduct.”¹²² Both lovers admit their feelings and they consummate their relationship. Since both are very much in love and Andreuola knows her father will not accept Gabriotto, both are married in secret. Andreuola has a dream that Gabriotto dies and she is frightened, but Gabriotto does not believe her and she does not want to worry him. Soon thereafter Gabriotto dies, and Andreuola and her maid place Gabriotto in a chest and leave him in front of his home so that he will receive a proper burial. Andreuola is devastated and “wants to die” because “she loved him more than her own self” but she wants to “protect her love of Gabriotto.”¹²³ The podestá (chief magistrate) investigates Gabriotto’s death. He tries to blackmail Andreuola into becoming his wife and asks Andreuola’s father for her hand in marriage. Andreuola tells her father that she was married to Gabriotto because he was the “man she loved best” and she asks for his forgiveness so that she “may die as his daughter.”¹²⁴ Andreuola’s father is so moved by her

¹²² Boccaccio, 287-88.
¹²³ Boccaccio, 289-291.
¹²⁴ Boccaccio, 292.
declaration that he forgives her and gives Gabriotto a funeral deserving of a son-in-law. Andreuola, saddened over Gabriotto’s death, enters a convent. According to Boccaccio, Andreuola is praiseworthy because she remains faithful to Gabriotto even though she is still alive. Andreuola is an unconventional woman because she defies her family’s wishes, marries for love and below her station, evades the sexual advances of the podestà, pleads beautifully for her life, and even becomes a nun and lives the rest of her life virtuously in memory of her Gabriotto. According to Boccaccio, Andreuola is faithful in love because she overcomes many obstacles before and after the death of her lover. Andreuola is a woman who goes beyond her role because she takes the initiative. It is Andreuola’s desire to protect her lover that motivates her actions and suggests that she remains faithful to Gabriotto even after his death.

CONCLUSION

The women whom Boccaccio regarded as unconventional display four basic qualities: a willingness to do anything for love, the possession of admirable qualities, the relentless pursuit of passion, and an extreme faithfulness in love. Furthermore, these women take many risks, they overcome obstacles, and they defy their families and social norms. Boccaccio excused the behavior of these women because most of their husbands are not fulfilling their marital duties and these women are left wanting. Boccaccio admired these women and he did not judge them.

Boccaccio praised cleverness and intelligence as well as the women who demonstrated these qualities to get what they wanted. Women who pursue their passion are seen as clever and intelligent because of their schemes. These women take many risks to be
with their lovers and they need to be able to get out of dangerous situations. The women who are married sought pleasure elsewhere because their husbands are neglectful, jealous, overbearing, and they do not fulfill their marital duties. Boccaccio regarded highly this type of women because they exhibit the other factors that make them unconventional. Women who are faithful in love could also possess cleverness and intelligence as well as demonstrate a willingness to do anything for their lovers and they definitely pursue their passion at all cost.
CHAPTER 4
OTHER CONTEMPORARY VIEWS ON WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

INTRODUCTION

Boccaccio described women who were both conventional and unconventional in the *Decameron* and he also proffered similar views regarding women in *De Mulieribus Claris* (*Famous Women*). Since both of Boccaccio’s works are important sources for the fourteenth century it is interesting to analyze Boccaccio’s views as they compare to other historical writings and writers of his time. Attitudes toward women similar to those of Boccaccio are revealed in diverse historical sources: his *Famous Women*, the chronicle of Dino Compagni, the letters of Alessandra Strozzi, and the religious writings of Angela Foligno and Saint Catherine of Siena. These sources suggest that men valued women for their beauty and wealth, associated them with nature, considered them meek and controllable, and thought of women as emotional and as causing fights and war.
ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL SOURCES

Boccaccio wrote Famous Women because he wanted to illustrate all of the renowned actions performed by women. This collection of one hundred and six biographies was the first in western literature that was dedicated entirely to women. Boccaccio maintained that although most women described were virtuous some of the women were also known for their evil deeds: “mix[ing] the impure with the pure.” Boccaccio juxtaposed the virtues and vices of the women in the hope that the virtues will prevail. Famous Women was dedicated to Andrea Acciaiuoli, countess of Altavilla, because “her splendid deeds” made of the countess “a shining model of ancient virtue.”

Christopher Martin argues that Virginia Brown’s edition of Famous Women provides an opportunity to explore Boccaccio’s work in greater detail. Brown believes that Famous Women is misogynistic, according to Martin, because it “honors women who have surpassed their naturally inferior femininity.” But Martin disagrees, suggesting that Boccaccio’s collection of biographies provides an example of women who challenged social roles.

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126 Giovanni Boccaccio, Famous Women, ed and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5. This edition is based on Vittorro Zaccaria’s authoritative edition of 1967 that is based on Boccaccio’s final revision manuscript held in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence.

127 Boccaccio, 5.

Furthermore, Martin argues that Boccaccio’s chosen women “challenge his moralistic pose” because of their “allurements and proclivities.”

Julia Simms Holderness analyzes Boccaccio’s tale of Semiramis from *Famous Women* to determine the author’s view regarding women. She claims that Boccaccio’s use of Semiramis shows his negative view of women, especially of feminine cunning. In the *Decameron* Boccaccio considered feminine cunning to be “a virtue but in *Famous Women* it was a vice.” Boccaccio’s treatment of Semiramis shows that Boccaccio believed that even the smartest woman could fall prey to their sexual nature. According to Holderness, Semiramis’s tale is “a second Fall” of humanity that demonstrates how “femininity perverts her masculinity” and how “feminine intelligence is a product and a reminder of the Fall.”

Margaret Franklin examines Boccaccio’s representations of Amazons in *Famous Women* as well as in another of his works, the *Teseida*. She argues that both depictions of Amazons warn men about the threat of powerful women. Amazons in the *Teseida* were shown as “relinquish[ing] their masculine activities and autonomy” to “reassume conventional female roles,” like remarrying. Boccaccio implied the praise of Amazons in *Famous Women* because they sought “retribution for their husbands’ deaths” and these women “refus[ed] to submit to inappropriate male attention” and in doing so they “rise above

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129 Martin, 531.
131 Holderness, 97, 99.
female concupiscence.” Boccaccio’s portrayal of Amazons suggests a fear of strong women and the sentiment that this type of woman should be controlled.

Carla Freccero analyzes Boccaccio’s works to determine gender ideologies. Freccero juxtaposes Boccaccio’s representations of the Amazons with his portrayal of other women characters. According to Freccero, Boccaccio’s Famous Women “simultaneously acknowledge[s] women’s equality with men” and then “aggressively undermines” this recognition. Also in her mind, Boccaccio’s description of the Amazons expresses a fear of powerful women and a need to subdue what these women represent. Boccaccio’s portrayal of Amazons in Teseida “identifies the element of resistance” and marriage becomes “the moral solution” that allowed her to “change her mind.”

Famous Women contradicted Boccaccio’s unconventional views of women in the Decameron because it gave examples of women in their traditional social aspects and roles. Women in these stories were valued for their physical beauty and wealth, and for their association with nature. For example, Boccaccio described Medusa, the daughter and heir of King Phorcus, as a beautiful woman. Medusa’s “face was exceptionally attractive” with “hair . . . golden and abundant” so that she “commanded the gaze of many men”; “her knowledge of agriculture . . . acquired [her] the name Gorgon.” Boccaccio offered the

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133 Franklin, 17.
135 Freccero, 241.
136 Boccaccio, “Chapter XXII” in Famous Women, 89.
physical attractiveness and association with nature as Medusa’s most praiseworthy characteristics. Furthermore, Boccaccio stated that Perseus, an important man in Achaia, “heard the reports” of Medusa’s beauty and conceived a “desire to see this beautiful woman” and “take possession of her treasure” was burning in him.  

Boccaccio’s representation of Medusa repeated the conventional view of women.  

The notion of woman as meek and controllable was also expressed by Boccaccio in *Famous Women*. Boccaccio made an example of Lucretia’s subordination to her husband and social norms. Lucretia was the daughter of Spurius Lucretius Tricipitinus, a famous Roman, and the wife of Tarquinius Collatinus whose father was Egerius. Lucretia “appeared lovelier . . . because of the beauty of her countenance . . . [and] her upright conduct” as well as for her commitment to her wifely duties because she “was discovered . . . plainly dressed and spinning wool with her ladies.”  

Lucretia was reduced to the domestic sphere where household chores are the wife’s duty. Boccaccio praised Lucretia’s conventional characteristics: her physical attractiveness and submission to male authority. Collatinus, Lucretia’s husband, was also honored because his wife adhered to her social role. In the story, Lucretia commits suicide after her chastity is violated, and even that act is admirable because her actions defend the honor of her husband and family.  

Pamphile’s admirable qualities in *Famous Women* also associated women with nature and assigned domesticity as the acceptable social arena for women. Pamphile was the

137 Boccaccio, 89.
daughter of Platea and she invented the weaving of cotton. Boccaccio implied that Pamphile was the first to “pick . . . cotton wool . . . and place it on the distaff” and then “demonstrated how to make thread . . . and how to weave.”¹³⁹ According to Boccaccio, this “invention . . . easily showed how capable Pamphile must have been in other respects.”¹⁴⁰ Pamphile’s intellect was also praiseworthy because she developed a new craft that was profitable. Boccaccio characterized Pamphile as a conventional woman because her admirable qualities were associated with nature. In inventing a new craft Pamphile secured further the role of women in the household.

The notion that women were the cause of war and battle between men was a traditional one and Lavinia represented this idea in Famous Women. Lavinia was the daughter of King Latinus and Queen Amata and she was the sole heir to the ancient kingdom of Latium. Queen Amata wanted Turnus as husband to her daughter but Latinus, aware of a prophecy, gave his daughter to the Trojan Aeneas. Boccaccio explained that although Lavinia was of “remarkable beauty” and the “heir to her father’s kingdom” she was “famous more for the war between Aeneas and Turnus . . . than for any deed of her own.”¹⁴¹ Lavinia provided an example of a conventional woman because the qualities that she was applauded for were her beauty and her inheritance. Furthermore, she was the reason that two men start a battle in which many “noble men were wounded and slaughtered.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Boccaccio, “Chapter XLIV,” 185.
¹⁴⁰ Boccaccio, 185.
¹⁴¹ Boccaccio, “Chapter XLI,” 165.
¹⁴² Boccaccio, 165.
At the same time, Boccaccio in *Famous Women* admired women who were unconventional because they were willing to do anything for love, pursued their passion, and ultimately were faithful in love. Boccaccio characterized Joanna, queen of Jerusalem and Sicily, as intelligent and as a woman who followed her desires. Joanna was commendable because she “cleansed . . . the cities [of] outlaws” and she “brought . . . order to the land.”\(^{143}\) Furthermore, Boccaccio admired Joanna because of her character. Boccaccio considered Joanna strong because she “overcame everything with her lofty and indomitable spirit” and she “valued and remembered devoted service.”\(^{144}\) Joanna was praiseworthy because she possessed qualities that Boccaccio respected. Boccaccio represented Joanna as an unconventional woman because she was intelligent, decided to pursue her passion, and was “renowned . . . for lineage, power, and character.”\(^{145}\)

Leaena, a Greek prostitute of unknown parentage and another of the women presented in *Famous Women*, merited admiration because of her bravery and strength of character. Boccaccio described Leaena as a woman with “manly strength in the face of torture . . . [who] went astray because of idleness . . . not because of an evil nature.”\(^{146}\) Bravery during captivity and torture renders Leaena praiseworthy. Boccaccio claimed that Leaena “steeled herself . . . and did not answer questions”; when she felt that her “resolve

\(^{143}\) Boccaccio, “Chapter CVI,” 471.
\(^{144}\) Boccaccio, 471, 473.
\(^{145}\) Boccaccio, 467.
\(^{146}\) Boccaccio, “Chapter L,” 207.
would . . . falter . . . she bit off her tongue . . . and spat it out."\textsuperscript{147} Leaena’s courage and
strength of character were qualities that Boccaccio respected. Leaena was not an example of
a traditional woman because she possessed strength and bravery in circumstances that would
have broken the spirit of others.

\textit{Famous Women’s} Queen Argia, the daughter of King Adrastus and the wife of
Polynices of Thebes, reflected the willingness to do anything for love and faithfulness in
love. According to Boccaccio, Queen Argia was “remarkably beautiful” but what was most
noteworthy about her was her “eternal record of conjugal love”\textsuperscript{148} The wife of Polynices was
a woman to respect because she chose to be faithful to her husband despite all odds. Queen
Argia took it upon herself to ask for her father’s aid against the tyranny of Polynices’ brother.
Polynices was injured in battle and died. His body was left on the battlefield, but Queen
Argia, “casting aside . . . womanly weakness,” went to look for her husband’s body; “the
bandits . . . did not frighten her, nor the wild beasts,” “she consigned his body to the flames.
. .[and] placed the ashes in an urn.”\textsuperscript{149} Boccaccio admired Queen Argia because she
overcame many dangers and obstacles to retrieve the corpse of her husband. Queen Argia
demonstrated bravery in the face of adversity and danger. She was willing to do anything for
her love and her behavior shows her faithfulness despite the death of her husband.

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[147] Boccaccio, “Chapter L,” 207.
\item[148] Boccaccio, “Chapter XXIX,” 117.
\item[149] Boccaccio, 119.
\end{footnotesize}
Queen Camilla, the daughter of the ancient king of the Volscians, was characterized in *Famous Women* as a model for women. Boccaccio portrayed Camilla as an unconventional and commendable woman because she chose to pursue her passion. Camilla was taught by her father to “hurl the spear, use a slingshot, stretch the bow, wear a quiver, chase and catch deer and wild goats, and disdain all womanly work.” According to Boccaccio, Camilla was a self-sufficient woman unhindered by traditional social expectations. Queen Camilla, an intelligent and cunning woman, also aided Turnus in defeating his enemies. Furthermore, Camilla was depicted as a model for women because, as Boccaccio stated, “[let] the girls . . . consider Camilla’s example; . . . let them learn . . . the proper demeanor” with respect to Camilla’s self-sufficiency and independence. Women in Boccaccio’s day were expected to follow the traditional social roles imposed on them, but he desired to give women an alternative in Queen Camilla, as was evident in Boccaccio’s praise for her intelligence and her pursuit of passion. Camilla willingly chose to pursue activities that were not associated with women and Boccaccio demonstrated his praise in depicting Camilla as a model for women.

Another woman whom Boccaccio represented as a role model to other women was Penelope, the wife of Ulysses, king of Ithaca. Boccaccio held Penelope in high esteem because of her “untarnished honor and undefiled purity.” According to Boccaccio,

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151 Boccaccio, 157.
152 Boccaccio, “Chapter XLI,” 159.
Penelope had many qualities to commend her but the most important characteristic was her faithfulness in love because she “resolved to maintain . . . a chaste and perpetual widowhood.”\textsuperscript{153} The queen “devised a clever way to deceive her enemies” by weaving a cloth by day and then unweaving it in secret at night, and “[she] asked . . . that she be allowed to wait for her husband until she could finish weaving the cloth that she had begun in accord with queenly custom.”\textsuperscript{154} Boccaccio also praised Penelope because once she decided on a course nothing swayed her mind. Women’s traditional fickleness was not present in her. Instead, Penelope was characterized as a woman of strength, beauty, wealth, nobility, with a steady mind and an undying loyalty to her husband.

**THE CHRONICLE OF DINO COMPAGNI**

The chronicler Dino Compagni provides another interesting example of the depiction of women in fourteenth-century Florence. Historical scholarship characterizes Compagni as a “successful merchant and member” of Florence’s “political and social elite.”\textsuperscript{155} Dino Compagni was born in 1255 in Florence and died in 1324.\textsuperscript{156} He was born into a wealthy merchant family and he was involved in civil affairs. Compagni, who belonged to the White Guelfs political faction, was opposed to papal influence.\textsuperscript{157} He was also a Florentine official

\textsuperscript{153} Boccaccio, 161.
\textsuperscript{154} Boccaccio, 161.
\textsuperscript{157} Arnaldi, “Compagni, Dino.”
and historian who wrote a chronicle of the city’s political life. Compagni’s chronicle was comprised of three books. The first book gave a description of Florence and its surroundings as well as Compagni’s criteria on how to differentiate that which is true from the false. The second book described the stages of the struggle between the two political factions, the White Ghibellines and the Black Guelphs in Florence: the former opposing papal influence and the latter supporting the papacy. The third book illustrated the election of the new Pope Benedict XI in 1303 and continued to describe the corruption of Florence as well as the evils that befell the city.

Carol Bresnahan Menning considers Compagni’s chronicle useful for understanding Tuscan politics. According to Menning, Compagni “fell victim to his own political blindness” because he often “attribute[d] the worst motives to the rival Black [Guelphs].”¹⁵⁸ Menning considers this a fault in the chronicle because Compagni did not provide a clear example of what was true and what was fiction as he claimed he would.

Teresa Pugh Rupp analyzes Compagni’s chronicle in the context of the political chaos of fourteenth-century Florence. She argues that the Cronica “favors the Ordinances of Justice established in the thirteenth century,” a set of political reforms that Florence’s political leaders quickly ignored.¹⁵⁹ Compagni implied that evil men destroy good governance but that divine justice will prevail at the end. Rupp analyzes Compagni’s

¹⁵⁸ Menning, 476.
retelling of the Buondelmonti murder, for example, and concludes “just as the original
division of Florence into factions could be traced to a marriage, the peacemaking too was
imitated by a marriage.”

Carol Lansing also discusses Dino Compagni’s chronicle in terms of the political
chaos described in his chronicle. Lansing implies that Compagni blamed men without honor
for the chaotic state of Florence. According to Lansing, Compagni “looked for moral order”
but none was found because “inherited privilege does not relate to real worthiness.”
Compagni’s chronicle implies that corrupt and evil men had destroyed Florence but also that
justice would ultimately restore the city.

Susan Noakes claims that Compagni’s vow in the Florentine church of San Giovanni
is significant in understanding the chaos in Florence. As described in the chronicle,
Compagni appealed to the leaders of the Florentine factions to make the vow by “recall[ing]
the strong religious and civic bonds which all of them had assumed at the time of baptism,” a
unity that would be imperative in order to keep a foreign prince, Charles of Valois, from
invading Florence. According to Noakes, Compagni was a firm believer of the commune and blamed the chaos on the deceptions of certain Florentine factions.

Placing the worth of a woman on her physical beauty was a traditional concept shared
by both Boccaccio and Dino Compagni. Compagni described in his chronicle how the

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160 Rupp, 325-326.
division of Florence into the two factions of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines had first occurred. Buondelmonte from the Buondelmonti family was engaged to the daughter of Oderigo Giantruffetti but broke his pledge when Aldruda, the wife of Forteguerra Donati, presented Buondelmonte with one of her daughters whom “she was saving for him” and the young man saw her and “want[ed] her.” Aldruda was also willing to pay the penalty that Buondelmonte owed to Giantruffetti for the broken engagement. Buondelmonte’s actions represented a man who places a woman’s value in her physical appearance above everything else. Aldruda’s behavior revealed a woman who was conniving and manipulative.

Compagni’s characterization of this history also implied a conventional notion of women as objects. Donati’s daughter was an object whom her mother sold to the better customer and in retrospect she was a desirable object that Buondelmonte wanted to possess. Buondelmonte’s rejected fiancée was also represented as an object that men could accept or reject.

Another traditional aspect of the representation of women in Compagni’s writings was that women were meek and controllable. Compagni expressed this conventional view through his explanations of the battles between the Blacks and the Whites. The magistrates of Pistoia “sent away women and others of low status” and they were “given to the enemies” because they were short of supplies. The male officials of the city did not hesitate to barter their women because traditional views of women allowed men to do with them as they saw fit. The enemy “recognized the women” as belonging to Pistoia and because of it, “the

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164 Compagni, 77.
women were raped.” Compagni demonstrated that women are made to pay the consequences of the actions of men. These women did not have any control over their fates.

Both Boccaccio and Compagni shared an admiration of certain qualities in women. Compagni held in high regard the empress, Margaret of Brabant, because of her “noble reputation and the great sanctity of her good life.” According to Compagni, the empress was praiseworthy because of her selfless acts and caring nature. Compagni added that she was “buried with great honor.” Compagni described the empress as an unconventional woman because she was passionate about helping others and she was clever. Determination, selflessness, passion, and intelligence were qualities that made the empress an unconventional woman to be admired.

THE LETTERS OF ALESSANDRA STROZZI

Another interesting example of the portrayal of women, albeit from fifteenth-century Florence, is given by Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi. She provides an example of social, domestic, and political life in fifteenth-century Florence through her letters. Alessandra was born in 1408 and she died in 1471. She was born into the merchant patriciate of Florence, an elite class in Florentine society. Macinghi married Matteo Strozzi at the age of fifteen and

165 Compagni, 77.
166 Compagni, 93.
167 Compagni, 93.
together they had five children who survived into adulthood. The Strozzi were one of the most prestigious families in Florence and had held leading positions in politics and business. Alessandra wrote seventy-three letters in the span of twenty-three years, illustrating many parts of her life.\(^{169}\)

Only some of these letters have been published. Judith Bryce implies that the thirty-five letters chosen by Heather Gregory for publication are appropriate because they “convey an [auto]biographical narrative” that is “illustrative of the attitudes, concerns, and activities characteristic of [Alessandra Strozzi].”\(^{170}\) According to Bryce, Gregory’s edition is helpful because it gives examples of various topics ranging from Florentine politics to everyday domestic issues.

Gene Brucker argues that the most “striking feature” of Strozzi’s letters is the “sense of authenticity and spontaneity.”\(^{171}\) He claims that Strozzi’s letters are evidence of her personality and character. Alessandra was not afraid to show her emotions in her letters to her son. Furthermore, the letters demonstrate Alessandra as a “tough ruthless landlady who scrutinized her peasants’ work” and “demanded her half-share of the yield.”\(^{172}\)

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\(^{172}\) Brucker, 153.
Ann Crabb recognizes Alessandra Strozzi as a “competent financial manager” as demonstrated in her letters.\textsuperscript{173} Crabb implies that Alessandra’s knowledge of finances is due to Strozzi’s mercantile family. Alessandra clearly discussed financial matters with her son Filippo and she also related both her economic successes and failures to him in her letters. Furthermore, Crabb implies that Alessandra’s negotiations with “tax authorities suggest” that “widows were involved in the world outside the household.”\textsuperscript{174} The letters of Alessandra Strozzi provide examples of women who participated in more active social roles.

Thomas Kuehn uses Strozzi’s letters to argue against women’s sense of individuality and personhood in fifteenth-century Florence. He states that Alessandra Strozzi “conforms more closely to anthropologists’ sense that agency is social . . . and that she operated for her sons.”\textsuperscript{175} Even though Alessandra appeared in court several times, she does not have “individuality in any modern sense because she did not have agency in legal actions.”\textsuperscript{176} Like all women in fifteenth-century Florence, Alessandra required a \textit{mundualdus} (a male guardian) in legal matters.\textsuperscript{177}

Alessandra Strozzi was held in high esteem because she possessed the qualities of intelligence and cleverness that Boccaccio admired. Strozzi was not a traditional woman

\begin{footnotes}
\item[174] Crabb, 56.
\item[176] Kuehn, 74.
\item[177] Kuehn, 58.
\end{footnotes}
because she did not behave in the manner acceptable for women and she was in charge of her family’s finances. Intelligence was a characteristic Strozzi possessed because she oversaw some economic activities for her family and took over duties that were generally associated with men. In one letter to her son Filippo, for example, Strozzi wrote about the arranged marriage of her daughter Caterina. The letter showed Strozzi’s intelligence because she argued that it was “necessary to marry her daughter because she was sixteen years old” and the fiancé Marco Parenti was willing to take “half of the dowry now and wait two years for the rest.”

This letter demonstrated Strozzi’s intelligence and cleverness in arranging a marriage to a silk merchant and reaching an agreement concerning her daughter’s dowry.

Negotiating and purchasing of property was another task that Strozzi oversaw as the head of her family. In another letter to her son Alessandra discussed her plan to sell a small property she owned that was being contested by her brother-in-law. She claimed that the “small farm in Antella will get rid of many expenses” and, when the title was cleared, the farm would bring “eight hundred florins added to the three hundred Filippo has is enough to begin business ventures.”

This letter demonstrated Alessandra’s sense for business. Strozzi also expressed anger in her letter because she heard about her “sons throwing away money instead of saving a penny” and she stated that their “bad habits have brought the family shame” and it “hurts the family.”

Strozzi made known her desire to help her

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179 Strozzi, 69.
180 Strozzi, 69.
family. Her excellent skills at managing the family’s finances and her wish to help her children were qualities that made Strozzi an admirable woman. Strozzi was an unconventional woman because she possessed intelligence and was good in handling money.

Furthermore, Strozzi’s intelligence and cleverness were shown in the letters she wrote to her son Filippo. Strozzi commented in one on her “carefulness to not spend money uselessly” and she told her son that she would “continue to do what she thinks is best for herself and her family.” In another she showed her good sense for financial matters. It described the remaining debt she owed to Caterina’s husband as part of the dowry. Caterina was pregnant and Strozzi wanted to “take out insurance for the five hundred florins” in case Caterina did not survive childbirth because she “does not want to lose the money.” Unlike her sons, Strozzi had a marvelous sense of financial matters and did not spend money carelessly. She was adept in handling matters that were traditionally considered as belonging to the men in the family.

**THE RELIGIOUS WRITINGS OF ANGELA OF FOLIGNO AND CATHERINE OF SIENA**

A closer contemporary to Boccaccio who provided examples of the opinions of women is Angela of Foligno. Angela of Foligno’s writings are not about herself or her family, but mystical visions based on the doctrines of medieval Christianity. Angela was

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181 Strozzi, 109.
182 Strozzi, 51.
born in 1248 in the town of Foligno in Umbria to wealthy parents and died in 1309. Her life is described as one of excess and vanity until she found her calling. Angela was a tertiary of the Franciscan order, following the regulations set for nuns in that order though still living at home, and that helped her to recognize her sins: pride, greed, and gluttony. She dictated her visions and teachings in a work called the *Memorial* to a priest named Arnold who referred to himself in it as *frater scriptor* (brother scribe).

E. Ann Matter argues that Angela Foligno is mostly recognized because she provides a good example of the degree of spirituality that existed in Christian women during the medieval era. Matter states that Angela felt she had a “direct connection to the love of God” and that she was “swept away, beyond bodily control, by the presence of the divine.” Angela and many other female visionaries needed “the involvement of a male confidant and spiritual adviser” because of their “lack of letters.” Matter implies that the use of a male spiritual adviser calls into question the literary legacy of female visionaries like Angela of Foligno.

John W. Coakley examines the works of Angela of Foligno in an attempt to understand her mysticism. According to Coakley, there are two main narratives in the

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183 Margaret Gallyon, introduction to *The Visions, Revelations and Teachings of Angela of Foligno* (Brighton: The Alpha Press, 2000), 1. The source analyzed is a selection of Angela’s visions and teachings based on the English translation of Mary Steegman.


186 Matter, 272.

187 Matter, 272.
Memorial of Angela: hagiography and theology. Furthermore, Coakley implies that frater scriptor is more the “writer of the Memorial” because the “words are his.”\textsuperscript{188} Coakley wants to understand Angela’s theology, though it was written by Angela’s male collaborator. The Memorial, he concludes, characterizes Angela as “profound in devotion to the Passion and the Eucharist” as well as in “exercising prophetic gifts.”\textsuperscript{189}

Mary Walsh Meany examines Angela of Foligno as an example of lay sanctity. Meany maintains that Angela’s mysticism centered on the Eucharist, which is appropriate for her as a model for the laity. The Eucharist has given Angela her mission, which was to make Christ visible in the world.\textsuperscript{190} Yet Angela not only received the Eucharist, but also was it: essentially Angela has become like the Eucharist herself and in doing so she feeds her followers.\textsuperscript{191} She has “allowed herself to become consecrated” as well as becoming “food for God and others.”\textsuperscript{192}

Joy A. Schroeder analyzes Angela’s description of a demonic visitation and its impact on her spirituality. The Memorial tells the event of a demon impersonating Saint Bartholomew and causing Angela much physical and psychological pain. Schroeder argues that demonic impersonation is a “form of martyrdom: it causes pain because liturgical

\textsuperscript{188} John W. Coakley, \textit{Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 120. It is possible that Brother Scribe was Father Arnaldo but it is not certain.

\textsuperscript{189} Coakley, 113.


\textsuperscript{191} Meany, 73.

\textsuperscript{192} Meany, 73.
observance is disrupted, and it diminishes the glory of the church because a feast day is not observed.”

Furthermore, Schroeder argues that Angela’s demonic torment is an example of the importance of liturgical time to the mystic.

Angela of Foligno described in her religious writings certain views about women that she held in common with Boccaccio. Angela was an admirable woman because she was willing to do anything for love, she pursued her passion, and she was faithful in love. The love that Angela was faithful to was the one she felt towards God. She was not a traditional woman because she renounced vanity. Angela claimed that “God has shown his grace” because she prayed and asked to be rid of any human obstacle and afterwards her “heart and will were united with God’s heart and will.” She was an unconventional woman because she renounced her family, together with her expensive clothes and jewelry, in order to pursue her love of God. Her renunciation of her family and her vanity showed her willingness to follow her desires.

Faithfulness in love was a characteristic of a woman who did not follow conventions. Angela of Foligno dedicated herself to her faith and in doing so she was unconventional and admirable. In a vision, Angela claimed that “God’s crucified arm was embracing her soul” and from then on she had a “clear knowledge and enlightenment” by which she “perceived

194 Schroeder, 162.
that in our flesh we are made one with God.” Angela’s devotion was shown in this vision. Angela strived to do anything she could in order to remain faithful in her love of God. The deaths of her family and husband that Angela prayed for demonstrated her resolve because she believed that in loving her husband and family she was being unfaithful to God. In the end, her faith was stronger than her love for her mother and husband.

Saint Catherine of Siena was another contemporary of Boccaccio who provides an example of the visions of women mystics. Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa was a woman visionary involved in church politics. She was born in 1347 in Siena and died in 1380 in Rome. She was the twenty-third child born to her parents, cloth dyers. From an early age Catherine showed signs of devout devotion and she fiercely resisted marriage. In 1365 she entered the Dominican order as a tertiary, also following its rules from her home, and Raymond of Capua was her biographer.

William R. Cook states that Saint Catherine of Siena was an honest woman as was evident in her letters. Catherine was especially “fierce and unwavering” in her “defense of the pope” and in her “demand that people should obey Christ’s vicar.” Cook argues that

196 Gallyon, 42.
198 Berrigan, 252.
Catherine’s “rich and varied imagery” are important because they “broaden our understanding of the meanings” that some “stories and objects had in late medieval Italy.”

Molly Morrison examines Saint Catherine’s retelling of the public execution of Niccolò di Toldo and the saint’s role as comforter: an important episode in her autobiography. The role of the comforter was to “prepare the criminal” to make his “last confession” and to “receive the Eucharist.” According to Morrison, Catherine “transforms the execution into a reenactment of the death of Christ” and her actions “resemble self-denial and extreme mortification.” Morrison also questions Catherine’s role because her actions transform the execution into salvation for criminals instead of serving as a deterrent to crime.

Karen Scott analyzes Saint Catherine’s role as a lay saint as well as her spiritual message to understand the position of lay persons in the medieval church. Scott suggests that Catherine believed that lay persons and church officials needed to work together to understand the message of God. According to Scott, God told Catherine to “preach the good news to both church officials and the laity.”

\[200\] Cook, 893.
\[202\] Morrison, 45, 47.
towards church reform. Furthermore, Scott argues that Catherine’s letters show a “positive appraisal of lay spirituality involving both apostolate and contemplation in the world.”

John W. Coakley examines Saint Catherine’s biography to discern her holiness. Catherine was a lay person who became religious but unlike a nun, she was not enclosed. Instead, she spent most of her time in the secular world spreading her message to the laity. According to Coakley, Raymond of Capua wrote the biography to “establish St. Catherine’s ascetic credentials.” Catherine did receive prophetic visions but instead she used persuasion to achieve her goals.

Saint Catherine of Siena was also an admirable woman because she possessed a willingness to do anything for love, a great desire to pursue her passion, and faithfulness in love. She was willing and able to do anything for her faith and love of God, as demonstrated through her “refusal of marriage” and because she “showed signs of remarkable devotion at an early age.” Catherine was praiseworthy because she did not follow the traditional social norms for women of her time. She did not desire earthly marriage and she dedicated the rest of her life in devotion to God.

Furthermore, Saint Catherine was an unconventional woman because she was not afraid to overstep the limits placed on women. She believed that “church reform” and the need for the “return of the papacy to Rome” from its exile in Avignon were “calls from

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204 Scott, 81.
205 Coakley, 179.
Women were not allowed to be involved in politics and yet Catherine was able to communicate with the pope and was partly responsible for the return of the papal see to Rome.

Although Saint Catherine of Siena renounced the love for a human man when she gave up marriage, she remained faithful to the love she felt for God. She believed that one must only love God because He is the reason for the existence of every living thing. In a letter to the queen of Naples Catherine stated: “love is perfect charity” and when a “soul is in perfect charity then it is considered to be a true son” because a person was expected to “love God because he is supreme and just and eternally good.” According to Catherine, the correct way to love God kept a soul in divinity and everyone was expected to strive to do so. Catherine of Siena was an admirable woman because she was willing to do anything for her love, she pursued her passion, and she was faithful in her love for God. She was not a traditional woman because she did not adhere to the social role imposed on women; in particular, she was involved in church politics and she saw her involvement as part of her devotion to her God and faith.

LEGAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Boccaccio represented both traditional and unconventional women in his stories and he admired the women who possessed unconventional characteristics. The legal and social context

207 Berrigan, 253.
208 Berrigan, 266.
realities of the later Middle Ages demonstrate the contrary. Women in the fourteenth century were not allowed to be as sexually free as Boccaccio portrayed them in the *Decameron*. There were legal and social consequences if women misbehaved. The legal and social mores regarding the conduct of women was influenced by the traditional view of women. Women had both minimal participation in the courts and legal protection. Boccaccio thus took liberties in his description of unconventional women in his stories.

The sexual nature of women influenced the laws and the courts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The conventional view of women as sexual and inferior to men formed the basis for the legal and social standards imposed on women. According to Michael Rocke, the friar Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar and a puritan fanatic who was the moral dictator of Florence in 1494, “insisted that gender identity was not natural but instead constructed and malleable; therefore, it should be shaped, reinforced and defended.”209 The social customs regarding women’s conduct were forcefully imposed and protected. Medieval theologians did not like the gender and sexual boundaries to become crossed and if it happened, punishments were inflicted: “women were publicly shamed and men were denied economic autonomy and civic roles.”210

Also, the idea that women were sexual by nature influenced the position of women in the public sphere. Since women’s “desires were ravenous, they were more prone to sin” and


210 Rocke, 152.
because of this “their sexual behavior had to be regulated more strictly.”

Women in late medieval Florence were restricted to their homes under the guidance of male relatives to prevent them from falling victim to their own sexuality. This conventional view of women was also responsible for the social restrictions forced upon women. Women’s behavior was highly limited and women were expected to be chaste in order to protect the honor of the family, primarily that of their husbands.

Furthermore, ideas about the nature of women forced upon them the ideal of chastity as well as the responsibility of sexual knowledge. Women were given the task of being responsible for satisfying the needs of their husbands. In the Middle Ages, men were given the active role in sexual activity and women were passive. According to Rocke, Bernadino of Siena instructed “wives to pay the debt before being importuned by their husbands” and in doing so he “fortified the notions of man’s active nature and woman’s passivity as well as her modesty.” He imposed on women the dual task of being chaste as well as sexual. Bernadino also forced on women “a greater burden of sexual knowledge and responsibility.” Women were sexually informed in order to satisfy the sexual needs of their husbands while also attempting to keep their chastity. Women were seen as carnal by nature so they had to safeguard their modesty and they had to provide the same knowledge to their daughters.

211 Rocke, 157.
212 Rocke, 155.
213 Rocke, 155.
During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, women had a limited legal persona. The law “was laid out in the texts and commentaries of civil and canon law” and women were “excluded from authoritative legal and political positions.”\textsuperscript{214} Gratian of Bologna and the compiler of the \textit{Decretum}, a twelfth-century collection of canon law, mentioned the low legal status of women; he stated that “authority of women is nil; let her in all things be subject to the rule of man.”\textsuperscript{215} Gratian reinforced the traditional view of women as being subservient to men. It was considered the “natural order for . . . the lesser [to] serve the greater.”\textsuperscript{216} The conventional view of the nature of women influenced their status in legal matters. For example in late medieval Pesaro, wives were not able to “make a contract without the consent of the husband” and in Florence in 1415, married women with children were declared ineligible to “draw up a will nor dispose of [their] dowry.”\textsuperscript{217} These two examples demonstrated the legal limits imposed on women; therefore, women did not have much authority or representation in the law.

Nevertheless, women in the Italian cities in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance did exhibit something of a legal persona. For example, widows in Florence “could exercise considerable control over property” and “women continued to bequeath landed property in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textit{Not in God’s Image}, 130.
\item \textit{Not in God’s Image}, 145.
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their wills through the fifteenth century.”\textsuperscript{218} These women had a fraction of legal authority, but they were able to delegate without the consent of a man. Women in Pisa were able to “redact notarial contracts . . . freely, without first gaining the contractual approval of a male protector,” and they also were able to “represent themselves in criminal and civil courts.”\textsuperscript{219} Although the traditional notion of women as being subservient to men imposed legal limits on women, these examples from Florence and Pisa show that they had some authority without the need to confer with a male authority figure.

On the whole, women in medieval Italian cities needed a male figure to act of their behalf in legal matters. This male figure, called a \emph{mundualdus}, and women “could not act without the consent of this male figure.”\textsuperscript{220} Nonetheless, this man could only serve on one legal matter and a woman had the option to choose a different person for every legal act she needed.\textsuperscript{221} Even with this restriction, then, women had some form of authority concerning the law. The laws in the cities reinforced this limitation. For example, in Lucca “married women could not sell or give away anything” without the “agreement of her husband and nearest male relative.”\textsuperscript{222}

Since women were widely considered to be morally weak as well as sexual by nature, their honor must be safeguarded. Philip of Novara, a twelfth-century historian, poet, and

\textsuperscript{219} Cohn, 123.
\textsuperscript{220} Kuehn, 98.
\textsuperscript{221} Kuehn, 101.
\textsuperscript{222} \textit{Not in God’s Image}, 145.
writer of legal treatises, wrote in *Les Quatre Ages de l’Homme* (The Four Ages of Man) that if a “woman keeps her body intact, all her other defects are hidden” and in doing so the woman “can hold her head high.”\(^{223}\) His statement implies that a woman’s value is sexual; therefore, her sexual honor should not be marred by sexual transgressions. Women’s chastity was protected in order to safeguard their reputation and their husband’s honor.

Furthermore, a woman’s sexual behavior was controlled and shaped by male authority figures. Men believed in controlling women’s sexual behavior and reproduction because “Italian society was strongly patriarchal . . . and in this type of society the control of women’s sexual conduct . . . was given great importance.”\(^{224}\) The sexual behavior of women was strictly regulated and social rules were imposed because their sexual transgressions reflected on the honor of the family and of the husband. The sexual honor of women was protected because in doing so secured the honor of men. Bernadino of Siena stated that a “wife’s unfaithfulness resulted in her ‘perpetual shame,’ for she had ‘no other virtue to lose’ than her sexual honor.”\(^{225}\) Women were strictly watched and they were forced to remain in the private sphere as precaution. The fear that women would commit sexual transgressions was great because medieval theologians saw women as being sexual by nature. Male authority figures thought that regulating women’s sexual behavior was important because it had social repercussions. Many persons in the Middle Ages thought that “women’s honor


\(^{224}\) Rocke, 151.

\(^{225}\) Rocke, 158.
was more dependent on society;” therefore, “authorities tended to punish them in precisely that public fashion to bring more defamation.” Male authority figures saw public defamation as appropriate consequence because of the nature of the crime.

Even though women’s private lives were controlled by men and their legal abilities limited, they still carried on public lives through their work. Florentine women were involved in “major guild professions . . . as merchants in the wool and silk industries, bankers or money-changers.” Work that usually belonged to men was sometimes held by women in Florence. Florentine women were shown by “tax officials in 1427” to have been “active in a wide variety of occupations: . . . [as] skinners, carders, shearsers, and stretchers.” Women in Florence provide an example of women who were more independent. These women worked the same hard manual labor as men. Florentine women were seen in the public sphere and they were not simply governed by male relatives. Women in medieval Florence “were never totally dependent on their fathers or husbands” and these women “earned [their] livelihoods as traders and artisans.” Florentine women who worked, were “widows who were head of the household” and their work went beyond “textiles and provisions.” Women were able to have some financial independence from their male relatives and consequently more control over their finances.

226 Rocke, 159.
227 Cohn, 115.
228 Cohn, 112.
229 Cohn, 115.
230 Cohn, 115.
Furthermore, work in the convents and nunneries contributed to the overall conditions of work available to women and the positions women held in Florence. Nuns helped to “supplement the incomes of their religious houses” and they did it “through [the] running [of] convent schools for lay girls, scriptoria [workshops] for the copying of manuscripts, as well as [the] making and selling of silk purses and ribbons, and practiced other crafts within the textile industry for commercial gain.”\(^{231}\) The work that the nuns produced was also varied.

Even though different types of work were available to women, sumptuary laws enacted in late medieval Florence limited their spending on fine clothing and jewelry. In 1511 a “law declar[ing] that women were spending so much on ‘disorderly and sumptuous’ clothing and jewels” was enacted because “husbands were [getting] ‘poco frutto’ (little profit) from their dowries.”\(^{232}\) Laws that hindered the purchasing of luxurious items also imposed gabelle (taxes) that women and men who bought or gave the items to women had to pay. For example, a fifteenth-century Florentine law prohibited women from wearing “necklines in the French style” and Florentine taxes of 1364 levied on women an “annual tax of one hundred gold florins in order to wear certain ornaments: crowns adorned with pearls or circlets of beaten gold or silver.”\(^{233}\)

\(^{231}\) Cohn, 111.


Moreover, the position of women in the household was transitory. According to Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “women, then, were not permanent elements in the lineage” and “memory of them was short.” Marriage “dispersed the women to their husband’s domicile or, rather, to that of their husband’s father.” At the time of marriage, a husband gave his new wife gifts as “indispensable symbolic agents in the integration of the wife into another household and another lineage.” Also, the “dressing of the bride is a rite of passage, more precisely, a rite of integration.” These rites and gifts were to welcome the new wife into another home and family. Women also gave gifts to a new bride. Women gave the wife rings “that assign the new wife to her place in a kinship group . . . within a group of women.” The young woman was also introduced to a new group of women, within which she had to learn her new role.

Nonetheless, even given the transitory nature of women’s presence in the household, dowries became a symbol of a woman’s status. Dowries were a part of the social contract that was marriage. “The most insistent pressure pushing dowries upward came from the imperatives of social honor that pressed on both sides of a marriage alliance.” Fathers were determined to make the most advantageous marriages and increasing the dowries of


235 Klapisch-Zuber, 19.

236 Klapisch-Zuber, 224.

237 Klapisch-Zuber, 225.

238 Klapisch-Zuber, 233.

239 Chojnacki, 79.
their daughters was one way. The physical attributes of young women also drove up the amounts of dowries. Two laws, one passed in “1425 and the other in 1444 waived the dowry ceiling altogether for the blind and the lame as well as misshapen women . . . so that they also could marry.” Dowries became increasingly ludicrous because fathers wanted to marry their daughters into the most prominent families. “The size of a woman’s dowry was . . . a measure of her status, and reflected on her entire family.” Just as a woman’s feminine purity and honor, the dowry symbolized her and her family’s status. Dowries were a representation of the prestige of a family. A more “prestigious family might be able to marry its daughters off for smaller sums” than one less so. The varying amounts of the dowries suggest that they came to symbolize not only social status, but also a woman’s sexual and feminine honor.

So important were dowries for marriage that the Florence commune created the _Monte delle doti_ (dowry fund) in hopes that it would generate marriages. The _Monte_ was established in 1425 and amended in 1433, allowing for deposits of sixty florins with maturity terms of five, seven and a half, eleven, and fifteen years. The fund generated many deposits, which helped the city’s finances. Deposits were made as investments to ensure the greatest return in finding socially suitable husbands. Florentines accepted the dowry fund

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240 Chojnacki, 84.
242 Lansing, 129.
because it fueled the social, political, and economic aspirations of its young men.\textsuperscript{244} Dowries gave parents the “hope that their daughters could be suitably married.”\textsuperscript{245} The Monte allowed young men to “enter into marriage confident that they will be able to collect on their dowries with the guarantee of the city.”\textsuperscript{246}

Marriages were social contracts in which goods were exchanged from one family to another. The establishing of a household led to the control of the transmission of properties in a marriage. After the thirteenth century, Florentine women were not allowed to inherit but they were “appropriately dowered” while sons received an “equal share of the paternal estate.”\textsuperscript{247} A young bride brought her dowry and personal belongings with her to her marriage and her husband’s familial home. Since women were the ones who left their home and joined their husbands’ families, fathers were not in a hurry to marry off their sons, but preferred to keep them unmarried until they “reached the age of thirty in the cities” while daughters were married off at the age of eighteen.\textsuperscript{248} The large age gap between a husband and a wife, “on average eight years but often fifteen among the rich, is a cultural trait that conditioned behavior that persisted from the fourteenth century to modern times.”\textsuperscript{249}

In part because of the age differences between spouses, wives were mostly subordinate to their husbands. This generational gap also resulted in women’s unique

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{244} Kirshner, 404.
\item \textsuperscript{245} Kirshner, 427.
\item \textsuperscript{246} Kirshner, 434.
\item \textsuperscript{247} Klapisch-Zuber, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{248} Klapisch-Zuber, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{249} Klapisch-Zuber, 20.
\end{itemize}
position in the home. Women were given the “status of mediator between father and children, but it also exacerbated their marginality among her husband’s kin, the demand for their submissiveness and the lack of communication between spouses.”

The role of the wife was to submit to her husband and the fact that she was younger and newer to the household further cemented her submissiveness. For example, Cherubino of Siena, a fifteenth-century Franciscan who studied philosophy and theology, stated in *The Rules of Marriage* that a husband ought to attempt to “correct a wife’s behavior by being nice” but if it “does not work or wife is too crude then [he should] beat her” but it should only be “for serious offense” because it is “better to save the soul than the body.”

The friar has given the husband the right to make a wife submit even through violence. A woman’s foremost duty was to be subordinate to her husband.

Married women generally did not have control over the family’s structure or finances; these were left to the husband. Husbands had control over “family structures and the framework of economic, legal, and political life” because they were thought of as “level-headed . . . bastions of solidarity and family values were inspired by a severely masculine ideal”

Even though men had control over the household’s finances, women were also often blamed for debt. In fifteenth-century Florence, the merchant Giovanni Morelli stated that his

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250 Klapisch-Zuber, 20.


252 Klapisch-Zuber, 118.
sister’s “financial ruin” was her “husband’s fault” but he also laid the blame on her because
she was “too obedient to her husband.” Morelli implied that a wife needed to be aware of
the financial situation of her family. Women were relegated to the private sphere, which
included the household, and therefore, they were entitled to be and expected to be aware of
the family’s finances. Furthermore, the economic state of the family also affected the dowry
of a wife and this was something that a woman needed to know. Husbands managed the
dowry of their wives and if they were in debt, their wives’ dowry could be forfeited.

Widows were a concern because they posed a danger to the honor of the family. As
Klapisch-Zuber writes, a widow “was a threat to the honor not only of one family but of
two.” Widows were also dangerous because of their sexuality: they had had their sexual
needs satisfied and they were not strangers to sexual desire. The families of widows feared
that these women would not be able to control their sexual urges and they would bring shame
upon their families. Most feared for widows was the “fall into debauchery.” Unlike
young and never married women, widows had some control over their lives. Widows also
“theoretically had some choice” in which they might decide if they would remain in their
husband’s home with their children, live independently but close to their children, or remarry
into a new family and abandoning their children and their late husband’s household.

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253 Not in God’s Image, 169-70. See also Elizabeth Bailey, “Raising the Mind to God: The Sensual

254 Klapisch-Zuber, 119-20.

255 Klapisch-Zuber, 122-23.

256 Klapisch-Zuber, 119-20.
Having some authority over all of these decisions made widows dangerous because they could be tempted to sin and bring dishonor to their families. Widows became the “target of a whole set of forces struggling fiercely for control of their bodies and their fortunes.”

Men wanted widows to submit because they wanted to control their dowries. Widows who remarried took their dowries with them and their late husbands’ family then lost that money.

Widows had several options available to them: the *alimenta* (remaining within their husband’s household), the *tornata* (returning to their birth families), remarriage, or the convent. Sometimes the choice was taken away from widows or the families would not honor a woman’s decision. For example, in fifteenth-century Florence, Piero di Bernardo Masi, a coppersmith, instructed his sons to “take precautions” and to “get guarantees for the dowries they [give] their daughters.”

Widows “could avoid remarriage with the consent of their relatives.” Although widows had some control over choosing, their decision was still dependent on male relatives.

Another problem that hindered a widow’s choice was her dowry. The husband’s family usually wanted to keep the dowry and that meant that the widow must choose to remain with his family. The natal family of the widow also typically wanted the dowry and regularly favored the return of the widow to her family’s home. A widow “usually had a permanent legal claim only to her dowry,” so “she was left with the choice of either support

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257 Klapisch-Zuber, 120.
258 Klapisch-Zuber, 122-23.
259 Klapisch-Zuber, 126-27.
from his estate or the return of the dowry” and “this choice is often stipulated in men’s wills.”

Even if widows had the right to choose, their husbands or their families might take the decision out of their hands. Male relatives needed to regulate a widow’s behavior in order to keep her dowry.

Like widows, the conduct of nuns was greatly policed. Convents were problematic because the sexuality of the nuns needed to be controlled in order to maintain their chastity. Women who entered convents “had no motivation to observe the vow of chastity” but because “physical or economic obstacles [had] prevented them from marrying.” These nuns could easily fall victim to the temptations of the flesh and might dishonor their family. Women were not trusted to be left alone and so if a family could not or would not arrange marriages for their daughters, the “convent was the only way out, although terrible doubts about the security of the cloister continued to torment [these] parents.”

The fact that so many women entered convents for mostly economic reasons also made them worrisome to city officials. The convent was an alternative to marriage but even it could not guarantee women’s honor.

Penalties for sexual activities in convents showed that many nuns entered convents without much religious motivation. Medieval Christians “venerated religious women” because of their importance to “civic well-being and thus inspired government initiatives for

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260 Lansing, 132.
261 Chojnacki, 69.
262 Klapisch-Zuber, 119.
Since nuns were seen as important by city officials, men wanted to correct the behavior of nuns and implement changes in order to safeguard their chastity. Michael Rocke argues that “nuns are examples of women resisting gender and social conventions to pursue erotic pleasure and male companionship.” Rocke implies that religious women defied the forced social gender roles inside the convents making them dangerous. Male authority figures wanted to control the convents because they serve as a solution for families with more than one daughter but they were becoming places where women could sin. The convents should be reclaimed as secure places where women could dedicate themselves to their religious vocation meanwhile securing their sexual honor.

**CONCLUSION**

*Famous Women* provided examples of women who were both traditional and unconventional. Traditional views of women associate women with nature, their value dependent on their physical attractiveness and wealth, they were considered emotional and irrational, and women were thought of as controllable and meek. These traditional views of women were not only shared by both the *Decameron* and *Famous Women* but with other historical sources. Chroniclers like Dino Compagni portrayed women who abide by traditional social views regarding gender. Compagni depicted women who were treated as objects controlled by men.

263 Chojnacki, 73.
264 Rocke, 165.
Boccaccio argued for the value of women’s following of traditional social roles in *Famous Women*. Submission to male authority was expected of women. Women who submitted to their husbands and to traditional social expectations were seen as praiseworthy. Furthermore, Boccaccio emphasized the conventional concept of women and their relationship with nature. Boccaccio gave several examples of women who were admired because they further cemented women to domesticity. Pamphile and Medusa both were recognized for their inventions that help women to be better able to accomplish their household tasks.

Although Boccaccio’s *Famous Women* described traditional views of women it also demonstrated unconventional notions of women. Boccaccio portrayed women who were respected for their willingness to do anything for love, intelligence and being cunning, their pursuit of passion, and their faithfulness in love. These unconventional views regarding women were also found in historical and religious sources. Religious writings of Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena showed women who were willing to do anything for their pursuit of passion. Both women were loyal and faithful in their love for God.

Other sources, like the letters of Alessandra Strozzi, provides the example of a woman who was considered unconventional because she did not adhere to traditional social roles. Strozzi was essentially the head of her family and she had good business sense and she could manage the family’s finances. These tasks were traditionally associated with the male who was the head of the family. Both Boccaccio and Compagni also described women as unconventional because they possessed the admirable characteristic of intelligence.

Nonetheless, Boccaccio’s description of women as sexually free and his admiration of unconventional women was a literary liberty he took because the legal and social realities of
women demonstrated the opposite. Women in late medieval Italian cities had little legal authority or presence. Furthermore, women were subordinate to male figures. Women were not trusted and they were rarely left on their own. The honor of the husband and of the family came first and was protected. Women’s honor was safeguarded in order to protect the honor of the family. Convents were the only places families trusted the sexual honor of their women and they needed to be secured. Widows were among the only women who had some form of control and even that was limited because their male relatives had the final decision regarding their choices. Women in medieval Italian cities were not as free as those Boccaccio represented in his stories.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION TO THE THESIS

Boccaccio’s Decameron illustrates the two types of women in medieval society: the traditional and the unconventional woman. The traditional view of women consisted of women being seen as objects of possession, as subjects to male authority, as possessors of a range of negative traits, and as victims of physical and emotional abuse. The negative traits include emotionality, greed, vanity, and wantonness. The implication that women could be possessed by men because of their physical attractiveness also suggested women’s bodies as desirable. Women became attractive in the eyes of men due to their beauty, wealth, and reputation. Since women were reduced to their bodies, Boccaccio implied that the fate of women was at the mercy of men.

Another quality associated with the traditional notion of women was submissiveness. Boccaccio’s stories illustrated women as being meek, controllable, and obedient to male figures. These women were considered the norm because women were thought of as objects of possession. Women were supposed to exhibit attributes that display their status. Men desired women who were easy to control and who were submissive to a man’s authority. Submissiveness was a desirable characteristic of the traditional medieval woman because it illustrated the power of men.

The representation of the traditional view of women also saw them as naïve, emotional, and irrational. The ability to reason was not a characteristic given to women
because women were seen as being weaker than men. The notion that women were less intelligent than men was a conventional one because men desired women who were controllable. Boccaccio described how women who were overtaken by their emotions become irrational creatures who maligned men. Women’s inability to control their emotions made them more susceptible to the temptations of the flesh.

Boccaccio also expressed the traditional view of women that described women as sexual creatures. Women were identified with the flesh because they were viewed as being weaker than men both physically and mentally. Their irrationality allowed women to succumb to the temptations of the flesh. Women’s relegation as sexual creatures furthered the idea that women’s bodies could be claimed by men because they were desirable.

Being greedy and manipulative were also negative characteristics that were traditionally associated with women. Boccaccio stated that a woman’s desirability could be lost if she appeared to be either. According to Boccaccio, such women lost their appeal because a man wanted a woman to engage in a sexual affair out of passion and not because of greed. These negative traits were also associated with prostitutes. Prostitutes were seen negatively because their chosen profession was sex. Women who exhibit greed or were considered to be manipulative were related to prostitutes and because of this association their desirability waned. These were women who did not submit to male authority and were not controllable and in essence were not desirable.

Women bore the consequences of being powerless beside men. The conventional view of women saw them as the playthings of men because their fates were dependent on the whims of men. Since women were submissive to male authority they had no control or power. Boccaccio gave the examples of nuns and lovers of the clergy as bearers of the
consequences of the actions of men. Nuns were powerless because there was no conviction behind their vows. Lovers of the clergy indulged in sexual trysts but they suffered the repercussions while the clerics did not.

Another aspect of the traditional view of women was their victimization. Women who were not submissive to their husbands were physically abused. The *Decameron* illustrated several women who were victims of their husband’s cruelty and fury. Physical abuse was considered an acceptable method to beat submission into women as dictated by the conventional view of women. Women’s victimization was thought of as being right because women were seen as uncontrollable and were not responsible for their own destinies. Boccaccio implied that medieval men abused their wives in order to make them submit to their authority. Furthermore, the traditional view of women argued that the fates of women were the result of men’s actions. Women who were not submissive but who were greedy or manipulative were left to suffer at the hands of male figures. According to the traditional view of women, women themselves were responsible for their victimization.

Even though Boccaccio included all of the traditional stereotypes in the women of his stories, he also created substantially different women for other stories. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and *Famous Women* demonstrated his ability to create both traditional and unconventional women. He implied that the unconventional view of women required women to demonstrate some basic characteristics: a willingness to do anything for love, an overwhelming desire to pursue passion, and a faithfulness in love, alongside other admirable qualities. Women willing to do anything for love were held in high regard by Boccaccio because they were brave and courageous. The women who were willing to do anything for love shared several traits: loving by reputation alone, not submitting to male authority,
defying family wishes, ignoring social positions, transcending traditional roles, and overcoming obstacles to achieve love. Boccaccio described these women as cunning and intelligent in their desire to do anything and everything for their love. A willingness to do anything for love was an admirable quality that Boccaccio liked in women.

Cleverness and intelligence were equally admirable traits in an unconventional woman. Boccaccio praised these qualities in women because they used these things to overcome obstacles in pursuit of their passion. Furthermore, women who possessed these traits were active and they were not submissive to male authority. Women who were ingenious and smart were not bound by traditional social roles. Unconventional women were held in high regard by Boccaccio because they used their cunning, intellect, and quick thinking to take control of their own lives instead of blindly following a man’s authority.

Boccaccio also respected women who pursued their passion because he saw them as unconventional. This allowed women freedom and liberty denied to them by the rigid traditional roles forced upon them. Women who decided to follow their hearts were unconventional because they must overcome obstacles and they were willing to do anything for love. Women were given permission to do what they were not supposed to because they were not satisfied. Young brides who were dissatisfied with their husbands were allowed to find fulfillment elsewhere. Boccaccio allowed nuns to fulfill their needs because they did not get to experience what others did and that left them unsatisfied.

Faithfulness in love was another characteristic an unconventional woman illustrated in the Decameron. Faithful women managed to overcome the difficulties in their paths and despite everything they happened to live virtuous lives. Boccaccio admired women who expressed the notion of being faithful in love because they stood up to the controlling urges
of their male relatives and these women remain loyal to their lovers. Such women were viewed admirably because they often chose death to be with their lovers and they lived virtuous and respectful lives if they did not join their lovers in death.

Other historical sources show how Boccaccio’s ideas were shared by his contemporaries. Dino Compagni, a chronicler, described women who were both traditional and unconventional. Compagni also described the worth of women being placed on their beauty, women who were treated as objects, and women who were meek and controllable. Both Boccaccio and Compagni stated the traditional notion of associating women with nature and both demonstrated this to be a desired component for women according to persons in the medieval era.

Religious writers like Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena also shared Boccaccio’s unconventional views of women. Both women showed a willingness to do anything for their love of God. These women overcame obstacles to pursue their passion and in doing so they did not behave in the manner that traditional medieval society dictated. Angela and Catherine were incredible women who were admirable because they were not satisfied to remain within the constraints traditional social roles imposed on women.

Another historical source that paralleled Boccaccio’s views about women who were not traditional were the letters written by Alessandra Strozzi. Strozzi was an unconventional woman because she was in charge of the family’s finances. Transcending the normal social roles was necessary for Strozzi because she also handled all of her family’s negotiations. Strozzi negotiated the marriage for her daughter and the sale of one of the family’s properties and she also gave business advice to her sons.
Boccaccio also provided further examples of both traditional and unconventional views of women in his *Famous Women*. He presented women being praised for their beauty and the wealth of their families. The traditional women he described were also admired for their submissiveness and domesticity that were traditional aspects desired in women. Women were also associated with nature in ways that furthers strengthened their roles in the household.

Even though Boccaccio discussed both traditional and unconventional women in the *Decameron* and in *Famous Women*, there are some types of women he did not mention. Boccaccio discussed nuns who had sexual affairs with men but he did not mention nuns who took their vows seriously. He also did not depict women who were lovers of other women. The women described in the stories were always only involved in physical relationships with men. Prostitutes were discussed in his stories but they were given only as examples of the wicked women: greedy, manipulative, and evil. In *Famous Women*, in contrast, Boccaccio described the praiseworthy actions of a prostitute. Boccaccio argued for the virtue of Leaena, whose admirable qualities he discussed, and he asked his audience’s permission to include a prostitute as a respectable woman worthy of praise.

A detailed textual analysis of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is important because it illuminates medieval constructions of women. There were two prevailing views concerning women: the traditional and the unconventional. Analyzing the *Decameron* is also important because it describes female sexuality. An analysis of Boccaccio’s work is helpful in determining how representative his stories are of women’s sexuality and social roles. Boccaccio described women who were traditional because they represent all of the traditional characteristics desired in women by medieval standards.
Comparing Boccaccio’s conventional and unconventional views of women to those of his contemporaries is also important. Since they shared many of his opinions about women it is necessary to rethink the negative tone of much modern scholarship. Boccaccio and his contemporaries have demonstrated that attitudes and thoughts concerning women were much more complicated than generally believed. Boccaccio admired women who transcended traditional roles and yet he also found praiseworthy characteristics in women who were conventional. The textual analysis of Boccaccio and several of his contemporaries has provided the opportunity to expand the manner in which medieval women were regarded and categorized.

Boccaccio’s portrayal of both the traditional and unconventional views of women is significant because it is approached from a historical perspective. The *Decameron* has been studied mostly by literary scholars and the topics of women and sexuality are usually framed within a literary perspective. There is little information on the *Decameron* as a historical source and this close reading of Boccaccio helps bridge the gap between literature and historical sources. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is a literary source that appealed to a historical class, the merchant class, and because of this the *Decameron* should be studied within a historical frame. Furthermore, the *Decameron* as well as Boccaccio have been very influential in the past and they continue to be so.
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