

*“Such tales were not to be told among ladies”*

Women’s Wit and the  
Problem of Modesty in  
Boccaccio’s *Decameron*



La novella da Dioneo raccontata prima con un poco di vergogna punse i cuori delle donne ascoltanti e con onesto rossore nel loro viso apparito ne diede segno; e poi quella, l’una l’altra guardando, appena del rider potendosi astenero, soghignando ascoltarono. Ma venuta di questa la fine, poi che lui con alquante dolci parolette ebber morso, volendo mostrare che simili novelle non fossero tra donne da raccontare. (I.5, 89–90)

[At first, the story told by Dioneo pricked the hearts of the ladies who were listening with a bit of embarrassment, which was made evident by the modest blushes on their faces; but then, as they looked at each other, they could hardly keep from laughing, and they smiled as they listened. As soon as the story came to an end, they reprimanded Dioneo with a few gentle remarks in order to show him that such tales were not to be told among ladies.] (42)<sup>1</sup>



Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (begun around 1350), perhaps more than any other medieval or Renaissance literary work, is specifically concerned with women’s laughter, for his female storytellers laugh at the stories told throughout the work and tell humorous stories of their own. But whereas the Wife of Bath

1. I quote from the English translation by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella and the Italian text edited by Vittore Branca. Where page references are given together, the first is the Italian, the second the English.

mocks norms of feminine decorum and plays the role of rampant female unruliness, Boccaccio's female storytellers skirt with more difficulty the line between proper feminine modesty and unruly laughter. Their blushes and their reprimand to the male storyteller to remember that they are ladies show how difficult it could be for medieval women of the bourgeoisie or nobility to laugh without compromising their modesty. Rather than suggesting that ladies eschew laughter and wit, however, Boccaccio demonstrates an unusually keen interest in exploring the extent to which women might use them to their advantage. Many of the stories extol the virtues of women's wit, which is in fact often used to challenge assumptions about feminine modesty. Furthermore, the flirtatious sparring between the members of the *brigata* proposes that women's laughter may also bring pleasure to men.

The *Decameron* is especially helpful in exploring medieval attitudes toward women's laughter because it was explicitly written, according to Boccaccio's preface to the work, for the pleasure of women. His claim invites us to ask how a male author might amuse women as well as what motive he might have for doing so. The *Decameron* is also helpful because its framework structure dramatizes the various ways in which medieval men and women might have responded to comic tales in which gender figured prominently. By examining differences between the male and female storytellers' responses to the stories, we are able to infer some possible ways in which gender influenced the response to comic literature among actual readers of Boccaccio's time.

### *Boccaccio and His Women Readers: Ladies' Man*

Boccaccio's concern with women's laughter is reflected in the five structural levels or "frames" of the work: the world of the narrator Boccaccio, the world of Boccaccio's readers, the world of the plague, the world of the ten storytellers (or the *brigata*), and the world represented within the stories told by the storytellers.<sup>2</sup> In all of these frames, Boccaccio both refers explicitly to women's laughter and demonstrates interest in women as readers. He addresses his work to ladies in love and has seven women among the *brigata* of storytellers who laugh at each others' stories. Although these inscribed

2. See Potter, *Five Frames for the "Decameron."*

readers include men as well as women, in ninety of the stories the *brigata* narrators address their stories to "dear ladies" or "valorous ladies," and in the conclusion to the tales we are often told the ladies' reactions, which reinforces throughout the work the impression that Boccaccio is particularly interested in women as readers.

Whether or not Boccaccio truly intended the *Decameron* principally for women readers is harder to determine.<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to Day IV, it is clear in his address to his potential critics that he had in mind these male readers as well. Women were most likely among his readers since many copies of the work were owned by the most eminent merchant families of Florence.<sup>4</sup> In a letter of 1360, a man demands that his copy, borrowed for quite some time by the addressee's wife, be returned to him immediately.<sup>5</sup> In addition to an audience of the well-to-do mercantile class in Florence and elsewhere, it is likely that the work enjoyed popularity in the court society of Naples, where women were actively reading.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the tales were also told in the public squares in front of an eager populace.<sup>7</sup> It thus appears that the *Decameron* was known to Italian women from various social strata, although many women, particularly those who heard rather than read the collection, perhaps only knew parts of it.<sup>8</sup> Women who did read the *Decameron* encountered a work that explicitly invited them to read as women, for Boccaccio dedicates it to them and takes consistent care to craft the fictive "dearest and fairest ladies" that he imagines as the readers of his work.

Boccaccio's interest in laughter can be understood to stem partly from the plague that raged throughout Florence in 1348 and led to the loss of as much as three-quarters of the city's population. Boccaccio's claim that his gift of laughter could heal the melancholy brought on by the plague echoes medical treatises of the time that advocate fleeing plague-ridden towns to seek refuge where one can engage in songs and entertainment,

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3. Janet Levarie Smarr provides a helpful summary of the various explanations given for Boccaccio's addressing the work to women (*Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 169–74).

4. Branca, *Boccaccio*, 199.

5. *Ibid.*, 197.

6. Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 267 n. 8.

7. Branca, *Boccaccio*, 201.

8. See also Smarr, "Boccaccio and Renaissance Women," 279–97, for a discussion of the female readership of the *Decameron* in the sixteenth century. Smarr argues that the *Decameron* was a source of inspiration for women writers, notably for Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*.

thus relieving one's mind of unpleasant and potentially harmful thoughts.<sup>9</sup> The *Decameron* dramatizes such contemporary therapeutic theories of literature for pleasure by having the members of the *brigata* heal themselves through delightful stories.

Another therapeutic justification for the *Decameron* concerns lovesickness, since melancholy arising from unrequited or unfulfilled romantic passion was in the Middle Ages also considered a kind of medical condition. Whereas men could be healed from their affliction by having sexual relations (preferably with the object of their passion), such a remedy could not be honorably prescribed for women, a disparity that can be seen within the *Decameron* tales.<sup>10</sup> Men could also engage in various distractions such as hunting, riding, or attending to business, which would remove any painful thought (*noioso pensiero*), whereas women were more often confined to the home, an inequality Boccaccio claims he wants to remedy, offering up his stories as medicine for women in love, a kind of sequel to Ovid's *Remedia amoris*, aiming to help women avoid the dangers of love, whereas Ovid intended to help men. Such literary medicine is not extended to all women, only to those whose love causes them to languish in idleness, since to those women who are not in love he leaves "l'ago e 'l fuso e l'arcolajo" (8) [the needle, spindle, and wool winder, 3].<sup>11</sup> By claiming to help lovelorn and leisured women, Boccaccio voices particular concern for their health and happiness.

However, Boccaccio's claim of wanting to cure lovesick women is also intricately woven into his own pose as victim of love. In the pages preceding his address to women in love, he announces that, now free from the bonds of love, he nonetheless has suffered and is in need of more compassion than any other man. Although claiming to blame not the cruelty of the lady but rather his own "poco regulato appetito" [unrestrained desire],

9. See Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's "Decameron,"* 32; and Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, 165–82. Olson notes that laughter as a treatment for various ailments has been prescribed by modern physicians as well (197).

10. Zago, "Women, Medicine, and the Law in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," 65–67.

11. Victoria Kirkham notes that this passage echoes closely Ovid's *Heroides* (XIX) (*The Sign of Reason in Boccaccio's Fiction*, 118–19). Also see Calabrese, "Men and Sex," which argues that despite Boccaccio's claim that he is writing to remedy women's lovesickness, the *Decameron* is actually more focused on showing how men are "vulnerable, fragile, and subject to female power" (65). Calabrese's reading at several points complements my own reading of the *Decameron* in pointing out how Boccaccio plays with seemingly discrete binaries such as reason versus passion or modesty versus immodesty.

he dons the comic mask of the helpless victim of female charms. At the same time, he portrays himself as a bit of a ladies' man. At the beginning of Day IV, he claims he cannot be blamed for loving beautiful women, "perché il porro abbia il capo bianco, che la coda sia verde" (467) [for though the leek may have a white top, its roots can still be green, 248]. The comparison of himself to a leek with green leaves but a white top (a white-haired man nonetheless endowed with sexual vigor) is later echoed by an old physician in one of the tales told (I.10). In the tale, a group of women make fun of the doctor, but he replies that he has often observed ladies eating leeks, and that, contrary to common sense, they leave the delicious bulb in their hands while they eat the bitter leaves. He then asks how he is to know whether they might not make the same mistake when it comes to choosing their lovers, and therefore choose him and discard younger men. The narrator, Pampinea, openly condemns the women's laughter as foolishness, for they erroneously believe "that the extremely delightful passion of love should dwell only in the foolish minds of the young and nowhere else" (119; 57). As though on Boccaccio's behalf, Pampinea warns women not to make fun of old men in love.

Boccaccio's pose as ladies' man is even more clear in the double entendres he uses to refer to his authorship. At the very end of the work, he apologizes to those ladies who have found him to have an evil tongue or language (*lingua* can mean either), but assures them that his tongue/language is top quality: "mi disse una mia vicina che io l'aveva la migliore e la più dolce del mundo" (1261) [I was told by a lady, a neighbour of mine, that I had the finest and sweetest tongue in the world]. Similarly, he responds to those women who think he has put too many jests and other light matter in his work, by assuring them that he is a "weighty" writer:

Io confesso d'esser pesato e molte volte de' miei dí essere stato; e per ciò, parlando a quelle che pesato non m'hanno, affermo che io non son grave, anzi son io sí lieve, che io sto a galla nell'acqua; e considerato che le prediche fatte da' frati per rimorder delle lor colpe gli uomini, il più oggi piene di motti e di ciance e di scede, estimai che quegli medesimi non stesser male nelle mie novelle, scritte per cacciar la malinconia delle femine. (1260)

[I confess that I do have weight and to have been weighed many a time in my day. And so, speaking to those ladies who have not

weighed me, let me assure them that I am not heavy at all—on the contrary, I am so light that I float on water; when you consider that the sermons delivered by friars to reproach men for their sins are, for the most part, full of nonsense, jokes, and foolishness, I felt that these same things would not be out of place in my stories, which are, after all, written to drive away a lady’s melancholy.] (688)

Boccaccio’s seeming apology to ladies who have found his work objectionable thus becomes sexual innuendo. Mazzotta, in discussing the double entendre of the words “lieve” and “pesato”—which refer on the surface to rhetorical terms of level of style but in context also imply sexual intercourse—argues that a fundamental mechanism of Boccaccio’s comedy is “one that mixes body and language, or more precisely, focuses on what can be called the body’s language.”<sup>12</sup> Boccaccio’s location of his comedy in his own body establishes a crucial dynamic between himself and his female readers. While claiming to use his comedy to refresh the spirits of his otiose lady readers by bringing them literary pleasure, Boccaccio insinuates that they provide him with a pleasure of his own.

### *When Modesty and Laughter Collide*

The portrayal of the fictional women within the *Decameron* is as ambivalent as his attitude toward his women readers. The seven ladies are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight, “savia ciascuna e di sangue nobile e bella di forma e ornata di costumi e di leggiadra onestà” (29) [all were intelligent and of noble birth and beautiful to look at, well-mannered and gracefully modest, 12]. Although they are all older than the common age of marriage for women of their time (fourteen to seventeen) none of the young ladies is married. The older age may be significant, since the women are also portrayed as judicious, and capable of governing their behavior, qualities that immature young girls would likely not possess. Significantly, it is a woman, Pampinea, who proposes the project of leaving the city and who initiates the storytelling structure, and scholars traditionally have proposed that she represents the virtue of prudence, with the other ladies of the *brigata* completing the catalog of the seven virtues.<sup>13</sup> The praise for the women’s fine

12. Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 160.

13. See Kirkham, “An Allegorically Tempered *Decameron*,” in *Sign of Reason*, 131–71.

qualities is rendered somewhat ambivalent, however, when Boccaccio worries that his readers might find the ladies' behavior suspect, particularly since they have listened to or told many of the stories. He assigns them pseudonyms, claiming that he wants to protect their anonymity because standards of his day are stricter than those during the plague, and he does not want anyone to diminish with their indecent talk the dignity or good reputation (*onestà*) of these worthy ladies (30; 13). With his excuse of extenuating circumstances, Boccaccio insists that the ladies are morally upright, yet in doing so he draws attention to those aspects of their behavior that might be judged improper.

When Boccaccio notes that the standards for feminine decorum were looser during the time of the plague, he explicitly connects women's modesty with their laughter. In his lengthy description of the many forms of social breakdown during the plague, he observes that women, no matter how well bred and virtuous, were obliged to bare their bodies to male servants if their female servants had died, and proposes that this situation explains why women after the plague may be less chaste (undoubtedly a wink to his male audience at the expense of their female contemporaries). Boccaccio then notes that whereas in death men usually count on women to take care of the bodies and perform mourning respectfully, the emotional strains of the plague were more likely to lead to laughter:

e pochissimi erano coloro a' quali i pietosi pianti e l'amare lagrime de' suoi congiunti fossero concesse, anzi in luogo di quelle s'usavano per li piú risa e motti e festeggiar compagnevole; la quale usanza le donne, in gran parte postposta la donnesca pietà, per salute di loro avevano ottimamente appresa. (23–24)

[Very few were granted the piteous laments and bitter tears of their relatives; on the contrary, most relatives were somewhere else, laughing, joking, and amusing themselves; even the women learned this practice too well, having put aside, for the most part, their womanly compassion for their own safety.] (10)

Boccaccio's statement that women had *learned* the art of laughter only once freed from the "feminine concern" with more serious matters suggests the degree to which laughter was normally considered incompatible with feminine decorum. In *Del Reggimento e costumi di Donna*, a well-known conduct

book of the early fourteenth century by Francesco da Barberino, women are reminded not to laugh with their mouths wide open, for it would have the unseemly result of revealing their teeth. Like other medieval conduct books, the *Reggimento* echoes a simultaneous concern with women's sexuality and their laughter. Of particular interest in the context of the *Decameron* is that Barberino explicitly asserts that control of laughter is more relevant to women of the nobility, whereas women of lesser rank could have more freedom: "E porrà ben più ridere guicare / E più d'attorno onestamente andare / Ed anco in balli e canti / Più allegrezza menare."<sup>14</sup> The notion that peasant girls can go about town amusing themselves freely reminds us of Boccaccio's earlier dedication of his work to women who did not have such freedom.

Having established the special exception of the plague as justification, Boccaccio gives his ladies free rein to laugh. They laugh at many different kinds of stories: tales of rogues who masquerade as saints (I.1), tales of women who deceive their husbands (Day VII), tales of abbots who get away with sleeping with girls they have secreted in the monastery (I.4), and tales of men who fall into toilets (II.5). After many stories, Boccaccio notes that the ladies laugh very heartily or many times. Their laughter is assumed to have become so obvious to readers that the narrator comments, after Lauretta's tale on Day VIII, "There is no need to ask how certain parts of the Queen's story made the ladies laugh: there was not one among them who did not have tears in her eyes at least a dozen times from too much laughter" (544) [*Quanto la novella della reina in diversi luoghi facesse le donne ridere, non è da domandare: niuna ve ne era a cui per soperchio riso non fossero dodici volte le lagrime venute in su gli occhi, 1008*]. The laughter of Boccaccio's ladies, exuberant and loud, contrasts with the image of the barely smiling lady of conduct manuals.

It is only when the stories are of a sexual nature that the ladies' laughter is shown to conflict with norms of feminine comportment. In such cases, they attempt to hide their laughter or blush because such tales are not to be told in the company of ladies. For example, after Filostrato's tale about the gardener who sneaks into the abbey and has sex with all the nuns (III.1), the narrator informs us that parts of the story had made the ladies laugh, while others had caused them to blush. Although Boccaccio notes these

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14. A summary of the text is located in Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 106–8.

blushing reactions, he is careful to point out that the women enjoy the sexual humor. In reaction to Dioneo's tale (V.10) about a woman whose husband prefers the unnatural "dry path" (anal intercourse with men) to the natural "wet path" (heterosexual intercourse), leading her to take a lover, the narrator remarks that "if the ladies' laughter seemed restrained, it was more out of modesty than lack of amusement" (376) [meno per vergogna dalle donne risa che per poco diletto, 706]. The ladies are amused, but their modesty (*vergogna*) forces them to restrain their laughter. It is this conflict between sexual humor and women's modesty that so seems to preoccupy Boccaccio throughout the *Decameron*.

As Regina Barreca has remarked in her study of contemporary American humor, sexual humor has traditionally placed women in a bind. They cannot laugh at a sexual joke, for to do so is to admit that they understand the joke and that, therefore, they know more about sex than they should. She uses as her primary example the television game show *The Dating Game* (specifically in its earlier years) in which young women ask a series of questions to the several male suitors who can end up winning a date with her if she likes their answers. Barreca notes the awkward moment for the female contestant when men answer her question with sexual innuendo:

If she laughed, she was doomed, because her laughter would give away a terrible secret about her: that she *got the joke*. That she knew what he was talking about. . . . It was in his script to make the dirty joke, and it was in her script only to smile. The girl couldn't laugh, because Good Girls just didn't "get it"—"it" being, almost inevitably, the not-so-hidden sexual meaning in male humor.<sup>15</sup>

While Boccaccio's ladies do laugh rather than smile, Boccaccio's repeated references to their blushes serve to show precisely the bind in which sexual humor places women, particularly unmarried women who presumably have not yet had sexual experiences.<sup>16</sup>

Such modesty in the face of sexual language was expected of women in the Middle Ages. According to Hostiensis, cardinal bishop of the thirteenth

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15. Barreca, *Snow White*, 2–3.

16. Apte notes that in many cultures unmarried women are discouraged from telling jokes, but postmenopausal women are accorded more license to laugh and joke (*Humor and Laughter*, 75–81).

century, women typically blushed at the mention of sex and would use euphemisms for sexual terms.<sup>17</sup> The scandal that a woman using blunt sexual language would provoke is dramatized clearly in *Le Ménagier de Paris*, a conduct book written in about 1394 by an elderly Parisian for his young wife. The husband warns his wife about vulgar speech and explicitly cautions against using it in order to be amusing:

Et certes, femmes ne doivent parler de nulle laidure, non mye seulement de con, de cul ne de autres secretz membres de nature, car c'est deshonneste chose a femme d'en parler. Je oy une foiz raconter d'une jeune preudefemme qui estoit assise en une presse de ses autres amis et amyes. Et par adventure elle dist par esbatement aux autres: "Vous me pressés si fort que bien la moictié de mon con me ride." Et jasoit ce qu'elle l'eust dit par jeu et entre ses amis, cuidant faire la galoise, toutesvoyes les autres sages preudefemmes ses parentes l'en blasmerent a part. *Item*, telles femmes gouliardeuses dient aucunes foiz de femme qu'elle est putain ribaulde, et par ce disant il semble qu'elles sachent qu'est putain ou ribaulde, et preudefemmes ne scevent que ce est de ce. (129)

[And certainly women shouldn't speak of anything vulgar, certainly not about cunt, ass, or other private parts, for it is unseemly for women to talk of these things. I once heard of a virtuous young lady who was seated in a crowd of male and female friends. And by chance she said teasingly to the others: "You are crowding me so much that at least half of my cunt is wrinkled." And although she said it in fun and among her friends, thinking she was gallant, nevertheless, in private the other wise young ladies blamed her parents. Such ribald women sometimes say of a woman that she is a bawdy whore, and it seems that they know what "whore" or "bawdy" means; but honorable women don't know anything about it.]<sup>18</sup>

The young woman, in trying to be "gallant" or witty, has demonstrated that she is a "bad girl," particularly since she speaks about her "con" in

17. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 426–27.

18. The translation is by Tania Bayard, *A Medieval Home Companion* (93–94). Because Bayard's translation omits about half of the original text, future translations of *Le Ménagier* are my own.

front of men. Even in jest, women must not use explicit sexual language. Moreover, the author asserts that even criticisms of such behavior are dangerous, for if a woman should reprimand the ribald woman by calling her "a bawdy whore," she only demonstrates her own lack of innocence by revealing that she knows what these things mean. To be a lady, in this model, is to lack the knowledge of sex that using sexual language would betray.

This pressure to maintain the appearance of innocence is especially keen when there is mixed company. In the *Decameron*, this is suggested when Filostrato, in recounting his tale about the two lovers who are caught together by the girl's father (V.4), describes the girl whose "left hand was grasping that thing which you ladies are ashamed to mention in the company of gentlemen" (339) [con la sinistra mano presolo per quella cosa che voi tra gli uomini piú vi vergognate di nominare, 636]. In other words, ladies are not ashamed to mention the name of the man's "cosa" when men are not around. Christine de Pizan cautions that girls should behave modestly especially in front of men, even when at home: "Young women should never be bold, skittish, or ribald, especially in the presence of any men whatsoever, whether clerks in the household, servingmen, or retainers attached to the family."<sup>19</sup> In this light, the blushes of the seven ladies of the *brigata* can be understood to show their concern about behaving properly in the company of their male companions.

Yet such displays of decorum were apparently a source of much amusement to medieval men, because they could ultimately be construed as a performance of modesty rather than a true innocence of sexual matters. This is suggested in the fabliau "De la damoisele" about a young girl who can not tolerate hearing the word "foutre" (fuck) without feeling ill.<sup>20</sup> As the tale makes clear, it is the term, not the act, that makes the girl ill, for she willingly engages in the act once her suitor cleverly devises euphemisms to describe and orchestrate it. By implication, the tale suggests that women's objections to sexual matters are merely an act they perform to craft the modest appearance required of them. Such a lesson might similarly be gleaned from Dioneo's tale of the innocent young Alibech, who is instructed by the clever hermit Rustico how to "put the Devil back in Hell" (III.10).

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19. *Treasury*, 203.

20. Noomen and Van den Boogaard, *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, 6:57–90.

Boccaccio himself takes a certain pleasure in the situation in which he has placed his own female readers. He does fret that women might say that he has made them listen to things that are not proper for virtuous ladies to say or hear (685) and indeed told a friend not to let the women in his house read his “trifles” [nugas], which might suggest sincere concern on his part.<sup>21</sup> The subtitle of the *Decameron*, “Prencipe Galeotto” of course invokes Canto V of Dante’s *Inferno*, where through the example of Francesca’s tragic adulterous love for Paolo, sparked as the couple reads the story of Lancelot, romances of adulterous love are blamed for corrupting the minds of their readers. Boccaccio’s choice of this subtitle playfully invites readers to consider the *Decameron* as a “go-between” corrupting their own minds. This use of the literature as corruption trope is largely ironic, however, for within the *Decameron*, Boccaccio shifts the burden of responsibility onto his readers, warning them to mind their own reading rather than blaming the texts themselves.<sup>22</sup> He argues that only a “prude” [spigolistra donna] would object to the few “little words here and there” because such women are “le quali piú le parole pesan che’ fatti e piú d’apparer s’ingegnan che d’esser buone” (1255) [ladies of the type who weigh words more than deeds and who strive more to seem good than to be so, 685]. With this passage, Boccaccio interrogates both the relationship between things and the words used to signify them and the question of *appearing* innocent without actually being so.

The suggestion that words themselves cannot do harm is a common argument by Boccaccio’s time, having been made famous by Jean de Meun’s assertion in the *Roman de la Rose* (through the voice of Reason) that the words “testicles” (*coilles*) and “relics” (*reliques*) were neither good nor bad in themselves and that each word could, in fact, have been used in the place of the other (7109–15). Boccaccio argues along similar lines that it is no more improper for him to have written naughty words than for men and women to say such words as “‘foro’ et ‘caviglia’ e ‘mortaio’ e ‘pestello’ e ‘salsiccia’ e ‘mortadello’” (1255) [“hole,” “peg,” “mortar,” “pestle,” “wiener,” and “fat sausage,” 685]. Whereas Jean argues that words in themselves cannot be improper since they are signifiers only arbitrarily attached to what they signify, Boccaccio goes a step further by

21. Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 169.

22. See Noakes, “The Double Misreading of Paolo and Francesca,” for a stimulating discussion of how Dante uses the Paolo and Francesca episode to warn about the dangers of *misreading* rather than the dangers of literature itself.

showing that plays on words, another level of linguistic displacement away from what is signified, are improper only when the mind of the reader or listener willfully construes such a meaning.

Consequently, Boccaccio argues that it is up to his lady readers to keep a pure mind, since his tales may either be harmful or useful depending on the listener:

Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola: e cosí come le oneste a quella non giovano, cosí quelle che tanto oneste non sono la ben disposta non posson contaminare, se non come il loto i solari raggi o le terrene brutture le bellezze del cielo. (1257)

[A corrupt mind never understands a word in a healthy way! And just as fitting words are of no use to a corrupt mind, so a healthy mind cannot be contaminated by words which are not so proper, any more than mud can dirty the rays of the sun or earthly filth can mar the beauties of the skies.] (686)

Such a claim is of course equivocal, for Boccaccio lets himself off the hook for anything readers might find offensive, a strategy later imitated by Chaucer in his invocations to his readers to exercise their judgment in distinguishing game from play. He has in effect blamed women for construing sexual meaning on his own literary work, a mere collection of words. The woman who objects to sexual humor simultaneously condemns herself for having understood it and makes herself appear a kind of narrow-minded spoilsport or "prude," much to the delight of male readers, who are free from such a dilemma.<sup>23</sup> Christine de Pizan complained of the sexual language in the *Roman de la Rose*, asking of what value was a work that could not be read before ladies without making them blush. Gontier Col replied jocosely that if ladies blush, it is because of their own guilty consciences.<sup>24</sup> Col's response, well fifty years after the *Decameron*, suggests

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23. Jill Mann, "Apologies to Women," 5, has observed that Boccaccio's interest in sexual language demonstrates, like Freud's model of the joke, "linguistic displacement," where talking about sex is more titillating than doing it. She furthermore argues that in his alleged apology to women readers, Boccaccio "uses the question of female delicacy or prudery to increase the reader's enjoyment of linguistic displacement; it seems improbable that it was seriously prompted by concern for his women readers."

24. Hicks, *Débat*, 56 and 103. Christine's statement reads, "Et pour Dieu! que fait a louer lecture qui n'osera estre leue ne ramenteue en propre forme a la table des roynes, des

how consistently men blamed women for not appreciating the humor that many men so clearly enjoyed.

By implicating women in their own objections to sexual humor, Boccaccio places his female readers in a position that compromises their modesty. While claiming to be writing for women's pleasure, he derives pleasure from literary sexual innuendo, like Freud's joker who displaces sexual desire onto the language of the joke. Such a conclusion appears even stronger if one remembers Boccaccio's male readers, who parallel the position of the male recipient of the sexual joke in Freud's triangular model. Yet within the storytelling frame of the *Decameron*, unlike in Freud's model, the women actually appear to enjoy sexual humor, for although they blush and show concern for their modesty, they generally laugh along with the men. After the tale of Alibech (III.10) the ladies of the *brigata* laugh, and within the frame of the story itself, the story's popularity with women is emphasized, for it "was told and retold by one woman to another all over the city until it actually became a popular proverb" (239). Here a dirty story circulates within a commerce of joking between a whole community of women. The only time when laughter is restricted to the men of the *brigata* is after a tale in which a man learns to tame his unruly wife by beating her (IX.9). While the tale makes the men laugh, it causes some murmuring among the ladies, who appear not to have enjoyed it. Such resistance could have been noted after tales of cuckoldry and other sexual mischief; the fact that it was not suggests that whereas the women object to wife beating, they do not object to sexual transgressions. In one sense, this willing participation in sexual humor could be viewed as an example of the questionable behavior Boccaccio had highlighted before the men and women leave Florence. In his comment that he has "sometimes made ladies say things, and more often listen to things, which are not very proper for virtuous ladies to say or hear" (685), Boccaccio does seem concerned about the propriety of his ladies, although by noting that they have more often *listened to* rather than told the tales, he appears to be making an important distinction.<sup>25</sup>

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princesses et des vaillans presentes fames, a qui convendroit couvrir la face de honte rougie! Quel bien donques y puet on glosser?"

25. The view that listening to salacious material was not as objectionable as actually speaking it is found in Aquinas's remark that "talking and listening are very different, for a man properly listens to things he could not properly say" *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 4, sec. 851.

More importantly, it is simplistic to focus only on the sexual content of the humor without looking at the relationship between teller and recipient. The male storyteller most associated with sexual jesting is Dioneo, and his relationship with the seven ladies parallels in several important respects the relationship between Boccaccio and his lady readers. Significantly, all of his tales, except the very last tale about Griselda, are comic, and most are sexual in nature. But Dioneo wins the hearts of the women primarily because, like Boccaccio, he declares his intention to use the healing power of laughter to combat the sorrows of the plague:

Donne, il vostro senno piú che il nostro avvedimento ci ha qui guidati; io non so quello che de' vostri pensieri voi v'intendete di fare: li miei lasciai io dentro dalla porta della città allora che io con voi poco fa me ne uscì fuori: e per ciò o voi a sollazzare e a ridere e a cantare con meco insieme vi disponete (tanto, dico, quanto alla vostra dignità s'appartiene), o voi mi licenziate che io per li miei pensier mi ritorni e steami nella città tribolata. (42)

[Ladies, more than our preparations, it was your intelligence that guided us here. I do not know what you intend to do with your troubled thoughts, but I left mine inside the city walls when I passed through them in your company a little while ago; and so you must either make up your minds to enjoy yourselves and laugh and sing with me (as much, let me say, as your dignity permits), or you must give me leave to return to my worries and to remain in our troubled city.] (18)

In extending his invitation, Dioneo shows that he knows that women want to laugh, but that their dignity (being in mixed company) might make them reluctant. His understanding of their delicate position and his appreciation of their good judgment ("senno") coupled with his desire to amuse them, wins him the respect of the women. For example, Pampinea grants him the privilege of telling a tale on any subject he pleases (whereas the others are constrained by the theme of the day) because he is "a jovial and entertaining fellow" suggesting that she recognizes that his motive is to bring them cheer.<sup>26</sup> According to medieval ethical justifications of play, made clear in the *Canterbury Tales*, Dioneo's jesting can be understood as

26. On Dioneo's privilege, see Grimaldi, *Il privilegio di Dioneo*.

justifiable because it is founded in proper intent: mutual solace rather than individually motivated anger or ill will.

The women's warm response to Dioneo's understanding of their desire to laugh contrasts with their displeasure when Filostrato sets the theme of love that ends unhappily (a theme chosen because he himself suffers from his love for one of them). Filostrato's self-serving use of the storytelling framework is not surprisingly connected to the sin of wrath, as Victoria Kirkham has shown.<sup>27</sup> Fiammetta announces that she will respect Filostrato's wishes, but that it seems inappropriate since their goal in leaving Florence was to leave behind sorrow. Filostrato's preference for sad stories and his own personal anger in fact directly contradict advice of the plague treatises, which advocate spurning sad thoughts in favor of cheerful ones.<sup>28</sup> Pampinea rebels more openly, deciding to tell a comic story to please the group rather than to indulge the selfish desires of the king (IV.2). When it is Dioneo's turn to tell his story at the end of the day, he announces his intention to tell a somewhat happier story, since he himself has been saddened by the previous ones, and Boccaccio remarks that the ladies laughed so much that they recovered from the melancholy caused by the previous stories. The next day, when it is his turn to tell a story, Filostrato apologizes to the ladies for having set the melancholy theme and makes amends by telling a story to make them laugh. Fiammetta acknowledges that since he has made them laugh, they can no longer hold his previous transgression against him; Filostrato is thus reformed and brought back into harmony with the group.

Laughter is thus shown as a way to heal divisions within the community, specifically those caused by enmity between sexes due to unrequited love. It is significant that Boccaccio's long defense of having written the

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27. *Sign of Reason*, 140–44. Kirkham assigns to Dioneo the soul's faculty of concupiscence and to Panfilo the superior faculty of reason. While I find this plausible, I think that in interpreting Panfilo as the superior force of reason that must harness the destructive forces of wrath (Filostrato) and lust (Dioneo), Kirkham downplays the positive function played by Dioneo because she does not view it within the recreative theory of pleasure as a kind of healing. As ruler of Day X, and the storyteller who reminds the *brigata* of the necessity to return to their civic obligations, Panfilo does indeed guide the company back into the real world, but Dioneo, too, has his fitting place within the recreative frame of the storytelling. As Smarr notes, although he may represent the principle of carnal pleasure and comic delight, "Dioneo clearly knows what he is doing and is not so simple as he pretends" (*Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 191).

28. Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, discusses plague tracts (171–73) and the specific application to Filostrato (207–8).

work to please ladies begins under the reign of the melancholy Filostrato, whose violation of the ludic agreement becomes all the more clear in the context of Boccaccio's advocating using his comic art to bring pleasure, echoed by Dioneo. In contrast to Dioneo's respect for the ritual space of solace, Filostrato's selfishness threatens to rupture the community the storytellers have established as a remedy for physical and social destruction of the city.<sup>29</sup> The contrast between Dioneo and Filostrato should thus be understood within the wider context of the justification of laughter both as therapeutic to the individual and as a way to instill mutual solace and communal cohesion. This justification of laughter as ensuring *communitas* is common not only in the Middle Ages, but also in antiquity, the Renaissance, and contemporary African cultures as well.<sup>30</sup>

Dioneo's interest in using humor for the well-being of the group is consistent with his lack of malicious intent in telling his sexual jokes. In fact, the general goodwill the women bear him becomes clear in the one passage where it does appear that Dioneo is deliberately trying to goad his female companions. At the end of the fifth day, when it is his turn to sing a song, he offers a series of ribald songs, including "Monna Aldruda, lift up your tail, for I bring you good tidings," "Raise your skirts, Monna Lapa," and "Monna Simona, fill up your cask, it isn't the month of October."<sup>31</sup> Queen Fiammetta, although suggesting he sing more fitting songs, laughs at his first few suggestions; it is only after he has *persisted* in his licentious litany that she tells him to "stop being funny and sing us a pretty song; if you don't you'll find out how angry I can get" (378) [*lascia stare il molteggiare e dinne una bella; e se no, tu potresti provare come io mi so*

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29. On the ritual separation between the ordered and structured *Decameron* world and the chaotic, socially fragmented world of the plague, see Joseph Falvo, who argues that Boccaccio's description of the ravages of the plague "disguises an even more terrible threat, the violence that destroys individual and social relationships" and that Boccaccio uses his storytellers to reaffirm the value of community ("Ritual and Ceremony in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," 148–49).

30. On communal joking in antiquity, see Bremmer, "Jokes, Jokers, and Jokebooks." On laughter as a way to build "communitas" in African societies, see Turner, *The Ritual Process*. Laughter, says Turner, "represents fellowship and good company," as in the ritual where before being installed as a chief, a chief-to-be is commanded "not to be selfish, but to laugh with the people" (101).

31. The songs are, respectively, "Monna Aldruda, levate la coda, Ché buone novelle vi reco," "Alzatevi i panni, monna Lapa," "Monna Simona imbotta imbotta, E' non è del mese d'ottobre" (707–8). Branca notes that these were popular songs of the period. Significantly, Dioneo's bawdy singing ushers out the first half of the *Decameron*, thereby standing in the very center of the work.

adirare, 708]. On one level, this passage may be an example of the work's larger preoccupation with moderation, Dioneo's needing to be reined in when his merrymaking impulse goes too far.<sup>32</sup> In light of medieval views of properly motivated jest, however, it may also suggest that Dioneo has forgotten the proper goal of merrymaking. The fact that Fiammetta at first laughs at Dioneo's *molteggiare*, but then promises to get angry, seems to suggest that it is not the songs themselves that anger her, but Dioneo's intent to see how far he can push the women before they will react. This passage invites us to consider whether Christine de Pizan's indignant response to Jean de Meun's use of sexual language is motivated not by prudery, but rather by the intent behind that form of masculine joking, calculated to keep women outsiders by laughing at their expense.

That Dioneo generally is mindful of the women's need to preserve their modesty suggests why the women respond so enthusiastically to his tales. To view the ladies' enjoyment of sexual humor as evidence of Boccaccio's misogyny is to neglect the communal and recreative context justifying laughter.<sup>33</sup> Without denying that masculine mastery is present in the voices both of Boccaccio and Dioneo or that there are misogynous statements made within the *Decameron*, I am arguing that the gender dynamics between male author and female readers are complicated by the communal function of laughter that frames the work. If Boccaccio appears to derive pleasure from causing ladies to blush (both among the *brigata* and among his readers), he also goes to some length to show the ways in which women themselves can justifiably laugh. Rather than presenting them as fully passive victims of undesired male humor, he recognizes the constraints feminine modesty places upon them, bringing into focus the question of the relationship between proper thoughts and appropriate behavior. It is important to remember that the men and the women of the *Decameron*, because of their noble birth and education, are assumed to be better able to resist sinful behavior than simple rustics, and indeed the extent to which they resist the temptations posed by salacious stories only

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32. Smarr in fact notes that in his singing Dioneo follows the principle of nine-plus-one; the first nine bawdy songs are followed by the more appropriate tenth, just as the tenth day of the *Decameron* contrasts in its seriousness with the preceding nine (*Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 180).

33. Mihoko Suzuki, "Gender, Power, and the Female Reader," 236, asserts that Boccaccio "seduces" his female readers into accepting misogyny by having his ladies laugh at the tales.

serves to further illustrate their virtue.<sup>34</sup> As Panfilo reminds the company at the close of the work, whereas those who have "weaker minds" might be corrupted, they have been able to listen to amusing tales that might stimulate carnal desire without behaving improperly: "continua onestà, continua concordia, continua fraternal dimestichezza mi ci è paruta vedere e sentire; il che senza dubbio in onore e servizio di voi e di me m'è carissimo" (1250) [Constant decorum, constant harmony, and constant fraternal friendship are, in fact, what I have seen and felt here—something which, of course, pleases me, for it redounds to both your honor and merit and mine, 682]. Panfilo emphasizes not only the communal enterprise of their temporary storytelling but also the importance of the mind in guiding behavior, which separates those who might laugh justifiably from those, whether the dissolute or prudes, who cannot distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate laughter. The *brigata* ladies, in the context of the ritual space of communal and therapeutic laughter, justifiably take pleasure in words while remaining chaste in behavior. This emphasis on the discerning power of the mind becomes even more central to the *Decameron's* exploration of the power of women to use humor as well as to appreciate it, a power that complicates still further the relationship between laughter and modesty.

### *Women's Wit and Women's Wiles*

At the end of Day I, Pampinea explicitly proclaims her view that women have lost the ability to make witty remarks: "oggi poche o niuna donna rimasa ci sia la quale o ne 'ntenda alcun leggiadro o a quello, se pur lo 'ntendesse, sappia rispondere: general vergogna è di noi e di tutte quelle che vivono" (116) [these days few if any women understand a single witty remark or, if they do understand, know how to reply to one—a source of universal shame for us all and for every woman alive today, 55]. Important here is the notion that women should *respond* rather than being merely passive onlookers to witty conversations, for wit is essential in demonstrating that women are not mere beautiful bodies, passive objects.

34. In *Ennobling Love*, C. Stephen Jaeger argues that overcoming sexual temptation attested to one's noble character, and that in the *Decameron*, the virtue of the ladies and men comes not "from rejecting the matter of vice, but from living in it virtuously—at least appearing to do so" (139).

She criticizes women who, rather than speaking with cleverness, adorn and paint themselves out of vanity, and is horrified that she too, is guilty by association since she is a woman:

Io mi vergogno di dirlo, per ciò che contro all'altre non posso dire che io contro a me non dica: queste così fregiate, così dipinte, così screziate o come statue di marmo mutole e insensibili stanno o sí rispondono, se sono addomandate, che molto sarebbe meglio l'aver taciuto; e fannosi a credere che da purità d'animo proceda il non saper tralle donne e co' valenti uomini favellare, e alla lor milensaggine hanno posto nome onestà, quasi niuna donna onesta sia se non colei che con la fante o con la lavandaia o con la sua fornaia favella: il che se la natura avesse voluto, come elle si fanno a credere, per altro modo loro avrebbe limitato il cinguettare. (117)

[I am ashamed to say this, since I cannot speak against others without speaking against myself, but these overdressed, painted, gaudy women either stand around like mute and insensitive marble statues or, if they reply when spoken to, it would be much better for them to remain silent; and they deceive themselves in believing that their inability to converse with ladies and with worthy gentlemen comes from their purity of soul, calling their stupidity modesty, as if the only modest women were those who speak only to their maid, their washerwoman, or their cook—if this had been Nature's intent, as they would have us believe, she would have found some other means to limit their chattering.] (56)

Pampinea's reference to mute statues recalls other medieval writers who urge women not to make the mistake of falling completely silent for fear of being perceived as too talkative. Anne of France, for example, cautioned her daughter to avoid being too taciturn, for such women "ressemblent a ydolles et ymaiges painctes."<sup>35</sup> More importantly, Pampinea explains that women are often reluctant to be witty when conversing with gentlemen because they fear they will be perceived as immodest, a view of course confirmed by medieval conduct books. In her lecture, Pampinea essentially argues that modesty and wit need not be seen as mutually exclusive, submit-

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35. *Les Enseignements d'Anne de France*, 68.

ting to critique the customary binary division between modest ignorance and immodest knowledge.

The challenge to the apparent contradiction between wit and modesty could also be viewed within the larger context of attitudes toward women's learning as damaging to their femininity. Although women of learning in fourteenth-century Italy were sometimes praised, they were more often viewed as aberrations of nature, unfeminine, and thus it was generally thought that there was no need for women to be highly educated, as Barberino's *Del Reggimento e costumi di Donna* attests.<sup>36</sup> Women who did achieve such education were considered masculine, suggested by Boccaccio's marveling at the "manly" learning of the woman who sponsored his *De claribus mulieribus*, in fact noting the appropriateness of her name, Andrea (from the Greek *andres* [men]).<sup>37</sup> The discussion of women's wit in the *Decameron* participates in the larger concern with how women could remain feminine while cultivating their intellect. Pampinea's declaration that women's wit is not in contradiction with their modesty (and her castigation of women who pass their stupidity off as modesty) takes a step toward challenging the common binary opposition between female corporeality and male intellect.

It is also important to note that when Pampinea comments that she cannot speak against women without speaking against herself, she raises the issue of group identity. She uses wit as a woman, urging other women to do so as well. When Filomena later becomes queen of Day II, she at first blushes "per vergogna arrossata veggendosi coronata del regno e ricordandosi delle parole poco avanti dette da Pampinea, acciò che milensa non paresse ripreso l'ardire" (123) [a little out of modesty, but then, recalling the words just spoken by Pampinea and not wishing to appear foolish, she renewed her courage, 58]. Remembering that modesty can work against women, Filomena in fact repeats and reinforces Pampinea's lesson by echoing almost word for word her complaint about dull-witted women in the preface to her tale of Day VI (717; 382). Thus, Pampinea's words serve to

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36. "Ma pur nel dubio dobbiamo pigliar / La più sichura; e or m'acordo in questo / Ch'esso fatichi a imprendere altre cose / E quello lasci stare!" (42). In Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 106.

37. See Pamela Benson's argument that Boccaccio's view of women in the *De claris mulieribus* is ambivalent, for he sometimes views women's capacity (or incapacity) as natural, at other times as due to social conditions (*The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, 2–24). For a discussion of the various ways in which educated women were considered sexually aberrant, see King, "Book-Lined Cells," 78.

educate the other ladies, and potentially women readers of the *Decameron* as well, to follow her example.

Whereas Pampinea's story is cautionary, about a woman who is the victim of wit because she doesn't know how to use it, Filomena's story takes a witty woman as heroine. Like other stories in the *Decameron*, it stages how women can use their wit to correct individual men or the legal system as a whole. In her story, a noblewoman named Madonna Oretta becomes physically ill because the knight who is accompanying her is mangling his story, despite his claim that it would make her journey as pleasant as a nice trot on a horse. Rather than telling him bluntly that he is a terrible storyteller, she says to him, "Messer, questo vostro cavallo ha troppo duro trotto, per che io vi priego che vi piaccia di pormi a piè" (719) [Sir, this horse of yours has too rough a trot, so I beg you, please, to set me down, 383]. The knight, rather than being offended, "inteso il motto e quello in festa e in gabbo preso, mise mano in altre novelle e quella cominciata aveva e mal seguita senza finita lasciò stare" [understood her witty remark, and taking it cheerfully and in a joking spirit, he began to talk of other things, putting aside the story he had begun and continued to tell so badly]. This story, which is structurally privileged as the first story of the second half of the work, and the first story of the day devoted to *motti*, is important to the theme of women and laughter in the *Decameron* because it refers explicitly to the activity of telling stories. It is a woman who makes the witty remark that establishes the principle that storytelling must be done with art and skill. Filomena shows that women can use wit strategically to criticize what displeases them, for Madonna Oretta is able to stop the knight's nauseating narrative not through a direct rebuke, but through displacement onto the analogy of the jerky trot of his story. Another tale that illustrates this technique is Fiammetta's story of a marchioness who rebuffs the advances of the king of France, who visits her while her husband is away. While the king flirts with her, her clever reply makes him stop his attempts at jesting with her, "for he feared her retorts" (44) [temendo delle sue risposte, 94].

In both of these examples, women are shown to be able to use their wit, the way in which they manipulate language, in order to respond to a situation that is unpleasant to them. Rather than remaining mute like marble statues, they respond. The ability to craft a well-timed and measured response is shown to be advantageous to women in general, and not just individual women. This is evident in Filostrato's later tale of a woman

who, through her witty reply to a magistrate, managed to escape death for adultery (VI.7). Madonna Filippa points out that laws condemning women but not men for adultery are unequal, and therefore unjust laws, a view that is in fact explicitly shared by Filostrato as he begins his story. Furthermore, Madonna Filippa notes that since the law was written by men, and no women were consulted, it should quite rightly be called a bad law. Like the Wife of Bath's question, "Who painted the lion?" Madonna Filippa questions the validity of laws written by men for their own profit and does so by using her wit. Setting up her clever coup de grâce, she requests that the judge ask her husband whether she had ever denied him her body. When the husband admits that she never has, she argues that as long as she satisfies the demands of her husband, she should have the right to dispose of her "surplus" [quel che gli avanza] as she sees fit: "debbolo io gittare a' cani? non è egli molto meglio servirne un gentile uomo che piú che sé m'ama, che lasciarlo perdere o guastare?" (748) [Should I throw it to the dogs? Is it not much better to give it to a gentleman who loves me more than himself, rather than let it go to waste or spoil? 398]. Those present at her trial laugh heartily, but proclaim that she is right. Not only is Madonna Filippa pardoned, but the statute is modified to apply only to women who commit adultery for money. The woman has achieved a victory against a legal establishment hostile to women through her use of a witty reply.

It is in fact because of Madonna Filippa's use of a humorous justification for her adultery—the cliché of the "surplus"—that she is able to show the deficiencies of the double standard of the law. Her defense is in one sense a "misreading," since she implies that the marriage sacrament solely concerns the conjugal "debt" that each spouse owes the other. However, given that she is clearly in a loveless marriage, probably one not of her choosing, and given that her love for her lover is described as pure and true, her argument gains more force. It is by provoking the laughter of the assembled townspeople at the ingenuity of her creative defense that she is more easily able to win them over to her side. Indeed, Quintilian remarked that wit could win over an audience, especially a judge who can be made either to wake up or to relax through the use of humor.<sup>38</sup> The text in fact notes that the crowd is impressed that she has spoken well; her eloquence is clearly an asset that has helped her to make her case. Cicero's remark that

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38. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.3.1.

a witty orator “by a jest or laugh often dispels distasteful suggestions not easily weakened by reasonings” in fact holds particular application to women faced with sexual innuendoes or other such “distasteful suggestions.”<sup>39</sup> Both the marchioness and Madonna Oretta are able to criticize their male companions in an oblique way that avoids attacking them directly. Madonna Filippa’s clever retort about her “surplus” gains her the support of the townspeople, which further authorizes the judge, mindful of maintaining his authority in the community, to grant her victory. The use of a witticism to talk back, to render tit for tat, is openly admired by Laurent Joubert, who notes that among the different forms of humor, “I find the funniest the ability to render tit for tat, and for a taunt, to come back with a clever reply.”<sup>40</sup> Not only do the heroines benefit from their wit, both the men and women of the *brigata* warmly applaud it as an appropriate and necessary strategy for women to use.

The notion of wit as a necessary strategy for women to use given the unequal social conditions in which they live, is furthermore connected to the issue of women’s wiles. Just as the Wife of Bath suggests that women’s wit is a special kind of knowledge given to women, many of the stories in the *Decameron* similarly justify women’s deception as a necessary strategy to equalize unfair social conditions. In Day VII in particular, whose theme is wives who play tricks on their husbands, many of the stories justify women’s adultery because of their husband’s arrogance, jealousy, or stupidity. These tales echo the thematic preoccupation of the French fabliaux on which they are often based, but are usually more explicit about justifying the women’s wily behavior. In Neifile’s tale (VII.8), a woman deceives her husband by slipping out to meet her lover and placing in her bed another woman, whose tresses the husband cuts off, a rewriting of the Old French fabliau “Les tresces.” The end of the fabliau condemns the trickery of women: “Par cest fabliau poez savoir / Que cil ne fait mie savoir / Qui croit fame de riens qu’avaigne” [By this fabliau you can understand that he who believes his wife about whatever happens is not at all wise, 262–64].<sup>41</sup>

39. Cicero, *De Oratore*, bk. 2, sec. 236, pp. 373–74. The Latin (facing page) reads, “odiosasque res saepe, quas argumentis dilui non facile est, ioco risuque dissolvit.”

40. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 24.

41. Noomen and Van den Boogaard, *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, vol. 6. The text I have quoted is taken from manuscript X. Manuscript D warns men not to let their wives go out at night (ll. 427–34). It should be noted that fabliaux do not always condemn women, and, in fact, frequently appear to approve of their deceptions.

In Boccaccio's version, however, Neifile does not condemn the woman, but rather concludes that her cleverness (*sagacità*) enabled her to get out of a difficult situation and never again have to fear her jealous husband, who has overzealously guarded her. In another story, told by Dioneo, a woman's adultery is approved because her husband is too old to satisfy his young bride. Laurent Joubert specifically commented on the lack of compassion we feel for the cuckolded men in the *Decameron*. He admired "the stories of Boccaccio, of which those telling of the infidelities that wives perpetrate on their husbands we find most conducive to laughter, because it seems unfitting, without inspiring compassion, that a man be thus deceived."<sup>42</sup> Men are not supposed to be betrayed by their wives, but they deserve to become the objects of our laughter when their own shortcomings are at fault. The women's wiles are applauded because they are used to *react* to mitigating circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to note that the men of the *brigata* openly advocate women's cultivation of their talents. Before his tale about a woman who takes a lover because her husband is homosexual (V.10), Dioneo assures his listeners that although its subject matter is unseemly, his goal is to dispel their melancholy, and that furthermore, the women should "pluck the roses but leave the thorns where they are" [cogliete le rose e lasciate le spine stare]. He explains his metaphor: "il che farete lasciando il cattivo uomo con la mala ventura stare con la sua disonestà, e liete riderete degli amorosi inganni della sua donna" (693) [you may do this by leaving the wicked man to his misfortune and dishonorable behavior, while you laugh merrily at the amorous deceptions of his wife, 369]. Whereas the man's behavior (the thorns) is described as dishonorable, the wife's deception merits the women's merry laughter (the rose). Later, Filostrato is even more explicit about the value of stories of women's trickery:

Carissime donne mie, elle son tante le beffe che gli uomini vi fanno, e  
spezialmente i mariti, che, quando alcuna volta avviene che donna

42. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 24.

43. In "Man's Flesh and Woman's Spirit in the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*," N. S. Thompson argues that in the *Decameron*, whereas men's transgressions are shown to be destructive to society, motivated by selfishness and greed, women's transgressions are largely "reactive," due to mitigating circumstances, such as the abuse by a husband or unjust society. On the social context underpinning literary representations of women's sexual transgressions, also see Martines, *Strong Words*, 199–221.

niuna alcuna al marito ne faccia, voi non doveste solamente esser contente che ciò fosse avvenuto o di risaperlo o d'udirlo dire a alcuno, ma il doveste voi medesime andar dicendo per tutto, acciò che per gli uomini si conosca che, se essi sanno, e le donne d'altra parte anche sanno: il che altro che utile esser non vi può, per ciò che, quando alcun sa che altri sappia, egli non si mette troppo leggiermente a volerlo ingannare. (798)

[My very dear ladies, the tricks men play on you are so numerous, and especially those that husbands play, that when a woman on occasion does as much to her husband, you should not only rejoice over it and be happy that you heard it talked about, but you should also go around telling it to everyone yourself, so that men may come to learn that women, for their part, know just as much about these things as they do. This cannot be anything but useful to you, for when someone knows that others know about such matters, he will not easily wish to deceive you.] (422)

Filostrato revises the cliché of feminine deceitfulness in several interesting ways. First, he argues that men are more likely to play tricks on women, and therefore, women are no more deceitful by nature than men are.<sup>44</sup> Christine de Pizan would later point out the absurdity of the obsessive condemnation of women's tricks given the evidence that it is more often men that deceive women. In her *Epistre au dieu d'Amours*, Christine sarcastically characterizes the whole allegorical plot in which the male lover tries to conquer the rose as a series of elaborate ruses, frauds, and schemes on behalf of the male hero, all simply to trick a virgin ("Pour decevoir sans plus une pucelle— / S'en est la fin, par fraude et par cautelle!" ll. 345–46). In addition to mocking the overblown "aventures" of the allegory and highlighting male trickery, Christine also criticizes men's assertions of women's easy virtue. If women could be had so easily, she asks, why is so much trickery needed to deceive them? Christine uses her biting sarcasm to uncover men's hypocritical trickery, but whereas she defends women by emphasizing their superior moral sensibility, Filostrato argues that trickery is a weapon essential to women's survival since men so often try to deceive

44. In the *Rose*, La Vieille argues that since men deceive women by being unfaithful, women should do the same to men (ll. 13265–72). See also Ovid's *Art of Love*, bk. 3, ll. 31–32.

them: they should fight fire with fire. If women actively tell stories glorifying women's trickery, men might desist from trying to seduce women, assuming them to be gullible.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, advocating women's use of clever replies is fully in service of conservative medieval sexual norms, for it urges women to use their wit to ward off challenges to their chastity.

The praise of women's wiles thus circles back to the question of feminine modesty, for Filostrato suggests that women are ironically more likely to fall prey to men when they try to hide their sexual knowledge. He argues that it would be useful for women to tell fabliaux "so that men may come to learn that women, for their part, know just as much about these things as they do." Here, the emphasis is not on pursuing sexual gratification but on demonstrating knowledge. Filostrato shifts the locus of concern from women's bodies to their heads, from sex and corporeality to knowledge and intelligence. In this light, Filostrato's praise of the utility of fabliaux helps us to see that fabliaux could offer pleasure to women because they are about women's wit, and not just about sex.<sup>46</sup>

Filostrato's praise of trickery as *useful* leads to the larger question of the utility of Boccaccio's work for women readers. Robert Hollander has argued that Boccaccio takes the classic Horatian formula of delight and instruction (or in Boccaccio's words in the *Proem*, "diletto . . . e utile consiglio") and subverts it in the service of his satirical portrait of human behavior. Whereas the Horatian formula assumes that utility is of a moral kind, such as to improve human behavior, Hollander shows that most

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45. See Smarr's discussion of the French writer Helisenne (Marguerite Briet), whose *Angoysses* (1538) was influenced by Boccaccio's *Elegia*. Helisenne portrays men deceiving women with their words and boasting untruthfully about their success with women ("Boccaccio and Renaissance Women," 284–86).

46. It is because of this emphasis on wit demonstrating knowledge that I disagree with Potter's claim, "Women's rights in the *Decameron* are limited to the right to give in to their physical nature, and their 'intelligence' is almost always inspired by and put at the service of their sexuality ("Woman in the *Decameron*," 96). It is also interesting to note, as does Valeria Finucci in "Jokes on Women," 72, that although Castiglione later incorporated some of Boccaccio's tales in his discussion of jesting in the Renaissance Italian court, he chose none of those told by women or in which women play tricks or use witticisms. Castiglione's more conservative attitude toward women's laughter is linked to his assertion that women are not fitting objects of jesting both because of the harm to their honor and because they are "defenseless," lacking the skills of wit to defend themselves in jesting situations. See the discussion of this point in Holcomb, *Mirth Making*, 119–20. One wonders whether Castiglione's exclusion of women in his book on courtly conversation is a conscious and deliberate rejection of the *Decameron*'s suggestion that women are able to jest on equal terms with men.

occurrences of the word *utile* or *utilità* are detached from any moral sense, referring more often to individual profit, whether it be based on money, power, or sexual pleasure: in this sense, pleasure itself *is* profit. Furthermore, those who win out in the tales are more often those who are clever (having the power of *ingegno*) rather than those who are morally right. Boccaccio's use of the formula is therefore ironic, meant to throw readers back again to the question not of conventional morality, but of the importance of intellectual discernment, which is certainly clear in the above discussion on Boccaccio's advice to women readers. Whereas Boccaccio's great predecessor Dante is interested in offering useful examples of good and bad behavior for his readers to follow or avoid, Boccaccio "wants to enable us to think more clearly about our human nature" and to "reflect upon the follies of the herd."<sup>47</sup>

Given this context, a possible way to read Boccaccio's claim that women will find both pleasure and profit in his tales is to see it as an invitation to readers, whether women or men, to question the usefulness of conventional expectations about how women are to behave. When Emilia is the first to tell a tale on Dioneo's prescribed theme of women who trick their husbands, she is embarrassed at being put in this delicate situation, but tries to get out of it by couching her tale in terms of its practical usefulness to the other women in the group:

E ingegnerommi, carissime donne, di dir cosa che vi possa essere *utile* nell'avvenire, per ciò che, se così son l'altre come io paurose e massimamente della fantasima . . . a quella cacciar via quando da voi venisse, notando bene la mia novella, potrete una santa e buona orazione e molto a ciò valevole apparare. (789–90; emphasis added)

[And I shall attempt, dearest ladies, to speak about something which may be *useful* to you in the future, for if other women are like myself, they are easily frightened, especially of ghosts . . . but if ever you run into a ghost you will be able to drive it away, for by listening carefully to my story, you will learn a fine and holy prayer made precisely for this purpose.] (417–18; emphasis added)

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47. The full essay is "Utilità," in Hollander, *Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire*, 85 and 86. Hollander notes his disagreement with Kirkham, who views Boccaccio's morality as more conventional (*Sign of Reason*, 73).

Emilia's tale, however, is not about a woman who is frightened by a ghost, but a woman who cheats on her husband. When the woman's husband unexpectedly arrives at their country house and her lover also shows up, knocking at the door and waking her husband, she quickly invents a lie about how he is the ghost who has been scaring her for the past few nights. The "prayer" she uses to chase him away is in fact a warning to her lover to leave the premises because of her husband's unexpected arrival. Later, the lady and her lover frequently laugh hilariously over this ruse. Emilia concludes her tale by telling the other women to learn these incantations by heart, "for they may come in handy in the future" (421) [e potravvi ancor giovare, 797]. Emilia has played a trick on her listeners, pretending to be preaching a tale of usefulness, but all the members of the *brigata* respond "with roars of laughter" and praise the prayer as "useful and holy" (422) [per buona e per santa, 798]. By using the trope of usefulness, Emilia has shown that she can play at innocence while demonstrating her knowledge.

Even in the final tale of the *Decameron*, on a day largely devoted to telling serious tales of magnanimity and Christian charity, Boccaccio's ironic treatment of the literature as moral instruction trope has the last word. After his tale of Griselda's incredible self-sacrifice, Dioneo subverts the message of women's humble submission to men and condemns Count Gualtieri's harsh treatment of Griselda, remarking that it would have served him right if Griselda had instead been the kind of woman who would seek another man who could "warm her wool" and give her a nice dress. As the last tale of the collection, it appears to privilege feminine submission as worthy of emulation, but Dioneo's comment, like the Clerk's comment on the tale in the *Canterbury Tales*, playfully suggests that such a model should be rejected in favor of the behavior of the resourceful fabliau women of Day VII. It is highly unlikely that Boccaccio advocates women emulating the trickery of adulterous wives, however justified, rather than the patience and humility of Griselda. What this playful move does, however, is to warn readers against facile moralizing and reading too literally.<sup>48</sup> The fact that the ladies are described as arguing with each other over how to interpret the Griselda tale in fact suggests Boccaccio's interest in differences in interpretation, and readers are reminded of their own role in the process of making meaning.

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48. This point has been made by Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 192.

*Verbal Jousting and the Game of Love*

The question of the reader's interpretation brings us to the relationships between the men and women of the *brigata*. It is interesting to note that overt statements of the cliché about woman as the body to be ruled by the man's head are actually voiced by the female members of the *brigata*. Emilia, for example, prefaces her tale of wife beating (IX.9), the only tale that causes the men to laugh but not the women, by arguing that women's natural softness is evidence of their need to be governed by men. Furthermore, when Pampinea first proposes that the women escape Florence, Filomena cautions that women are suspicious, quarrelsome, and fickle, thereby needing male governance, and Elissa seconds her opinion, urging them to find suitable male companions to escort them. Such overtly misogynous remarks are never voiced by the three men. Are the women's comments meant ironically? Or is Boccaccio simply trying to spout anti-feminist ideas more subtly and ironically by placing them in the mouth of the fair sex?

It is difficult to ascertain Boccaccio's own views in this passage, but it is clear that in not having the male storytellers voice such statements, Boccaccio is maintaining an ambiance of courteous play between men and women, in which name-calling or direct accusations would be inappropriate. Lauretta's refusal at the end of Day VII to take revenge on Dioneo by reversing his topic of women who play tricks on their husbands to that of men who play tricks on their wives is an example of such civility, for she does not wish to belong "to that breed of snapping curs who immediately turn round and retaliate." Rather, antagonism between the sexes is channeled through jesting, and more often than not is mixed with flirtatious teasing. At the beginning of the *Decameron*, we are told that each of the three men loves one of the seven ladies, only one of which (Neifile) is specified. The women are aware of their suitors' feelings and are very careful not to encourage or invite any behavior that would compromise their reputation. But they do engage in repartee that allows them to be flirtatious without being immodest, to be assertive without being forward. This is best illustrated in a battle of wits at the end of Day III. Upon ending her reign as queen, and after Dioneo's salacious tale of Alibech, Neifile crowns Filostrato, the first man to reign, saying, "Tosto ci avdremo se i' lupo saprà meglio guidar le pecore che le pecore abbiano i lupi guidati (451) [Soon we shall see if the wolves know how to guide the

sheep better than the sheep have guided the wolves, 239]. Filostrato laughs at her remark, but counters, "Se mi fosse stato creduto, i lupi avrebbero alle pecore insegnato rimettere il diavolo in inferno non peggio che Rustico facesse a Alibech; e per ciò non ne chiamate lupi, dove voi state pecore non siete" [If you had listened to me, the wolves would have taught the sheep to put the Devil back into Hell no worse than Rustico did with Alibech; you shouldn't call us wolves, for you have not acted like sheep]. Filostrato implies that the women are not meek like sheep, and perhaps not sexually innocent either. Furthermore, he uses the example of the Alibech tale to make an even more clear innuendo: He would have liked to teach Neifile about sex.

Neifile indeed proves she is not a passive sheep, for she counters by invoking the earlier story about the gardener Masetto, who is used as a sexual object by a whole convent of nuns (III.1): "Odi, Filostrato: voi avreste, volendo a noi insegnare, potuto apparar senno come apparò Masetto da Lamporecchio dalle monache e riaver la favella a tale ora che l'ossa senza maestro avrebbero apparato a sufolare" (451) [Listen, Filostrato, if you ever hoped to teach us anything, first you would need to be taught some sense, just as Masetto of Lamporecchio was taught by the nuns, and not regain the use of your speech until your bones rattled like a skeleton's. (240)]. Rather than being taken aback by his innuendo, Neifile outdoes him by suggesting that he needs to be taught a lesson. Her lesson is double-edged. She first hints that his sexual knowledge is so skimpy that he needs to take lessons from nuns. She also implies that Filostrato has nothing to teach her that she does not already know, thereby undermining the cliché that virtuous women know nothing of sex. In doing so, she ironically echoes Filostrato's own claim that women should demonstrate their knowledge of sexual matters so as not to be seen as easily deceived by men's seductive words.

Most importantly, she has made these points through her own wit, and by oblique reference to fiction rather than through direct comment, similar to the Canterbury pilgrims' use of their own stories to return offenses made against them. Whereas conduct manuals advise women to pretend that they know nothing of such matters, Neifile shows that she is a force to be reckoned with because she is in full possession of knowledge that would allow her to resist men's advances. By implication, she has overturned the paradigm of male mastery and female tutelage by informing him that women are not men's pupils, eagerly awaiting their instruction. Neifile's

witty retort is so effective that she literally silences him, causing him to desist from his lecture: “Filostrato, conoscendo che falci si trovavan non meno che egli avesse strali, lasciato stare il motteggiare a darsi al governo del regno commesso cominciò” [Recognizing that the ladies’ sickles were as sharp as his arrows, Filostrato set aside his jesting and began to govern the kingdom entrusted to him]. Women, according to the lesson of the exchange, are able to use the “sickles” of their wit as effectively as men, and these sickles can in effect be used to teach men that women are not gullible, easy prey for men’s seductive fictions.

This mixture of assertiveness and flirtation may be what has led scholars to disagree on what this exchange says about relations between genders. On the one hand, Neifile’s comment has been seen as a “harsh rebuttal to Filostrato’s snide reference to the anything but meek nature of women.”<sup>49</sup> Others have argued that this sparring involving the tales of Day III has been used by Boccaccio “to identify the sheep as wolves, to equate the women with the men in terms of their highly developed sensuality,” which suggests that his intended readers are not virtuous ladies, but both men and women with base sexual inclinations.<sup>50</sup> Neither interpretation of the sheep/wolf theme, however, adequately addresses the jocose tone of the section and the overall rapport between the members of the *brigata* throughout the work, where jesting can combine flirtation and rebuke.<sup>51</sup>

The mixed tone of this exchange in fact recalls a common pastime of the upper classes throughout medieval Europe: games of verbal repartee such as the *demandes d’amour*, or riddles and questions pertaining to love. The *demandes* could be so charged with sexual innuendo that they could lead to amorous liaisons between the contestants. An example is the account in 1468 of the meeting between Count Gaston IV of Foix and Etiennette de Besançon, married to a bourgeois. After exchanging “questions joyeuses et amoureuses” and “plusieurs requestes, offres et aultres plaisans bourdes” Etiennette is reported to have left her husband and

49. Iovino, “The *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*,” 144.

50. Brownlee, “Wolves and Sheep,” 265.

51. A brief passage early in the work anticipates the playfulness to come. When Pampinea first invites the men to join them in leaving the city, “in a spirit of chaste and brotherly affection” [con puro e fratellvole animo], they at first believe she is mocking them: “I giovani si crederterro primieramente essere beffati” (40). The men apparently think the women are aware of their affections and thus assume that they are teasing them rather than offering a serious invitation.

children to join the count.<sup>52</sup> The sexually charged nature of these exchanges is also suggested in a collection called the *Adevineaux Amoureux*, in which a knight and lady exchange *demandes*. In relating the *demandes*, the narrator anticipates the potential objections of his female readers, asking them to forgive him for anything they find dishonest or shameful ("deshonneste et vergoingneuse"), playfully urging them, as Chaucer earlier did, to turn the leaf and find something more to their liking.<sup>53</sup> The exchanges are witty, but sexually charged, and one can well understand the Knight of the Tower's advice to his daughters not to engage in repartee, lest it lead to more serious consequences.

Jokes between men and women could also be tendentious rather than flirtatious, and a woman uninterested in the flirtatious advances of her male interlocutor could cool his ardor with a well-timed reply. The narrator of the *Adevineaux Amoureux* recounts one evening when he was invited to play at "venditions," in which one person offers to sell something. The other person asks how much, upon which the asker then explains the "sale." In one example, the lady of the house, whom the narrator notes suffers from the malady of jealousy, attempts to "sell" him something, and addresses him as "Sire Grison," or "old grey-headed man." Realizing the mockery conveyed by this address, the narrator responds with a vendition that makes clear that he rejects her advances and puts her in her place. At the end, he remarks that his pleasure of the evening was spoiled because he was humiliated, having been spurned and made the butt of a joke ("repudié et rebuté"). The aggressiveness of the woman's joke is evident in the narrator's comment that he is surprised that she was the one who began when he

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52. This exchange is discussed by Bruno Roy, *Une Culture de l'équivoque*, 94. See also Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 34. See also Richard Green's argument, in "Le Roi Qui Ne Ment and Aristocratic Courtship," that the game of the Roi Qui Ne Ment was partly a kind of quiz for the players to demonstrate their knowledge, but more importantly, a stylized flirtation that was part of aristocratic courtship of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

53. Hassel, *Amorous Games*, 200–201. There are two printed editions in the Réserve of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, both thought to be dated 1479. There is also a manuscript of about 1470 (Chantilly Musée Condé ms. 654 [1572]) that also contains the *Évangiles des quenouilles* (discussed in the next chapter). The racy riddles are not told by the knight and lady, but rather reported to be of the kind the collector used to hear in his youth on long winter nights in mixed company of "matrones et filles es assembleez" (227). An example is no. 277, which asks to name a beautiful and stiff tool (*ostil*) that is sometimes bent and sometimes straight. The answer: a bow (*un arc a main*) (pages 81 and 228). Other sexual riddles include 349 and 356.

thought that *he* would begin the selling, noting that it was apparently the custom of the women in this house to go first.<sup>54</sup>

The banter between Boccaccio's women and men is charged in the way that these evenings were. Somewhat flirtatious, at times aggressive, they spar with each other with words that channel sexual tension into play. On the verbal level, they imitate the medieval pictorial tradition in which knights and ladies, dressed in battle, engage in jousts for love.<sup>55</sup> Women's wit (their sickles) are arms they can use either to engage in flirtation or to deflect unwanted advances or insinuations. Indeed, the phonological similarity between our English *jest* and *joust*, although the terms are etymologically unrelated, is evocative of the close relationship between verbal and physical sparring. One of the lessons that emerges from the *Decameron* is that both men and women should use wit for the justifiable purposes of mutual solace or individual defense but not to disparage others without provocation. For example, Pampinea's story of the women who laugh at an old man who is in love with them is used to show that laughter should not be used to harm a suitor who has not done any harm himself (I.10).

Such a lesson is also at the heart of a tale by Jean de Condé, a minstrel at the court of Count William II of Hanault. The *Sentier batu* stages another medieval pastime similar to the *demande d'amour* called *Le roi qui ne ment*, where designated kings or queens ask questions of their fellow participants. In this fabliau, the "queen" uses the occasion to belittle the sexual prowess of a suitor she has spurned. He quites her by answering that he disdains a path that is well worn (*sentier batu*), thus implying that many men before him have trod the path to her sexual favors. Glending Olson reminds us that the tale fits into the larger ethical preoccupations with jesting in the Middle Ages:

The tale is interesting principally for its close connection with a society pastime that can be documented elsewhere; it suggests how easily conversational play can turn into literary narrative. And as well, it reveals the special status of *gab*: jesting, a legitimate facet of

54. This *vendition* is included in both the manuscript and the printed versions of the *Adevineaux Amoureux* (249). Succeeding venditions include both eloquent requests for love and stinging rejections.

55. The Luttrell Psalter (c. 1300), for example, shows ladies throwing flowers from a castle while knights below, armed with their swords, try to storm the castle. For this and other images, see Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, plates 96 and 706–10.

secular life, becomes dangerous when it is misused in the attempt to cause "anui" rather than to relieve it. Game ought not be earnest.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the notion of kings and queens in the pastime recalls Boccaccio's use of queens and kings for each of the ten days of narrative, and his *Filocolo* in fact makes overt use of the game, suggesting the possible influence of this pastime on Boccaccio's vision of how men and women can jest and joust with each other for mutual solace.

To argue for Boccaccio's interest in women's laughter and wit is not necessarily to claim that he intended to promote a more friendly view of women. In some passages, Boccaccio characterizes women as the weaker sex, more fickle and subject to their physical passions. Even while claiming to write for women's pleasure and well-being, his various narrative poses at times create a leering and patronizing authorial voice. The *Corbaccio*, written not long after the *Decameron*, is a reworking of antimarriage satire, replete with the expected misogyny of his time. The fact that Boccaccio wrote works both (putatively) praising women (*De claribus mulieribus*) and blaming women (*Corbaccio*), as well as the ambivalent attitude toward women within the *Decameron* itself, makes it unlikely "that we will ever be able to locate Boccaccio definitively at any point on a spectrum from philogyny to misogyny."<sup>57</sup> Like many men before and after him, Boccaccio enjoyed playing that most masculine of scholarly games, in which authors demonstrate that they can master both sides of the debate. The more positive attitudes toward women that emerge from the *Decameron* can be attributed, at least in part, to the greater context of Boccaccio's interest in exploring the healing power of laughter, whether as solace for the social chaos brought on by the plague or the melancholy caused by love.

Whatever Boccaccio's own feelings about women's sexuality or intelligence, his work examines how norms of feminine modesty and women's laughter can be at odds. He allows his women to laugh at sexually explicit tales, but in having them blush, shows the pressures that women face in order to remain ladies. Dioneo's evident pleasure in making the ladies laugh, as well as their own pleasure in laughing, creates a ludic atmosphere in which the sexual tensions of both the men and the women are present, but channeled through the civilized play of joking. Unlike Freud's model

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56. Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, 143.

57. Psaki, "Boccaccio and Female Sexuality," 127.

of joking, in which only the man channels his desires, the *Decameron* shows that women, too, can use joking as a way to say indirectly what they cannot say openly. The ladies' "sickles" show both that women have a sense of humor and that this sense of humor can be used to their advantage. Boccaccio, like Dioneo, makes sexual innuendoes to the women who listen to his tales but seems to enjoy making women laugh and not simply laughing at women. More importantly, the work directly engages issues involved in women's interpretation of comic literature. Women are urged to use their judgment to distinguish between proper jest and incitement to immoral behavior. They are furthermore shown that cultivating an ability to respond to a man's verbal seduction with a well-timed witticism can do more to affirm their respectability than mute ignorance. Most of all, since women are encouraged to respond to sexual humor tit for tat, rather than mutely sit back and take it on the one hand or respond indignantly (and risk being perceived as a spoilsport) on the other, the greatest insight we gain from studying this work is to see that women could actively participate in the humor of medieval texts because their wit was the tool that allowed them to engage in the game.