

## AGAINST THE IDEOLOGY: DEBATES WITH IN DECAMERON

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### ABSTRACT

This paper studies Decameron written by Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio under Althusserian Theory. Louis Althusser's neo-Marxist theory makes the notion that Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) exist in societies and unknowingly rule the members of that society. For this study three stories of Decameron, which are told by the character Dioneo, are scrutinized and the ISAs present in the stories are recognized. These ISAs are then analyzed in relation to the historical, cultural and social setting of Boccaccio's 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The study reaches the results that Boccaccio has employed Dioneo as a speaker for himself in the tales and uses the stories to shed light on the norms of his society and often, in disguise, stand up against them.

**KEYWORDS:** Decameron, Giovanni Boccaccio, Althusserian theory, Ideological State apparatuses

### INTRODUCTION

Boccaccio's *Decameron* has been read and analyzed both for pleasure and study numerous times since its publication in 1353. The 100 tale collection contains an array of stories told by 10 versatile personas. Each day 10 tales are expressed, always ending with those of Dioneo. Dioneo's tales stand out for he is the only narrator allowed to digress from the assigned topic and many scholars believe he can be considered partly as a mouthpiece for Boccaccio. This paper demonstrates how Dioneo is representing Boccaccio and not only do the tales show his personal opinion but rather they illuminate the ideologies of his time. By applying Althusserian theory to three selected stories, the study highlights the ideologies of Boccaccio's era and how he illustrated fictitious tales to criticize and question such ideologies.

Algerian born Louis Althusser is known as a Neo-Marxist critic, his theories develop on that of Marx but expand the power of the elite from solely economical to ideological as well. In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", Althusser explains how all people in society are unconsciously obeying pre-defined concepts; concepts imposed by the powerful upper-class in aims to secure their governing strength over society. Althusser goes on to identify the tools through which these ideologies are imposed on the public; however these Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as he defines them have so long existed that they function unnoticed.

By identifying the ideologies of Boccaccio's era and the ISAs in which they penetrated through, this paper offers insight on Boccaccio's narrative talent at mocking the ideologies in an attempt to educate readers and goes on to demonstrate how Dioneo acts as Boccaccio's puppet in expressing the suppressed voices of women. From the 100 tale collection and specifically of the 10 stories told by Dioneo, 3 tales which illustrate both the dominant ideologies of the time and Boccaccio's mockery have been chosen for scrutiny. The first belongs to day three. It is also known as "Putting the devil back into Hell"; the story tells of a young naïve girl who in search of service to God becomes tricked into sexual intercourse by a monk. The plot is quite scandalous and is considered by many the bawdiest tale of the entire *Decameron*. In

this study, by detecting the ideology of the repression of female sexual desire portrayed in the story, Boccaccio's disagreement with this ideology can also be seen.

The second story under scrutiny is Dioneo's tale from day 6. This story depicts the religious beliefs of the time. A friar promises to show his congregation a feather belonging to the angel Gabriel. But when the feather is switched with coal, the friar merely changes his tale and continues deluding the worshipers. In this tale Boccaccio's voice is once again heard through Dioneo as he ridicules the religious ideologies of the time.

The concluding story of *The Decameron* is the final tale chosen for study. This story is a prime example of Boccaccio using Dioneo as his mouthpiece in advocating for women's rights. The story is of a marquis who in an attempt to test his wife's obedience and patience forges the death of their two children, makes her his servant and has her prepare his fraudulent new wife. Through all of these struggles the wife, Griselda, does not complain or question her husband. This paper uses the story as evidence of Boccaccio's exaggeration of the passivity of women as a means to show his disapproval of the bourgeois classes imposed restrictions on women. Through the study of the mentioned stories, this paper reveals Boccaccio's talent in recognizing the ideologies of his time and more importantly shedding light on them through narratives. By employing Dioneo as his disguise in *The Decameron*, Boccaccio becomes one of the first advocates of women's rights and *The Decameron* becomes more than just pleasure reading.

## DISCUSSIONS

In an article titled "A Woman as Savior: Alibech and the last age of the flesh in Boccaccio's *Decameron*" Guido Ruggerio noted how Dioneo's concluding story of day three "suggests a different way to view the day that might allow readers and Boccaccio to have both their sex and religion." (Ruggerio, 2009,153). The juxtaposition of sex and religion especially in that era was scandalous however by understanding the ideologies of that time the tale carries greater meaning.

One dominant ideology of that era was patriarchal society. Rustico's dominance over the virgin Alibech is visible throughout the entire tale; the fact that Alibech is even looking for a source to unify her to God can be read as a desire to win the "father's" love. In lines such as "the girl addressing herself always obediently to its reduction" (Boccaccio, 1995, 299) and "the girl thus frequently inviting and exhorting Rustico to the service of God" (Boccaccio, 1995, 305) Boccaccio illustrates Alibech's reception to Rustico's power.

In line with the patriarchal society this story illuminates the sexual repression of women as an ideology of society. Althusser claims "We cannot recognize ourselves outside of ideology, and in fact, our very actions reach out to this overarching structure" (Althusser, 1969,183). Therefore Alibech's sexual desire which has been long repressed should be understood as a display of her time. "She began to find the game agreeable" (Boccaccio,1995, 309) shows Alibech reaching a recognition about her own body and the pleasures she had been refraining from.

In Marilyn Migiel's article "Beyond Seduction" this tale is concluded as straining "against the bounds of decorum and raised questions about the moral aims of the *Decameron*." (Migiel, 1998,162). This morality should be examined through what the dominant powerful classes have established as moral. The dominant classes of 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy wanted the sexual repression of females as it would allow them a stronger hold on their much valued patriarchal society. Boccaccio, however, desired to expose these ideologies and offer his readers an alternative path but as Stuart Hall, an Althusserian critic, puts it ideologies are meant to be left unexamined.

- It is precisely its spontaneous quality, its transparency, its naturalness, its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to correction, its effect of instant recognition...which makes common sense, at one and the same time, spontaneous, ideological and unconscious. (Hebdige, 1971, 11)

The ending of Dioneo's tale seems to be the perfect wrecking ball finale for Boccaccio's covert rejection of dominant beliefs of society. Once Alibech's father dies Rustico marries her and inherits her father's wealth, this is when Alibech learns from other ladies who "set up so great a laughing" (Boccaccio, 1995,320) that this "putting the devil back into hell" does in fact take place in other cities too. A key of this sexual tale as stated in "Beyond Seduction" is "this impulse or drive is its indeterminacy, which will allow Alibech to be misled" (Miguel,1998, 166). This indeterminacy is the defining element of ideologies and simultaneously the feature which has given Boccaccio the freedom to poke fun and scrutinize.

The final tale of day three of *The Decameron* is "a literary portal to libertine pleasures, a reaffirmation of the naturalness of indefatigable sexual desire, an invitation to woman to resist outmoded constraints" (Miguel, 1998, 162). This literary portal is the representation of Boccaccio's era and the thought systems that the elite class wished to establish in society. Through this bawdy playful tale he unweaves the threads of two deep established ideologies, patriarchal control and repressed female sexual desire. This unweaving is invisible yet it can be concluded from the previous paragraphs that Boccaccio's story does in fact invite a change in what was presumed as being unchangeable.

The *Decameron* continues day by day, each day with a new topic. These topics are chosen by the brigade and are meant to over shadow all of tales, Dioneo however wins himself space and is allowed to digress from the assigned topic. Nevertheless on the sixth day he tells the tale revolving around Fra Cipolla, a preacher who has the rhetorical power and fooling his congregation into believing an outrageous fabricated religious tale. This tale does in fact seem to reflect the day's theme of wit yet Dioneo goes further and satirizes the strong religious ideologies of the time.

As previously mentioned Dioneo can be considered as a demonstrating vehicle for Boccaccio's own views, mockery and struggles. Carol Falvo Heffernan has affirmed this belief in her 2005 article titled "Boccaccio's Decameron 6.10 and Chaucer's Canterbury Tale 287.968: Thinking on Your Feet and the Set-Piece". She recognizing the lexical aspect of the protagonist's name and writes "Boccaccio's Fra Cipolla is treated as a hero of verbal wit is unsurprising as the name "Cipolla" (Onion) and the story's setting in Certaldo- the supposed birthplace of Boccaccio- suggest that the preacher is the storyteller's alter ego" (Heffernan,2005, 117).

In relation to the previous statement, we must then recognize the social standards and ideologies of Boccaccio's time. Althusser himself places special emphasis on religion as an ideology referring to it as one of the main Ideological State Apparatuses, meaning it is a medium in which the ideologies the dominant places desires can be feed to society. Attempting to undermine any Ideological State Apparatus is daunting because it is as Hebdige has quoted Stuart Hall notes "its transparency, its naturalness" (Hebdige,1971, 11) and as Antonio Gramsci asserts "Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously 'born' in each individual brain; they have had a center of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion" . (Gramsci, 1971, 89)

Boccaccio endeavors to expose the roots of such religious formation in society through nothing other than literature. The final fiction of day six revolves around a mendicant friar travels collecting alms for the Society of St.

Anthony. During one of his visits he promises the villagers of Certaldo that he will show them a feather from the wing of the Angel Gabriel. The feather is in fact taken from a parrot but when two practical jokers replace the feather with a lump of coal, predicting this will expose Fra Cipolla's untruth, the story takes a turn once Fra Cipolla doesn't break but rather fabricates a new eloquent tale about the coal.

The story is explicitly pretentious and exaggerates the ill use of power by criminals under the veil of religion and righteousness. The explicit nature plays a twofold role by making the story a delight to read meanwhile shaking the religious institution at its roots. Fra Cipolla is only a friar by name for he is focused on his own success rather than that of the church. As noted by Carol Falvo Heffernan "Style, not content, is what counts in Fra Cipolla; he is far more concerned with secular rhetoric (and self-aggrandizement) than he is with Christian teaching" (Heffernan, 2005, 116). Boccaccio is using the disguise of a friar and the style of a sermon to project his own ideas which are against that of the dominant class. His comic use of a religious figure is undermining to the strict ideology of Christianity meant to be the upmost truth.

Once he sees the feather has been exchanged with a lump of coal the story reads "Without changing color in the slightest, however, he raised his eyes to the Heavens and ...exclaimed "Almighty God, may Thy power be forever praised" (Boccaccio, 1995, 732). By considering the friar as a symbol of entire church and religious institutions and ideologies, this line acts as evidence of their quick wit in assembling lies and the ideologies dependence on God, always relating back to the Lord as an ultimate all-knowing power therefore eliminating the possibility of suspicion.

In his essay Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses Althusser describes the formation of the Ideological State Apparatus of religion as such "They [Priests and Despots] "forged" the Beautiful Lies so that, in the belief that they are obeying God, men would in fact obey the Priests and Despots" (Althusser, 1969, 694). Boccaccio creates the tale of Fra Cipolla through the character of Dioneo on a day themed as wit to expose under seemingly playful context the beautiful lie that Althusser described six centuries later.

Fra Cipolla's wit in the costume of a religious figure is telling of the deep rooted religious ideologies. Compared to an onion, interestingly enough the literary Italian translate of Cipolla, Carol Falvo Heffernan writes "the many layers of an onion also serve as an image for fiction, the kind represented by the *Decameron*, intended for solace rather than for the didactic seed of truth at its core" (Heffernan, 2005, 117). Expanding on the assumption of Heffernan, it seems that in the final tale of day six Boccaccio is in fact reaching solace from the strict regulations of religious decree of 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy yet on the contrary to Heffernan's statement I project that Boccaccio was also in search of revealing the truth to his readers.

Boccaccio's ridicule of the religious institutions can be seen through Dioneo's tale. The subject matter of Angel Gabriel's wing and Fra Cipolla's quick wit bring about bitter humor which ridicules the dominant classes' ideologies. Mann concludes Boccaccio's story writing abilities by saying "In describing relics that never existed, Boccaccio seems to come near to satirizing the whole nature of religious belief-the abandonment of a 'common-sense' basis for belief means also an inability to distinguish genuine mystery from fraudulent mystification." (Mann, 1973, 152). Thus, tale ten from day six of *The Decameron* can be recognized as Boccaccio's attempt to shed light on the inaccuracy of the religious ideologies of his time.

The stories which construct *The Decameron* are categorized into 10 days, each with a different theme. The theme of the final day is chosen by Panfilo to be stories of deeds of munificence. The tales of this day tell of wives and honesty

but reach the ultimate peak of generosity with Dioneo's tale. The tale of Griselda, as it has come to be known, tells of the patience of a young woman as she ages and bears the outrageous tests of faithfulness that her husband, Walter, puts her through. These tribulations include the separation of Griselda from her children, her rejection and return to her father's home and being told to prepare Walter's new young bride. Dioneo dives deep into the story and illustrates Griselda's obedience and loyalty to an extent that she is almost mythological. In this tale once again Dioneo acts as Boccaccio's mouthpiece and conveys Boccaccio's opposition to his epoch's beliefs and rituals, the combination of these artifacts is now known as ideology. Therefore the tale of Griselda can be recognized as a disguised battle with the dominant ideologies of Boccaccio's time.

In the summary offered at the beginning of the tale of Griselda it is written that after the trials Walter subjected Griselda to "finding her patient under everything, he fetcheth her home again, dearer than ever" (Boccaccio, 1995, 1005). This foreword has summarized the expectation present in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy. By focusing on the subject and object this expectation is deeper clarified; Walter as a representative of men is the controller, the tester, the one who sets the standard, thus showing his undeniable power over Griselda who is acting as the symbol for all females.

Althusser notes a key feature of ideologies in his 1969 essay titled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". He focuses on the omnipresence of ideologies and states

- The individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatuses on which "depend" the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject. (Althusser, 1969, 696).

For modern readers Griselda's obedience may be considered as her own choice and doing. However it is in fact the result of an ideology rooted deep into Griselda's unconscious. Her lack of resistance to Walter's trials is not only telling of her steadfastness in marital vows and in accepting wifely duties but also a projection of what society considered generosity in Boccaccio's era.

In an essay titled "The Voice of Dioneo: Women in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*" Williams affirms this belief that Dioneo is acting as a vehicle for Boccaccio to transfer his ideas by saying "Boccaccio employs the voice of his narrator Dioneo to represent his ideas on the tension between masculinity and femininity." (Williams, 2007, 5). Moreover, Boccaccio focuses on topics contemporary to his era such as the suppression of women and the expectation of unquestionable submission from them.

During the final tale of *the Decameron* Walter goes to fetch the peasant bride that;

- He has chosen, it is written that; he (Walter) asked her if, he took her to wife, she would still study to please him, nor take umbrage at aught that he should do or say, and if she would be obedient, and many other like things, to all of which she answered ay (Boccaccio, 1995, 1003).

It is noteworthy that Walter, as a stereotypical male of 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, is setting his standards for Griselda before even allowing her to become his bride. This is showing of a belief or as Althusser would name it an ideology dominate in that time which indicates the male superiority in marriage. Griselda does not specify expectations for Walter, rather she unquestionably vows obedience. Boccaccio disapproves of this irregularity in marital expectations, as a thinker

beyond his time and a feminist he seeks reciprocal benefits in the union and hence has used Dioneo and projected his own beliefs through this member of the Brigade.

Williams recognized Boccaccio as a feminist when she says “Boccaccio provides a space within this collection of novella for the passion and intellects of women to be documented. This is especially unusual for any writing in the early Renaissance, and even modern times” (Williams, 2007, 32). Griselda is therefore not only a means for Boccaccio to value women in ways never before done in his time but exhibit his disapproval for Griselda treatment. The story writes such about Griselda throughout her ordeal “

Describing her in this way is not only a projection of the time’s ideology but the hidden implications of the suffering and injustice Griselda endured is in fact Boccaccio’s disapproval to them. Later in the story it is written that “But, a little after, a new thought having entered his mind, to wit, to seek, by dint of long tribulation and things unendurable, to make trial of her patience” (Boccaccio, 1995, 1012). This line shows the sadistic tendencies of men like Walter, their incomprehensible doubt and need for trial especially to their loved ones. Boccaccio is once again displaying his disapproval to 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy’s mindset that the fidelity of women must be examined repeatedly.

The tale of Griselda is the end of the *Decameron* but definitely not the fall of Boccaccio’s resistance. This tale of Dioneo displayed the mistreatment of women, the outrageous demands of unquestionable obedience but more importantly projects the need for a change. Dioneo tells of the crazed tests of Walter only to show Griselda’s persistence and unimaginable devotion. Boccaccio is against the suppression of women in his time and uses this story to undermine the deep rooted and unsuspecting ideologies which have been set by the ruling class. The ending of Griselda’s tale shows her reunion with her children and notes “they held the trials which he had made of his lady overharsh, nay, intolerable; but over all they held Griselda most sage.” (Boccaccio, 1995, 1024) Boccaccio clearly states his position, the expectations made of women in his time are intolerable yet he advocates for them by noting the women’s triumph.

## RESULTS

Boccaccio’s Italian masterpiece *Decameron* confronts a diversity of topic. The 100 tale collection maneuvers through topics of respect, dignity, love, revenge and everything in between. The members of the Brigade each designate a topic and the tales pour in as they sit in the isolated countryside awaiting the passage of the plague as if it were a hurricane. Dioneo as one of the members reserves the right to digress from the topic very early on and as the final storyteller of each day his stories stand out. It has been argued in this paper and others such as “The Voice of Dioneo: Women in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*” by Williams that Dioneo is in fact the mouthpiece of Boccaccio.

By considering the range of stories and the wit as well as the subject matter that Dioneo incorporates in his stories it seems telling that he is trying to shed light on aspects of 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian cultures, rituals and beliefs. As Althusian theory expanded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century each society is formed of ideologies that seem to be recognized as unquestionable facts but are in fact the calculated presentations of the dominant ruling class. Boccaccio as a thinker ahead of his time has picked some of the most troubling and deep rooted ideologies and tried to awaken readers from the sexual repression, propaganda and female suppression that dominated his era.

Dioneo’s tale of the third day has come to be known as the some sexually teasing tale of the entire collection. As established through this paper, the tale of Alibech is more than just a good read, it is a demonstration of a cry for help. It is



the exaggerated tale of a girl so young and innocent that she is easily fooled into having sexual intercourse under the pretext that it is the capturing of the devil into hell. The tale of Alibech and Rustio is not just the tale of youth innocence but a disguised weapon in which Boccaccio aimed to destroy by acknowledging the existence of this ideology. The dominant class of Italy which consisted mostly of the church members needed their citizens to be religiously obedient well as sexually suppressed.

Absolute religious obedience and restricted sexual awareness especially in women were two of the mindsets, or ideologies, that the dominate class needed in its citizens in order to have a strong ruler over society and reach its own goals. Thus, Boccaccio's daring endeavor to place a tale into such a large collection, under the guise of Dioneo was all in the aims of expressing his opposition with these governing ideologies of his time.

This clever undermining of dictating ideologies through Dioneo's humorous stories continues. The final story of day six demonstrates the zenith of religious corruption. Fra Cipolla, a traveling friar, promises to show his followers a feather from the wing of the angle Gabriel, once it is changed into a piece of coal, the so called religious man does not hesitate to lie to his congregation. The humorous language of Boccaccio diverts the unsuspecting reader's attention from the horrible action of Fra Cipolla to his skillful ability in fabricating lies.

In this tale, Boccaccio has ventured into a dangerous topic of religion and church. Renaissance Italy was not a place of religious freedom or controversy. Religion was the strongest control the government had therefore Fra Cipolla's overt disloyalty was quite controversial. The story is a dent in the deep religious structure of Renaissance Italy. The tale of Fri Cipolla is Boccaccio's challenging the religious propaganda and blind devotion to the church, under the mask of a funny fable of a friar. Francesco Ciabattoni goes as far as comparing Boccaccio's storytelling to magic and writes "Boccaccio is to the *Decameron* what the storytellers are to their lies. Boccaccio's words, then, like the storytellers are imbued with the miraculous power to change reality." (Ciabattoni, 2010, 175).

The last tale analyzed in this paper was Dioneo's final story about an obedient wife's superhuman tolerance to her husband tough tasks to test loyalty. Boccaccio once again employs Dioneo's voice and as he tells of Griselda's patience and serenity he is in fact exposing the rigorous demands society had of women. As Marquis notes "Griselda's unrelenting submission, religious allegory and the implications of patriarchal dominance over state and home" (Marquis, 2011, 5) are all topics the tale touches upon. This story much like "Putting the devil back in Hell" and "Fri Cipolla" is destabilizing the ideologies. Boccaccio recognized the outrageous expectations his society had of females. As shown with Alibech's tale they were expected to be pure and innocent to an almost pre-puberty state and as seen in the case of Griselda they were expected to stand by their patriarch no matter what. They eliminated the right of choice, expression and desire in women and Boccaccio noticed so as a proto-feminist writer he shed light on it through these tales.

The *Decameron* is a collection valuable in numerous ways, only one of those ways has been examined in this paper. Giovanni Boccaccio's skill in recognizing the governing demands of society, the unspoken cultural expectations and the absolute religious norms has given him the ability to find the ideologies of his era. The three tales covered in this paper find those ideologies; sexual female repression in the tale of Alibech and Rustio, supreme power and blind acceptance of religious propaganda in the tale of Fri Cipolla and suppression of women and their superwomen roles in marriage.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus three main points were revealing. Firstly Boccaccio's genius for being ahead of his time as well as having proto-feministic view was recognized. Secondly, the existence of ideologies as Althusser explains and finally and most importantly the combination of these points. Boccaccio's skillful story telling has paradoxically acted as a mask to reveal the hidden ideologies and raise awareness in his readers, revealing the debates within the *Decameron*.

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