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Confession, Sexuality, and Desire in the Decameron

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Abstract:

This essay discusses how in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the stories of I.1, III.3, VI.7, and VII.5 subvert the fundamentally religious and juridical activity – confession – to serve a wholly different and erotically-charged function. In these stories, Boccaccio unveils the mechanism of confession, establishes a new theology, creates new laws, and brings about a reversal of discourse, which is a possible solution to the discourse of sexuality in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. In this way, narratives in the *Decameron* confessions, not only rebel against the repression of sex in middle ages, which is achieved by putting sex into silence or nonexistence, but also resist the will and consensus of knowingness – *Scientia Sexualis* – of modern times.

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Introduction

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses how the “truth” of sexuality is explored through the Catholic confession and how the concept of confession survived and became widespread in other relationships, which transformed western man into a confessing animal.¹ “Western society has established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth... (Confessions) signify someone's acknowledgment of his own actions and thoughts. The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.”² However, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, especially in III.3 and VII.5, women utilize confession as a tool to conceal and satisfy their sexual desires. Also, in VI.7, Fillipa confesses to justify her sexuality before the judge on adultery, which saves her from punishment. Confessions in these stories undermine any presumable truth-exploring goal, or according to Foucault, the “Scientia Sexualis.” What is Boccaccio's purpose of writing these confessional stories in the *Decameron*, which are scattered through the whole book and relate to sexuality? How do these stories explore the economy of sexuality, power, and truth? Is there any possibility of sexuality other than the one western culture is suffering from as Foucault has discovered – what can we find in Boccaccio's exploration?

This essay examines how Boccaccio utilized III.3, VI.7 and VII.5 of the *Decameron* to subvert the essential religious and juridical activity – confession – to serve a wholly different and erotically charged function. Among all the four stories which contain confessions in the one hundred stories in the *Decameron*, the first story of the first day, though not focusing on sexuality like the other three, provides a guide for us to overview the whole confessional series stories, and to unveil the mystery of sexuality.

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books ed., 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).P57

² Ibid. Vol.1, P59

“Confessional” *Decameron*: I.I

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

John 1, 1-3

Panfilo tells the opening story of the *Decameron*: Ser Cepparello falls ill while he is in Burgundy recovering the debt of a merchant. Although he is the vilest man in the world, with his false confession to a holist friar, Cepparello “is after death reputed to be a saint and is called Saint Ciapelletto.” The first story is fundamental to the whole structure of the *Decameron* as the beginning of the book as well as to the confession series.

While the first day is a day to tell a free story, Ser Cepparello’s story still begins with God since Panfilo claims that “it is fitting that everything done by man should begin with the marvelous and holy name of Him who was the Creator of all things.” The attribution to God resonates with the meaning of the book's name "*Decameron*" as intending to create a new order in a world "with worries, anguish, toil, and anger." The form of confession cooperates with the group's storytelling frame of the book: Confession is not only a story, but also a conversation in which people respond to others, persuade others, and console others. Thus I.1 is fundamental as a conversation and a form of storytelling which suits the book's frame as the ten protagonists tell stories and respond to other’s stories.

1. The Mechanism of Sexuality, Pleasure, and Power in Confession

Besides its structural function, Ser Cepparello’s story also deals with the relationship between sexuality and pleasure and how they are repressed by Catholic beliefs. Ser Cepparello is notorious for indulging in sex and even worse, he is a sodomite. “He was as fond of women as dogs are of

a beating with a stick; he was, in fact, more fond of men, more so than other degenerate.”³ In Wayne Rebhorn’s translation, the depiction of his preference is more cursive. “Of women, he was as fond as dogs are of being beaten with a stick, and he took more delights in their opposite than any degenerate ever did.”²⁰ In Peter Hainsworth’s more direct translation: “He liked women as little as a dog does a stick and reveled in their opposite more than any pervert you can think of.” While being more reserved in revealing Cepparello as a sodomite, the phrase “the opposite” stresses Cepparello’s sexual preference in his way of life more than the simple depiction of “more fond of men.” Such differences in the description of Cepparello’s sexual orientation makes him “worse” than any other sinners, which contributes to the definition of him as “perhaps the worst man ever lived.” The first question the priest asks Ser Cepparello after checking if he confesses routinely is whether he has ever sinned in lust with any women, to which Ser Cepparello replies with pride that he is a virgin. While in I.1, the story discusses sexuality with only several lines, other stories of the confession series make sexuality their themes.

Ser Cepparello’s evilness lies in his pursuit of worldly pleasure instead of the other world of God when we trace his way of life:

Ciappelletto was, by profession, a notary; he was very much ashamed when any of his legal documents (of which he drew up many) was discovered to be anything but fraudulent. He would have drawn up, free of charge, as many false ones (documents) as requested from him, and more willingly than another man might have done for a large sum of money. He gave false testimony with the greatest of pleasure, whether he was asked to give it or not; and since in those days in France great faith was placed on sworn oaths, and since he did not object to taking a false oath, he won a great many lawsuits through his wickedness every time he was called on to swear up his faith to tell the truth. He took special pleasure and went to a great deal of trouble to stir up scandal, mischief, and enmities between friends, relatives, and anyone else, and the more evil that resulted from it, the happier he was. If he was asked to be a witness at a murder or at any other criminal affair, he would attend very willingly, never refusing, and he frequently found himself happily wounding or killing men with his very own hands. He was a great blasphemer of God and the saints, losing his temper at the slightest pretext, as if he were the most irascible man alive. He never went to church, and he made fun of all the church’s sacraments, using abominable language to revile them; on the other hand, he frequented taverns and other dens of

³ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella, vol. 864 (Penguin Publishing Group, 2010). P27

iniquity with great pleasure. He was as fond of women as dogs are of a beating with a stick; he was, in fact, more fond of men, more so than any other degenerate. He could rob and steal with a conscience as clean as a holy man making an offering. He was such a great glutton and big drinker that he often suffered the filthy price of his overindulgence; he was such a gambler who frequently used loaded dice. But why am I wasting so many words on him? He was probably the worst man that ever lived! His cunning for a long time, has served the wealth and the authority of Messer Musciatto, on whose behalf he was many times spared both by private individuals whom he often abused, and by the courts, which he always abused. (Boccaccio, 27)

The repeated address on Cepparello's pleasure is significant – his motivation for being evil is pure pleasure. Guido Almansi states that “Far from representing a dire warning against the gloomy perils of sin, it stands as a lusty reminder of how attractive it can be to be wicked. The description instills the desire to live like Cepparello, and not the wish to take holy orders and become a friar.”⁴ Cepparello's dilemma is that while the priest claims that “God is so great that if he were to confess, God would freely forgive him of all those sins,” Cepparello and the two brothers know for sure that he will not end well with a truthful confession of his life. The two brothers talk about his situation:

He has been such a wicked man that he does not wish to confess himself or to receive any of the church's sacraments; and if he dies without confession, no church will wish to receive his body, and he will be thrown into a ditch just like a dead dog. And suppose he does confess? His sins are so many and so horrible that the same thing will happen, since neither friar nor priest will be willing or able to absolve him, and so, without absolution, he will be thrown into a ditch just the same. (Boccaccio, 29)

Cepparello's indulgence in worldly pleasure makes his body and soul rejected by the church. The core of Cepparello's dilemma reminds us of the image of the prude “that is emblazoned on the restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality.”⁵

⁴ Guido Almansi, *The Writer as Liar: Narrative Technique in the Decameron* (London ; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1975). 34

⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. P4

The repression of sexuality stands out as a requirement of purity. To the priest's first question, Cepparello responds: "I am a virgin today as when I came from my mother's womb." The status of being a child is a sign of purity. When Cepparello confesses on his biggest sin at the end of his life, he says: "When I was just a little boy, I cursed my mother once." The conversation starts with Cepparello's being a child and ends at being a child. He is a child because he claims not to have any sexual desire, which is consistent with the western belief in Foucault's discussion: "Children have no sex."⁶ In the dialogue, the friar presupposes that if a man is in lust, he is in lust with women. The possibility of being a sodomite or a gay was removed from this conversation. The right way to talk about sex is to admit that there is no sex, or as Foucault puts it, "repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by admission, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know."

The repression extends everywhere in human pleasures from its prohibition in sexuality. The first questions the priest asks Cepparello focus on all kinds of sins that could happen in human life for the pursuit of pleasure. First sex, then gluttony, avarice, anger, killing, ill-mouthing, and cheating. The sexual discourse, in this process, expands from the confined space to the limitless room of a profane inquisition. Having committed all these sins, Cepparello makes himself innocent by denying all the unforgivable sins: debauchery, avarice, and violence. Then he justifies others so that he conducts them for the sake of goodness. Anger becomes righteous because Cepparello is furious with men's doing evil deeds, disobeying God's commandments, and not fearing his judgments. Speaking ill of the neighbor is understandable since Cepparello's neighbor beats his wife when drunk. Even the accidentally earned money is evidence of Cepparello's honesty and charity instead of fraud. Sins can only be acceptable when they are aimed to serve the welfare of the public. The governance of pleasure parallels the censorship of sexuality in Foucault's writing: "the forbidding of certain words, the decency of expressions, all the censorings of vocabulary, might well have been only secondary devices compared to that great

⁶ Ibid.

subjugation: ways of rendering it morally acceptable and technically useful.”⁷ The repression of sexuality and pleasure is in essence utilitarianism.

Confession is a process of repression, and it is at heart of the operation of power from the authoritarian institutions. It is “a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship.” The ritual is impossible without the presence of a partner “who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.”⁸ Cepparello is forced to confess since his refusal to do so would be a special kind of confession and would lead to severe consequence – torture is confession’s shadow. Coming to the patient’s bed, the first thing the priest does is checking how long has it been since Cepparello’s last confession, and he is very pleased to hear that Cepparello maintains a weekly routine. Even more praiseworthy is that Cepparello offers to reveal all these sins he remembers since he was born to the priest. " But more unignorable and the irony is the fact that the priest is frequently pleased by what Cepparello tells him. When the priest is about to give him absolution, Cepparello continues willingly to expose his “misdeeds” to the friar. Making up his sins of withdrawing reverence for the Holy Sabbath on Sunday and spitting in the house of God, Cepparello died after weeping on his biggest sin – cursing his mother once when he was a child. These sins cooperate with the image of Cepparello as a saint which has been set up in the priest’s earlier inquisition. The interaction illuminates the mechanism of power and pleasure produced in the unstoppable confessions: “an impetus was given to the power through its very exercise; an emotion rewarded the overseeing control and carried it further; the intensity of the confession renewed the questioner’s curiosity; the pleasure discovered fed back to the power that encircled it.”⁹ The power of the priest operates as a mechanism of attraction which evokes the obligation to confess. The danger of confession lies in the perpetual spirals of power and pleasure. And it is in this spiral that the *Scientia Sexualis* develops. So that the spoken form of

⁷ Ibid.P21

⁸ Ibid.P61

⁹ Ibid.P44-45

the sacrament of penitence permeates to other places and forgets the Christian promise of redemption. The religious ritual serves as the sexuality deployment and exploits the profane will to knowledge to manifesting a truth value and being our master key defining who we are.¹⁰ Truth, through confession, serves as a medium of sex and its manifestations.

2. Confession in *Decameron*: True or False

Confessions in the *Decameron* are tricky, because they are false if we judge them according to what has happened before the protagonists' confession in the stories. The most typical situation is Cepparello's story. He is a total pervert, but in his confession, he manifests lies which grant him the opposite virtues and accordingly make him a saint after death. Foucault in his lectures on avowal has argued how "avowal is a strange way of truth-telling" and "it is always true (if it is false, it is not an avowal)".¹¹ Represented by I.1, are confessions in the *Decameron* true confessions, with all the authentic ritual elements?

It is hard to answer "Yes" or "No" to this question. Cepparello's confession is not true in its content, but it is true in unveiling the truth of "confession" in the hypocritical Christian setting where sex and pleasure are repressed, and it is true in putting pleasure and sex back to their place as secrets. Confession is a language game, and so is the lie. To lie, Cepparello has to command what the priest needs, what the church wants to hear, and what saves him from the exile of his body. Foucault has revealed the mechanism of power and pleasure, and Cepparello's confession has presented the economy of discourse on sex and the perpetual spirals of power and pleasure as we have discussed. In this sense, Cepparello's story is consistent with Foucault's interpretation of confession. We have witnessed how the mandatory production of the truth-telling of a subject encourages the proliferation of sexual discourses,

¹⁰ Wolfgang Streit, *Joyce/Foucault : Sexual Confessions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). P5

¹¹ Michel Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling : The Function of Avowal in Justice*.P14

which are carefully tailored to the requirements of power, establishes a system of legitimate knowledge, and builds up an economy of manifold pleasures. It is in the positive mechanism that the interdiction is distributed. The strategy of power is immanent in the will to knowledge.¹² However, Cepparello utilizes the same economy and mechanism in the opposite direction. The ascetic ideal, which power aims to construct, becomes a starting point where Cepparello manages to obtain his absolution. The effect becomes the cause. Through "truth-telling," his notorious sins, his sexuality, and his pleasures are hidden. His indulgence finally eludes the repressive power, whose aim is in revealing and thereby controlling, all sexual pleasure, shedding light on individual obscurity. The public truth as controlled by power, in turn, is challenged. From Boccaccio's narrative, we know Cepparello to be a person who "was ashamed when any of his legal documents were discovered to be anything but fraudulent," who has the wickedness to take advantage of swearing upon "his faith to tell the truth" to win lawsuits, who "always abused" the court while "often" abusing men. Yet he obtains absolution and sainthood. To rebel against the authority's production of public truth causes the public ideal to go against itself; this in turn creates a place of the individual's history which power cannot uncover within its mechanism.

The more significant aspect of the complexity in the *Decameronian* confession is that although the confession is not a truth of the individual's history of the past, it creates a truth of the individual's future. A confession is a place where the signifiers are not separated from the signs, the body is not separated from the soul, absence becomes presence, and words become deeds.¹³ What Cepparello says is who he is. The connection between purity and truth-telling (only the pure can tell the truth; a theme that we find in the necessity of virginity, in the cleanness of a holy temple, and the requirement of continence to receive the word of God in the confession in Cepparello's story) breaks down. The fantasy that truth-telling annuls sins turns invalid.¹⁴ Almansì regards Cepparello as "the pure hero of the power of human words" since the story "instructs us in some of the techniques which can operate transformations

¹² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. P72-73

¹³ Catherine Léglu and Stephen J. Milner, *The Erotics of Consolation : Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages*, 1st ed., The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). P106

¹⁴ Foucault et al., *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling : The Function of Avowal in Justice*. P14

on reality by the mere power of words."¹⁵ It is the manifesting of a truth that grants Cepparello his salvation. He manages to make his body accepted by the church. If the body is accepted, should we question the acceptance of the soul?

If power's production of truth through a well-developed mechanism is true, then fiction's creation of truth through a well-organized narrative cannot be false. We cannot judge that one manifestation is truer than the other. It is easy to answer the question now: Yes, Cepparello's confession is true. It is true in examining the mixing of sexuality and pleasure, in creating a space and a future to liberate the truth of sexuality and pleasure from the close monitoring of power, and in dismissing the gap between words and deeds, body and soul.

3. The Birth of New Theology

The name *Decameron* has its meaning of creating a new world in ten days. Day one is the Genesis. A new theology is set up in I.1. One thing that seizes our attention is Cepparello's final confession on the vilest sin of his life: cursing his mother when he was just a little boy. This tearful confession has a two-fold effect: it intimates the birth of new ethics by connecting Cepparello's story with God and His mother, and it points out that the severest problem inhibiting the establishment of the new ethics is the purpose of procreation in the discourse of sex since Cepparello confesses that the greatness of motherhood lies in procreation.

The essence of Cepparello's inappropriateness is that cursing his mother undermines the value of a mother's pregnancy and protection. It is a puzzle whether this is another manifestation, or if the event did happen in Cepparello's life since he weeps so sorrowfully. But the priest comforts Cepparello by telling him that God will forgive him. Cepparello replies: "Alas, father! What are you saying? My sweet mother, who carried me in her womb nine months, day and night, and who took me in her arms

¹⁵ Almansj, *The Writer as Liar : Narrative Technique in the Decameron*.P27-28

more than a hundred times! Cursing her was too evil, and the sin was too great; and if you do not pray to God on my behalf, he will not forgive me.” Cepparello’s reply focuses on the process of pregnancy and the protection from the mother instead of the love they may bear for each other. The pregnancy and the protection promise an increase in population by increasing the birth rate. The focus on production is the root of the repression of sexuality. As Foucault puts it, the repression of sexuality is motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, and to perpetuate the form of social relations: to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative.¹⁶ Pursuing pleasure in his lifetime and manifesting all the confessions, Cepparello regards cursing the procreative part of sex as his greatest sin according to the Christian judgment. He lives a life which deviates from the economic and political purposes of sex and his worst deed is cursing the role of mother, a representative of those purposes. His regrets intimate that precreation is the focus of sexuality in Christian value, and the rejection of this focus leads to the rejection of his body. To be forgiven and accepted by the church again, he needs to cherish these purposes.

The curse on Cepparello’s mother also plays a role in implying the birth of new theology. After his death, the priest reproves the public at Cepparello’s funeral ceremony by relating their sins to Cepparello’s greatest one: “And you, God’s wretched sinners, blaspheme against Him, His mother, and all the saints in Paradise when a little blade of straw is caught under your feet!” Cepparello and his mother are placed with God, His mother, and saints. Most importantly, Cepparello addresses that “things done in God’s service should be done completely and without hesitation.” Criticizing the friar for spitting in the house of God all day long as not proper to serving God, Cepparello himself is the only character that devotes himself completely to the pursuit of earthly pleasure. While the friar restrains himself from lust by religious rules, Cepparello lives his way of life voluntarily. Again, we recall his indulgence in doing everything for the pursuit of pleasure and the two Florentine brothers’ comment on Cepparello after hearing what he tells the friar:

¹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P36-37

What kind of man is this? Neither old age nor illness, nor fear of death (which is so close), nor fear of God (before whose judgment he must soon stand), has been able to turn him from his wickedness, or make him wish to die differently from the manner in which he has lived! (Boccaccio, 36)

If Cepparello is the saint, the liberation of pleasure from political and economic power is the new ethic, then the establishment of God comes into sight.

God is Love. Eisner has discussed the eroticization of theology in Day three of the *Decameron* that “Boccaccio explores another configuration that is neither the courtly conflict between love for God and love for lady, nor the theologized *eros* of Guinizelli and Dante, but an eroticization of theology.”¹⁷ In the Preface, Boccaccio describes his motivation for writing the book::

But since he who is infinite had been pleased to decree by immutable law that all earthly things should come to an end, my love, more fervent than any other, a love with no resolution, counsel, public shame, or danger that result from it could break or bend.¹⁸ Diminished by itself in the course of time, and at present it has left in my mind only that pleasure which it usually retains for those who do not venture too far out on its deep, dark waters; and thus where there once used to be a source of suffering, now that all torment has been removed, there remains only a sense of delight. But while the pain has ceased, I have not lost the memory of favors already received from those who were touched by my heavy burdens; nor, I believe, will this memory ever pass, except with my death...I have promised myself to use my limited talents in doing whatever possible in exchange for what I have received – if not to repay with consolation those who helped me, then, at least, to assist those who may be in need of it.
(Boccaccio, 4)

The strong love of Boccaccio is compatible with the pleasure Cepparello chases with persistence. And pleasure is what love often retains for those “who do not venture too far in its dark water.” Boccaccio’s gratitude to the friends who “were touched by his heavy burden” and his motivation to console is the same as those of Cepparello’s. Cepparello confesses out of his gratitude towards the brothers who provide accommodations to him: “I don’t want you to worry on my account or be afraid that you will suffer

¹⁷ Martin Eisner, "Eroticizing Theology in Day Three and the Poetics of the Decameron," *Annali d'Italianistica* 31 (2019).P206

¹⁸ These statements resonate what the brothers comment on Cepparello.

because of me.” And Cepparello’s manifestation assists the two usurers. The Cepparello story entails Boccaccio’s self-referentiality in providing consolation and fulfilling gratitude.

If we take Love as God, then the *Decameron* is a love epic. Panfilo’s comments at the beginning, as well as the end, are more understandable if we inspect them in the background of the repressive power and liberation of pleasure. At the beginning Panfilo makes it clear that:

We choose as an advocate before His majesty one who is sentenced to eternal exile; nevertheless He, to whom nothing is hidden, pays more attention to the purity of the one who prays than to his ignorance or the damnation of his intercessor and answers those who pray to Him just as if these advocates were blessed in His presence. All this will become most evident in the tale I am about to tell: I say evident, in accordance with the judgment of men and not that of God. (Boccaccio, 25)

If we take what Panfilo says literally, as the friar takes what Cepparello says literally, we may agree that Cepparello is the damned and exiled advocate. But in the end, Panfilo explains his assumption of Cepparello’s life after his death. This explanation points out what is hidden from us and what is clear to us:

It was in this manner, then, that Ser Cepparello of Prato lived and died and became a saint, just as you have heard; nor do I wish to deny that it might be possible for him to be in the blessed presence of God, since although his life was evil and sinful, he could have become so truly sorry at his last breath that God might well have had pity on him and received him into His kingdom; this is hidden from us, but from what is clear to us, I believe that he is, instead, in the hands of the Devil in Hell rather than in Paradise. And if this is the case, we can recognize the greatness of God’s mercy toward us, which pays more attention to the purity of our faith than our errors by granting our prayers in spite of the fact that we choose His enemy as our intercessor – fulfilling our requests to Him just as if we had chosen a true saint as intermediary for His grace. (Boccaccio, 37-38)

If the introduction has told us that what is evident in the judge of men not that of God, and to Him nothing is hidden, then Cepparello is forgiven and taken into God’s kingdom because in the conclusion his salvation “is hidden from us.” If Cepparello is unforgivable in the traditional Christian values, then it turns out there is another theology which will show mercy on him and his pleasure. This theology is created through his story and the life he has lived – he is completely devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, or rather, he is devoted to a theology which embraces pleasures.

4. The Troublesome Role of "Medium"

With the surname "*Prince Galeotto*," the *Decameron* makes an effort to explore the role of the medium throughout Cepparello's anecdote. In Canto V of *Inferno*, Dante's Francesca becomes involved in adultery as Galeotto's story impassions her. There is a two-layer structure here. While Galeotto himself is a medium leading to the combination of a couple, his story again evolves into a medium to promote another love affair in its audience. The possibly immoral consequence that results from the acceptance of stories comes into sight. Boccaccio's Ser Cepparello also maintains this stylistic structure. The friar and Cepparello are the media between men and God, and audiences are influenced by what they say. Besides this, Boccaccio put a third layer on how to deal with the influence a story has on the audience.

The first go-between character is presumably the holy friar, an expert in Scriptures. But he is not the right medium between men and Christian God since he chooses a wrong person to be the saint. The friar takes literally whatever Cepparello says in the confession to be the truth instead of investigating the person's life. So does the church, a place where the friar's fellows are gullible and believe every word of the friar as truth. Fido cites Boccaccio's comments on the study of Scriptures: "Is it not true perhaps that the Holy Scripture, of which they (the enemies of poetry) pass themselves off as true interpreters, while coming from the Holy Spirit, is replete with obscurities and ambiguities?"¹⁹ It is with obscurities and ambiguities that the friar creates a false legend of Cepparello, who is thought to brought to light and whose way of life was urgently solicited in front of the friar.²⁰

The same blindness exists among the friar's audience and loyal followers – Burgundians. Cepparello's arrival in Burgundy results from his master Musciatto's impression on Burgundians: "the

¹⁹Elissa B. Weaver, *The Decameron First Day in Perspective : Volume One of the Lecturae Boccaccii*, Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).. P73

²⁰Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P55

Burgundians were a quarrelsome lot, of evil disposition, and disloyal,” and only Cepparello’s evilness can match the Burgundians wickedness. The only description of the evilness of the Burgundians is from the Florentine brothers. Burgundians speak badly of the brothers' profession (which they consider iniquitous) and wish to rob them and kill them. The church’s refusal of Cepparello’s body will provide the Burgundians an opportunity to do what they want. The blindness in taking words as they literally are and stirring up violence is the wickedness of the Burgundians. They recognize the friar’s judgment on Cepparello without a doubt. Everything that happens only confirms what they have believed. When Cepparello arrives in Burgundy, contrary to his nature, he behaves appropriately, as if he is "saving all his anger for the conclusion of his visit." The conclusion of his visit is the worship from the people. It is in this manner that Ser Cepparello dies and becomes a saint – as if the creation of Saint Ciappalletto is revenge for the blindness of the church and the wicked people.

On the other hand, Ser Cepparello is also an intermediary. Cepparello falsely becomes a Christian saint through his confession. He may also become the saint of the *Decameron* God – Love's saint through his contribution in words and his constant rebellion against church, courts, and people for the pursuit of pleasure and the anti-manifestation of truth. But either way, his story may corrupt the audience because of his indulgence in pleasure. Boccaccio expresses his worries in misinterpretation and explains his solution. He rebukes censorship of sexuality since "nothing is so indecent if proper words are used" and nothing is improper when it aims to save lives. Writing tales is a kind of art which frees itself from censorship. A prude who takes offenses weighs words more than deeds and is therefore hypocritical in strive to seem good than to be good. And most importantly, in the conclusion of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio argues again that while the Holy Scriptures is most worthy and holy, “there are many who have perversely interpreted them and have dragged themselves and others down to eternal damnation because of this.” If even Scripture can be misinterpreted, how can Boccaccio himself always be interpreted correctly. It is also the reader's responsibility to make the judgment, find consolation, and understand words in a healthy way when the author has written properly since daily we could interpret everyday words and religious art erotically. The example of the right audience is the Florentine brothers.

They are the only ones who not only know the truth but also the motivation of Cepparello's confession – to make them get rid of troubles. Similarly, Boccaccio claims that his purpose in writing is to help those “who may be in need of it.”

Cepparello's story is fundamental since it embraces the power of words. In words, old repression is dismissed, pleasure is liberated, and new ethics are created. Though Foucault has unfolded how the economy of truth and power works in the discourse of sexuality, Boccaccio steps further to present how confession, as a medium of truth and its manifestations in the same economy, can break the mechanism of power. Working from a different direction to truly liberate sex from the repression of power and provide a solution to Cepparello's sorry situation, confessions in the *Decameron* are a verbal act through which the subject reconstructs who he is, hides his truth to himself, frees himself from a relationship of dependence with regard to another, and changes at the same time his relationship to himself. These themes will continue to exist in other confessional stories, and in those stories, we venture farther into Love's deep, dark waters.

The Fulfillment of Desire in the Economy: III.3

Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs."

Matthew 8:30-31

The third day of the *Decameron* is a Sunday. After two days' rest, the group resumes their routine of story-telling under the rule of Neifile. Told by Filomena under the topic of people "who have attained something they desired through their ingenuity or who have recovered something they once lost," III.3 is about a noble woman, who pretends to be an innocent victim of her desired lover's sexual harassment, tricks a friar with her three confessions and successfully satisfies her desire without speaking directly to her lover – the friar's friend – or experiencing the danger of rumors. III.3 cooperates with I.1 to witness and welcome the resurrection of Boccaccio's God, Love.

The theme of III.3 shares a lot of similarities with I.1: the manifestation of truth in confession, the reversal of the role of the go-between friar, the success in manipulations, and the pursuits of pleasure. Filomena's story, however, is not a duplication of Panfilo's. Sunday is a special day. Ceparello mentions in the first confession that "Sunday cannot be honored too much, for on that day our Savior rose from the dead" is related to the theme of Day Three – the recovery of something that was once lost. Eisner two days off from story-telling resonates with the theme of II.10. Since Bartolomea and her husband, the protagonists of II.10, have "competing ideas about the significance of individual days as due for devotion for God or service to ladies, Neifile's calendric innovation brings together both *venerdi* and *domenica*, thus linking, willingly or not, service to ladies and devotion to God."²¹ At the end of III.3, the woman's lover enters the garden, climbs up the tree, and enjoyed his love with the woman. The image of the garden, tree, and the Forbidden fruit recreate an Eden. To conclude the story, Filomena makes a plea for the bestowing of pleasure from God: "And I

²¹ Eisner, "Eroticizing Theology in Day Three and the Poetics of the Decameron." P200-201

pray God through His mercy that He may soon bestow the same thing upon me and every other Christian soul who has such a desire.”

In this regard, the rebuke of the church's role as a divine intermediary in III.3 is much stronger than the equivocal description in I.1. Filomena's bitter attack involves all the hierarchy in the institution as a trick. She describes this story as a trick "which was actually played by a beautiful lady upon a sanctimonious churchman and which should prove to be all the more pleasing to laymen inasmuch as most of the clergy are very stupid men with strange manners and habits." Recalling the friar's habit of taking things literally instead of investigating deeply, the satire again confirms the judgment in I.1. As Gulizia has discovered, "the dim-witted friar is incapable of reproaching the young man other than with insults and is unable to see in his 'risposte perplesse' [bewildered response (III.3.47)] anything more than cautionary ambiguity." Filomena even remarks that the clergy is inferior to anyone and seek refuge wherever they can find something to eat like pigs. Such attack transforms the clergy into devils like those in Bible. The repeated association of the holy friar's friend as a devil in the woman's confession is also important. "Let me tell you what your friend – or rather, this devil from Hell – did to me." While the woman gives the friar alms, the image of a suffering mother comes into sight again. "I believe she is suffering such tremendous pain from seeing me so persecuted by this enemy of God." The repression of sexuality and useless pleasure, once again, is the enemy of God.

Filomena also responds to Panfilo from the perspective of gender. Women's wit and men's wit are equal.

I shall tell you this story, dear ladies, not only in obedience to the order imposed upon me but also to make you aware that even the clergy, in whom we place too much trust out of our excessive credulity, are capable of being cleverly deceived, and actually they sometimes are, not only by men but also by some of us women. (Boccaccio, 206)

In terms of structure, the reestablishment of the same story about the obedience to God, the background of a world with more fraud than love and loyalty, and the brief discussion on woman's nature is consistent with Panfilo's narrative of Cepparello. The significant difference lies in the fact that it is a woman who is the protagonist this time to prove that while a man is capable of fooling a

friar, a woman can do the same thing, too. As a story-teller, Filomena herself can marvelously explore the mixing of love and sexuality within her narrative as Panfilo does.

While Cepparello's story focuses on unfolding the mechanism of confession, disclosing the interplay of confession and pleasure, and building up a foundation for the whole series of stories in the book, Filomena's story delves into the economy of desire, the theater of confession, and gender differences in sexuality.

1. The Economic Issue

The focus on the woman's wool merchant husband reminds us of Foucault's criticism of how modern industrial society puts labor in the foreground and thus tries hard to eliminate useless desire. In the story, the woman's husband is wealthy, but in the tale she is unable to suppress her contempt for him, for all she finds out about the husband is that he only knows "how to design a blend of cloth, or to set up a loom, or argue about a spinning girl about a yarn." The woman is convinced that her husband's low condition, despite all his money, is not worthy of her nobility. Sex with her husband becomes something she has to put up, because she does not have the power to refuse his embraces. This repression floats out to the surface of the institution of marriage with the unequal distribution of power within the family. Foucault reasons more profoundly that "if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits."²²

The economic reason for repression cooperates with religion. The wealthy husband's devotion to the production of goods resonates with II.10 again. The beautiful Bartolomea marries rich Bernabo, a husband who does better in his service to his studies in God than to his wife. The inability to satisfy his wife's sexual desire promotes Church and husband to come together into the historical apparatus of the repression of sexuality. They have arrived at a consensus for the pursuit of economic

²² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P6

benefits. In III.3, when the woman first comes to confess, the friar "starts going on and on about acts of charity and the giving of alms, informing her of his needy condition" as he knows she is wealthy. Knowing how greedy the friar and his fellows are, the woman pays at the second visit and claims that she is being persecuted by God's enemy. It is reasonable that at the end of the story, "while enjoying each other," the woman and her lover "talked and laughed hilariously over the stupidity of Brother Ignoramus, and made many a jibe about wool-wicks, wool-combs, and wool-carders as together they amused themselves to the great delight of both parties." In order to fulfill their pleasure, it is necessary that they overcome the power of the church and the husband together.

Boccaccio employs the same idea of making revolution by means of the mechanism of utilizing money. Among all the stories told on the day, III.3 is the only one in which the woman gives out money to satisfy her desire. On the first visit, the lady discreetly fills the priest's hands with money, and requests that he say Masses for the souls of her dead relatives; "then she got up from where she was kneeling at his feet and returned home." She pays the church back to regain her lost pleasure and rises from the places she kneels. The relative position of the woman and the priest changes. The priest becomes the one to beg alms, and the woman becomes the one who grants consolation on his needy situation. On her second visit, the woman puts a florin in the priest's hand while claiming she is tortured by the enemy of God, and "the friar happily took it." She supposedly is paying the church for its service in praying for her dead relatives. The friar's hypocrisy is vividly revealed. But rather, she is investing in her pleasure.

An exchange happens here again: the church and the husband, to achieve an economic goal, take pleasure from the woman; then the woman pays the church with the husband's money to restore her pleasure. Moreover, if it is a financial service that the friar provides to the woman under the name of the Christian God, it is also a commercial deal that puts the service under the name of love and desire. The woman even gifts her lover "a most beautiful and ornate purse and along with a fine and precious little belt" to demonstrate her love. She tells the friar that "thanks are to God and my husband, I've got enough purses and belts to drown in." Stefano Gulizia touches on this statement that "by overstating her richness with this hyperbole, the woman raises the capital of

storytelling in the present exchange between her and the friar."²³ Gulizia interprets it as a part of the social mobility in the story: The husband embodies the city's blocked reproductive power. Though he accumulates wealth, he is too vulgar to please his spouse. His wife's shift to sexual entrepreneurship provides a new economic model of desire, which becomes the index of fecundity of *Decameron*.²⁴ It is in this way that the woman builds another literary and material economy in III.3 to undermine the repression rooted in a work imperative.

2. Confession: A Theater of Church

I mentioned earlier that III.3 shares themes with Cepparello's story in the narrative art of utilizing words to design a reality. By pretending to be harassed and creating three confessions to the friar, the woman transforms absence into presence, makes words into deeds, and exposes the friar to the danger of the manifestation of truth – which is developed by the power of church itself. She reports her would-be lover's actions to the friar, which, while a virtuous woman of her description would regard these actions as offensive, are in fact what she desperately desires. In successive narratives, the lady convinces the friar of the sexual harassment to which the potential lover has been subjecting her, by stalking her day and night, by sending expensive gifts, and then by conducting the unforgivable act of trying to enter her bedroom when her husband is away from home. To prevent the man from continuing his behavior, each time, the friar will in his turn inform the man of the trouble he makes to the lady. The reproaches from the friar turn into messages of the woman's interest in him and eventually instruct him as to how to be with her during her husband's absence. Marga Cottino-Jones points out that the woman's desire, which the established rules of power forbids her to express or to voice, finds a voice in the play of deception where the woman's sexual desire and the man's non-existent desire are disguised as female virtue and male desire.²⁵ The absence of voice

²³ Pier Massimo Forni and Francesco Ciabattini, *The Decameron Third Day in Perspective*, Toronto Italian Studies. Stefano Gulizia. "The Gentlewoman, the Gallant Man, and the Friar." P10

²⁴ Ibid. P56

²⁵ Marga Cottino-Jones, "Desire and the Fantastic in the Decameron: The Third Day," *Italica* 70, no. 1 (1993). P11

becomes a presence, and the man's desire is stirred up. Again, what Panfilo's man has done in I.1, Filomena's woman does it as well.

And Filomena does it more strikingly. Cepparello's story has unfolded how the will to know is the will of power to guide, to correct, and to put pleasure under control in the confession. But I have also noted, the woman's position and exchanges with the friar, not only in their financial deal but also during their conversations. Although Cepparello is a cheering hero in the manipulation of narrative, he still has to make his tale in the form of random responses to the friar's unpredictable questions. In contrast, the woman has a delicate plan. She initiates the confession and directs the conversation. While Cepparello aims to please the friar to dismiss his misdeeds, the woman can succeed by annoying the friar she talks with. During the first visit, the friar, delighted by her great virtue, trust, and generosity, decides that he will educate his friend, whom the woman pretend to accuse of stalking – but actually falls madly in love with. The friar reproaches his friend "in a very polite tone" for the friend's behavior. But the friar's tone of criticizing changes as the woman's successive stories become worse. The polite tone evolves first into a harsh and angry tone on the woman's second visit, and eventually becomes a furious tone that only the crime of crucifying Christ could exceed. The "righteous anger" of the friar results from his futile efforts to persuade the man out of this business. The woman leads the friar to taste the helplessness she suffers from the close censorship under the church and her husband's control. It turns out the woman is empowered by his anger. She takes control over the beginning, development, and the ending of the whole sequence of events. She directs the friar to do the very thing he is taking every effort to prevent. The friar is so confident in his "righteous anger" that when the innocent man is bewildered at his anger, he ensures his friend he knows the truth. "Now don't pretend to be surprised or to waste your words denying it," the friar says to his friend, "She herself, complaining bitterly about you, revealed it all to me." The friar is even more confirmed that his friend does give the woman expensive gifts when the woman provides evidence to materialize her tales on the second visit by suddenly throwing a belt and a purse on his lap. Gulizia thinks highly of the action of throwing evidence to the friar: "The woman knows that a smart handling of the purse and the girdle will have a shattering effect on the friar's

psychological reaction to the story, so he will believe that somebody is set up to 'raise hell.'"²⁶ The woman guides the friar's sense of truth. By promoting the woman and her lover's extramarital affair and acting as a go-between of the woman's desire, the friar becomes a traitor to the God he believes in, literally the enemy of his God. The trickery is a play to mislead, to distort, and to put the institution under control.

Fido mentions the theatric effect of the speeches in Cepparello's story, which transfers the relationship between God and man to a relationship among men due to the wholly secular exercise of theatric art.²⁷ The woman in III.3 becomes a playwright and an actress who transforms confession, as well as the church, into a more well-designed theater than the one in Cepparello's story. The delicate plan is a well-written play with three acts and three actors – the woman, the friar, and the woman's lover. The church becomes the stage for a play where a female with a purest mind confesses her sufferings and a holy friar gives consolation by penancing the male sinner. Tears, belt, and purse become props instead of evidence. Playing the role of the ideal female the church expects – a worthy woman without dirty thoughts, a most loyal wife who loves her husband more than her own life and a lovely daughter who prayx for dreams of her mother -- she makes herself a victim of a stranger's unwanted love.

No sex is mentioned throughout her dialogue, but the conversation entails every detail about sexual desire. The only scene containing a sexual image in the conversation is the one when she describes how the man enters her bedroom through the window and begs her: "So I listened to him and for your sake kept silent, and as naked as the day I was born." The status of being naked exists in Cepparello's story when he claims that "I am as virgin today as when I came from my mother's womb." On the one hand, it intimates a kind of purity as an infant and a virgin. On the other hand, it is a pornographic depiction that can stir up the friar's anger. Cottino-Jones comments that: "This playful handling of the representation of desire within a religious space, through a member of a religious order, and especially through the religious rite of the confession, intensifies the parodic function of the

²⁶ Forni and Ciabattini, *The Decameron Third Day in Perspective*. P54

²⁷ Elissa B. Weaver, *The Decameron First Day in Perspective : Volume One of the Lecturae Boccacci*ibid. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). P62

discourse.”²⁸ The purpose of confession for the woman deviates from receiving the Holy host to receiving her lover. “The confessional in this novella is thus the site where the narrative discourse, working through the play of deception staged by the lady and involving religion at all levels, created the fantastic by means of what, according to Rabkin, is a diametrical contradiction to ‘the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative’”²⁹ The theater stages out the fantasy of the friar’s ideal and the reality of the woman’s desire.

When the woman and the man spend most of the story theatricalizing themselves by acting out their cliched idealist scripts, the friar is also rendered into an actor of his cliché. He fantasizes himself as the holy hero who is respected and enabled to rescue the pure woman. After hearing the first session of the tales, he promised to look into the issue so that “she would never ever be bothered by that man again.” And on the second visit, he comforts her: “I commend you most highly for following my instructions, I think I shall warn his ears in such a way that he will give you no further trouble.” As the “clever” judge he thinks he is, he fails to discern who is acting for desire and who is not. When the worthy man proclaims his innocence in the case the woman makes up, the friar stops him: "Don't pretend to be surprised or to waste your words to denying it, because you won't get away with it." In doing so, he forces the innocent man into acting. The man is more perceptive than the friar and understands the woman’s intention immediately. Pretending to be somewhat embarrassed, the man starts his acting, after which he turns to the woman immediately while promising the friar to stop his impolite conducts. The reversing strategy the man utilizes is familiar. By cooperating with the woman and the friar to be a sinner, the man resists the friar’s theatricalization by blinding the friar into a fantasy, which the friar can get away with. The lovers render the friar into a pure performer. Forcibly theatrical, the friar is reduced to a cliché. The penance ritual turns into a theatrical spectacle. By showing such theatrical confession, Boccaccio reveals to us the way the friar theatricalizes people and himself in everyday life. Moreover, to theatricalize the institution is to think it untrue, to treat everything that happens in the institution as a performance, not truth. If Cepperallo is

²⁸ Cottino-Jones, "Desire and the Fantastic in the Decameron: The Third Day."P11

²⁹ Ibid.

an expert in fighting against his adversity by manifesting truth, then Filomena's woman is an expert in beating back by theatricalizing the institution's repression and making power's truth untrue.³⁰

The silence of the woman is consistent with other stories in Day Three. III.3 is an excellent example of how to satisfy desire while keeping silent in the form of theater. Foucault expresses his concern about the rebellion against repression by speaking out. Taking *My Secret Life* as an example, he maintains that while trying to excuse oneself from the guilty position in the regime of power and sexual discourse, people recount their strangest sexual behaviors, which contributes to the production of sexual truth. The sexual descriptions thus become a reticence of repression, "a digression, a refinement, a tactical diversion in the great process of transforming sex into discourse."³¹ Facing this dilemma, III.3 provides a substitution. The woman obeys a tradition of what should happen in courtly love and doesn't have any word concerning sex description, except the doubly-meant "naked." Yet she succeeds. Nothing more than "enjoy" or "happiness" appears in the lovers' success. Boccaccio puts sex back to the natural status of *Ars Erotica* instead of *Scientia Sexualis*, and sex gets rid of the everyday bit of power's theater with its solemn discourse.

3. The Justice of Being A Woman

Filomena intends to create a female character who is as brilliant as Cepparello. The woman in III.3 is even more capable in the fact that she gets her lover involved in the theater to cooperate with her. But such capability juxtaposes her inability in her husband's requirement as her marriage debt and the fear of rumor. She decides to "put up with those embraces which were not in her power to refuse." The description of her unwillingness is severer in McWilliam's translation as "As far as it lay within her power she would have nothing whatsoever to do with his beastly caresses." This translation stresses her unwillingness but also confines where her power lies. The danger of sending messages forces her to turn to the church, where she complains about how the sharp

³⁰ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism : Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).P223-247

³¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P22

responses from men could "lead to words, and words lead to blows." The story-teller of III.3, Filomena, defends herself before telling the story on the first day against possible rumors: "As long as I live in dignity and have no remorse of conscience about anything, let anyone who likes to say what he likes on the contrary." But her defenses don't protect her protagonist from the fear of public opinion. While Stefano Gulizia regards III.3 as a myth of female predominance,³² Filomena's protagonist still has a long journey in her pursuit of equality with her husband and public justice for her love.

³²Forni and Ciabattani, *The Decameron Third Day in Perspective*. P56

Right of Death and Power over life: VI.7

Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine.

Matthew 7:6

In the sixth day of the brigata's story-telling, Filostrato tells a story about how Madonna Filippa avoids the threat of death by justifying herself in front of the *Podesta* after her husband discovered her adultery, which fits the day's theme of defending oneself or escaping danger with witty remarks. In VI.7, by recalling I.1 and III.3, Filostrato manages to construct a story which reestablishes laws in favor of female sexuality.

Combining the themes of I.1 and III.3, VI.7 redistributes power in gender by correcting the law. Madonna Filippa's story reflects Cepparello's tale in three ways. First, since the sixth day is Wednesday, on which the book *Decameron* begins, the sense of Genesis remains. Second, Donna Filippa is from Prato – the hometown of Cepparello. Third, the results of the case are similar to those of Cepparello's. The audience's laughter and pleasure over Filippa's case is compatible with the Florentine brothers' joy in hearing Cepparello's narrative, and the woman's avoidance of shameful death is consistent with the church's acceptance of Cepparello,

Filippa's story echoes III.3 in diving deep into love's deep waters – the distribution of power, the economy in marriage, and the justification of women's desire – since I.1 has already set up a world governed by the God Love. The story begins with a statute from Prato that states, "any women caught by her husband committing adultery with her lover should be burned alive, just like the woman who goes with a man for money would be." Pennington comments that no such law existed at that time except in the world Boccaccio creates.³³ Instead of regarding it as existing law, the statute is rather a symbol that the husband controls the wife's life through the operation of law. Moreover, the image of a woman burning alive appears in III.3. The woman tells the friar in III.3 that "I would be more deserving of the flames of Hell than the wickedest woman in the world." Filippa and her lover's

³³ Kenneth Pennington, "A Note to Decameron 6.7: The Wit of Madonna Filippa," *Speculum* 52, no. 4 (1997).P903

love shares the same devotedness in the woman's description in III.3: "love me dearer than his life." While, again, Pennington humorously comments on Boccaccio's Podesta for making his decision based on Fillipa's beauty,³⁴ the striking beauty and good breeding are characteristic of the woman in III.3 too. "The friar upon seeing her realized that she was a noble lady, and he listened to her confession most willingly." Thus, it is reasonable to infer that VI.7 resonates with III.3 because the woman's beauty is exaggeratedly depicted in a day when wit outweighs appearance. Even Filippa's defense that she satisfies all her husband's needs is in resonance with the embraces her counterpart cannot refuse in III.3. Therefore, the tale of Madonna Filippa is an extension of III.3, a place where Boccaccio discusses the role of gender in power, female sexuality, and canon law through a confession. The differences in locations between the two stories imply that it is a universal situation in which the subject struggles for being a woman.

1. The Right of Death and The Exile of Abnormal Sexuality

The statute in Prato presents us with the husband's power over the wife's life in controlling the right of her death. Foucault points out that the right to decide life and death is one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power: "In a formal sense, it derived no doubt from the ancient patria potestas that granted the father of the Roman family the right to "dispose" of the life of his children, and his slaves."³⁵ And a woman, under the rule that "husband is the lord," is under the control of her husband in the institution of the family. While Pennington finds incomprehensible Rinaldo's turning to the court instead of killing the lovers on site,³⁶ Foucault uncovers that it is the evolution of power that directs the husband from the diminishing form of killing directly to exposing them to death. Without directly putting the children and slaves to death, which may result from Hobbes's natural right, the father is empowered to "expose" these people's lives. In this sense, as Foucault shows, he wields an "indirect" power over the offender's life. The right over death changes

³⁴ Ibid.P905

³⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P135

³⁶ Pennington, "A Note to Decameron 6.7: The Wit of Madonna Filippa."P902

from a privilege to a defense, which is an asymmetrical distribution of power. Rinaldo, therefore, is exercising his right not only by killing but also by refraining from killing.³⁷ “Power in this instance,” Foucault concludes “was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately her life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life to suppress it.”³⁸ Far from being confusing, Rinaldo’s choice is, in fact, an excellent example in the operation of the right of death. The statute which is worthy of criticism is based on the repression the husband exercises on the wife, and it is biased to the male for it is only applied to women.

Power’s seizure of women’s bodies is in the law aiming to confine female sexuality – sex is only legal with one’s husband and is regulated by rules and recommendations. Foucault explains that “breaking the rules of marriage or seeking strange pleasures brought an equal measure of condemnation,”³⁹ so that adultery is set apart from the normal marital sexual relationship and becomes the “unnatural.” Madonna Filippa and her sexuality, in this case, face the danger of living in exile and being condemned *in absentia*.

Filippa escapes from the danger of either exile or death by utilizing power's logic, namely marriage debts, to confess and regain control of her sexuality, her body, and her life. Brundage traces the theory of sex in marriage that couples have their sexual rights and obligations to each other, men and their wives should pay each other their due.⁴⁰ While it seems equal to both parties, in an asymmetrical power relationship, the woman’s desire, as useless as it is in economic production, is ignored and repressed. Moreover, no law punishes men severely for adultery, so, Filippa complains "this law applies to us poor women." By revealing the inequity of the application of the law, she questions the assumption underlining the logic, in which men are superior to women in terms of power in political participation and sexual satisfaction. Marriage diets restrain only women in the institution of marriage.

³⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.136

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.P38

⁴⁰ James A. Brundage, *Sex, Law, and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 1 vols., Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain ; Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1993).P381

Filippa defends herself by asking the Podesta: "I beg you to grant me a small favor: that is, to ask my husband whether or not have I ever refused, whenever and however many times he wished, to yield my entire body to him." While the husband, admits immediately and without doubt, the woman responds with another question that: "I ask you, Messer Podesta, if he has always taken of me whatever he needs and however much pleased him, what was I supposed to do then, and what am I to do now, with what is left over?" The dialogue is dramatic here. The husband's quick response illuminates how he takes her wife's offer of sex for granted and how he considers that woman would not have excessive desires. Such a surplus of desires undermines the man's masculinity for his inability in fulfilling his responsibility. The female's desire, which is forced to be silent, speaks out for equal treatment in sexuality in the institution of marriage. By bringing her excessive desires into the light, Madonna Filippa's confession questions the masculine conceptions of gender differences in sexuality and the mutual responsibility in marriage.

The power structure also experiences a change here. Korneeva points out that by regarding sexuality as marriage debts, Madonna Filippa transfers her body and sexuality into a marriage commodity, which makes it possible for her to impose the right of property over her sexuality, her body, and her life. By integrating her marriage into the economic imperative, Filippa enters into the logic of the discourse of sexuality.⁴¹

2. Justifying Sexuality

Underlying the repression of female sexuality in the law is the inequality between man and woman, Madonna Filippa decouples sex and gender before claiming her unsatisfied desire. Steinberg has mentioned that Boccaccio is especially concerned with what happens when the state's monopoly of violence is married to a monopoly of verisimilitude.⁴² Only the voice of men is heard,

⁴¹Tatiana Korneeva, "Law and Women's Rights in Boccaccio's Decameron," *Comparative Literature Studies* 30, no. 3 (1993).P231

⁴² Justin Steinberg, "Mimesis on Trial: Legal and Literary Verisimilitude in Boccaccio's Decameron," *Representations* 139, no. 1 (2017).145.

and husbands and church decide what truth and justice are. The law is biased to man not only in its application but also in its making. Filippa doubts the legitimacy of the regulations in the first place:

As I am sure you know, the laws should be equal for all and should be passed with the consent of the people it affects. In this case these conditions are not fulfilled, for this law applies only to us poor women, who are much better than men to satisfy a larger number; furthermore, when this law was put into effect, not a single woman gives her consent, nor was any one of them ever consulted about it; therefore, it might quite rightly be called a bad law. (Boccaccio, 464)

Filippa's employment of legal principle is astonishing. Pennington confirms the authenticity of the principles that law should be applied equally and should obtain the consent from those who are affected by it.⁴³ Korneeva praises Filippa's *Decameronion* strategy – instead of overturning the hierarchy of male power, she puts the structure into question and defeats it with its own mechanism. Taking measures according to the constraints of feminine behavior that are imposed by the dominant morality, Boccaccio creates a new femininity that transcends the boundaries of power imposed on women, which offers a positive solution to the conflict and an example of a new order.⁴⁴ As Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity clarifies, Boccaccian revolution is one in which "the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound."⁴⁵

Filippa's defense is also based on Boccaccian theology. She never denies her adultery, "Sir, it is true that Rinaldo is my husband and this past night he found me in Lazzarino's arms, where, because of the deep and perfect love I bear on him, I have many times lain." J. L. Austin has distinguished justifications from excuses. Making a justification is when the subject does something that leads to negative outcomes; she admits it and takes responsibility but suggests that what she has done is right, sensible, good, or permissible.⁴⁶ To justify her sexual desire, Filippa glorifies it by linking to the Bible: "What am I to do now, with what is left over? Should I throw it to dogs? Is it much better to give it to a gentleman who loves me more than himself, rather than let it go to waste or spoil?" Not only does she regard her desires as holy – as "Give not that which is holy to

⁴³Pennington, "A Note to Decameron 6.7: The Wit of Madonna Filippa."P903

⁴⁴Korneeva, "Law and Women's Rights in Boccaccio's Decameron." P234

⁴⁵Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power : Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).P17

⁴⁶J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excusea," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956).P2

the dogs,” she also ingrains her sexuality into the economic structure as a commodity again. Under the name of God, “holy” desire becomes good again.

3. The Revolution and Danger in Public Confessions

Filippa’s confession explores ritual in terms of necessity and social results. When in need, confession saves her from death and rescues sexuality from permanent exile and silence. At the beginning when Filostrato introduces the case, he says “It is good to know how to say the right thing at the right time, but I think it is even better to do so at a moment of real necessity.” He emphasizes the timing of confessing. Filippa’s justification is under the threat of being exiled. To keep silent in juridical circumstance, Foucault notes, is also a confession, in which one submits herself to her husband and the court. Whatever she does will always become an avowal.⁴⁷ So that in spite of being advised against the issue by many of her friends and relatives, she: “decided that she would rather confess the truth and die with a courageous heart than, fleeing like a coward, live in exile condemned in absentia and show herself unworthy of such a lover as the man in whose arms she has rested the night before.” To deny the affair under such circumstances is to cooperate with her enemies and betray the love she believes in. Therefore, VI.7 is the only truthful confession – at least in admitting what indeed has happened. Even though it is true, it is still a *Decameronion* confession which creates a future for her enjoyment of sexual desires and goes against the repressive institutions. In identifying the necessity of the circumstances to speak out, Filippa also essentially confesses outside of the everyday theater in which one consistently participates in the discourse of sexuality. She thus facilitates the repression of the power.

Filippa also succeeds in the social realm. The cheerful victory of Filippa’s lawsuit leads to a public change. The citizens modify the statute such that it applies only to women who are unfaithful for money. An affair which happens out of love is now different from an affair which happens as a result of the exchange of money. The achievement of Filippa’s words is inseparable from

⁴⁷Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P22

the empathy and understanding from both the judge and the citizens. The strength to break power is within power's structure itself, but it demands that the judge see reality. Unlike the theater of church's clichés, it is in an investigation where notions of probability and plausibility really come into play⁴⁸ in Filippa's efforts to make the public to see what is unseen before – that the strength and naturalness of sexual desire are the same in both genders. With the change in the statute, "Fillipa transcends the domain of domestic conflict, assumes the transgressive implications of affirming women's rights, as well as their status as personal and legal subjects, and establishes an equal relationship between the two gender roles."⁴⁹

The tale also influences the power distribution within the brigata. In the introduction, the queen Elissa of the day maintains that "man are truly leaders of women, and without their guidance, our action rarely ends successfully." After the story, when the three men turn to playing cards, this same Elissa convinces the other ladies to visit the "Valle delle donne." "For the first time ever--indeed," as Meier discovers, "since they met in Santa Maria Novella--the ladies break away from the men's company which, at the beginning, mattered so much to them on account of their sex's proverbial mobility and hostility towards any solid and lasting order."⁵⁰ The woman's independence from the man serves the day's underlining theme of recounting the distribution of power and the building of another ethic.

While celebrated by the citizens of Prato and the brigata, Madonna Filippa's confession also risks putting "excessive female desire" into the discourse of sexuality. Foucault has commented on the condition of liberation:

We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical ages, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. For the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics. (Foucault, 5)

⁴⁸ Steinberg, "Mimesis on Trial: Legal and Literary Verisimilitude in Boccaccio's Decameron."P122

⁴⁹ Korneeva, "Law and Women's Rights in Boccaccio's Decameron."P236

⁵⁰ Franziska Meier, "Day Six of the Decameron: Language's Polysemy or the Importance of Being Understood," *Annali d'Italianistica* 31 (2019).P310

Containing all these elements, the story still has its tension between the truth and power. As cautious as Boccaccio has been to set the confession under such circumstances, Filippa's claim on the excessive desire of women remains immoral to the husband, who is ashamed and confused at the end of the story. Instead of denying the existence of such excessive desire and forcing the woman into silence to control it, the authority grips the immorality and abnormality of such desire and puts it into discourse. A potential will to know female's sexuality is on the agenda for the abnormality that could be exploited in the issue. Confession is a double-edged sword, and in Filippa's victory, we have witnessed its positive changes. Nevertheless, in VII.5, the dark side will come out, and the wheel of fortune will turn to its starting point.

The License of Sex: VII.5

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:21

The seventh's day is under the rule of Dioneo. He decides the topic for the day about how wives play tricks on their husbands out of love or self-preservation. As such, Fiammetta tells a story of how a jealous husband disguises as a priest to hear his wife's confession, but his wife recognizes him immediately and gives him a false one. While the husband is suffering from believing in her adultery and waiting for her so-called lover, a priest, who is said to come from the front door every day, the woman enjoys herself with her lover who enters the bedroom from the roof. VII.5 reveals how the theatricalization in confession, which is similar to the one in III.3, helps the woman to cure her husband's unbearable jealousy.

Among the confession series, VII.5 responds to III.3 and continues to explore a possible consequence that results from VI.7. VII.5 contains two factors that exist in III.3: the theatricalization of confession and the conspiracy of the friar and the husband in suppressing female desire. Cervigni analyzes the theme of jealousy and links VII.5 to III.6, in which a jealous woman is hooked by a man into adultery.⁵¹ But jealousy doesn't make many any differences in terms of gender in both of the tales – it is always the male who utilizes this quality, whoever has it, to control the woman's sex and satisfies himself from the activity.

VII.5 and VI.7 ties to the same topic of women's power in many ways. First, the place of “Valle delle donne” (Valley of Ladies) binds the space of the two days together. McTighe claims that “the narrative position of ‘Valla delle donne’ in the *Decameron* at the end of Day VI highlights it as Day VII's invariable point of departure and “the description of the place makes it a pre-symbolic space that generates and empowers the feminine discourse that defines Day VII.”⁵² As well, the topic of the day -- women playing tricks on their husbands – relates to VI.7, where Madonna Filippa leaves

⁵¹ Dino S. Cervigni, "Fiammetta's Song of Jealousy: Are the Young People Still at Play?," *ibid.* (2013).P474

⁵² N McTighe, "Generating Feminine Discourse in Boccaccio's *Decameron*: The " Valle Delle Donne" as Julia Kristeva's Chora," *Romance Notes* (2016). P41

her husband in a state of discomfort. The name of the woman's lover, Filippo, in VII.5 is a variation of the protagonist in VI.7 - Filippa. In the hidden meaning of the topic on Day Six, focusing on women's empowerment, Madonna Filippa is the only one that influences power distribution in marriage. Most importantly, VI.7 leaves the problem of promoting more discourses on the excessive desires of the female; VII.5 provides a possible solution to a new repression resulting from such circumstances.

1. The Chain of Jealousy

Although VI.7 witnesses the victory of Madonna Filippa's witty remark on the "leftover desire," which brings to light the hidden secrets of women's sexuality, the "leftover desire" can also be a tool to explore the abnormality of female sexuality in the discourse. Filippa's identification leads to more discussions based on the idea that women have more desires and such desires drive them to cheat. Dioneo, the King of the Day Seven, chooses this topic out of the hypothesis on women's sexuality:

As you heard, she declared she never knew a girl in her neighborhood who went to her husband a virgin, and she added that she was well acquainted with the many kinds of tricks married women played on their husbands. But leaving aside the first part of what she said, which is child's play, I think the second should make for pleasant discussion, and so, since Mistress Licisca has provided us with the clue, tomorrow I want you to tell stories about the tricks which, either out of love or for their own self-preservation, wives have played on their husbands, whether these tricks were discovered or not. (Boccaccio, 479)

The topic complicates the claim of women not being virgins when married. Even though Dioneo denies it, the tricks of Day Seven are all based on the assumption of the surplus of female desires.

Female sexuality is marginalized in this sense by way of revisiting and fixing it into discourse. We have discussed Foucault's concern on reverse discourses. While seemingly rebelling against the dominant power as resistance to it, they degenerate automatically into a stimulation to another turn of marginalization of the suppressing mechanism, and therefore any justification they

have made remains necessarily precarious.⁵³ When the ladies feel this topic is unsuitable and ask Dioneo to revise the theme, he refuses them. Dioneo argues that as long as ladies and gentlemen take care not to act immorally, every form of speech is permitted. He continues with other comments “Are you not aware of these times, judges have abandoned their tribunals, the laws, both of God and man, have fallen silent, and everyone is granted free rein to protect his own life?” This argument responds directly to VI.7. To conclude with a moral requirement for ladies to tell such stories, he says: “So, set aside these false scruples which are more befitting a wicked mind than they are our own, and let each one of you do your best to think of some beautiful stories to tell.” Knowing that the ladies go to the lake independently, Dioneo regards them as having begun to play a trick and revisits the lake, a place which McTighe regards as the sign of the female’s empowerment.⁵⁴ Elissa’s song at the end of Day Six is sorrowful, it is an accusation of the constant expansion of male control, an explanation of her hopelessness and silence, and an appeal to get rid of prison she is in:

Love, if I could ever escape your claws,
I hardly can believe
That any other hook would ever catch me again.

I entered just a maiden in your war,
Believing it was perfect peace, benign,
And all my arms I laid upon the ground as any trusting person would have done,
But you, treacherous tyrant, harsh and fierce,
were quick, instead, to leap on me with your cruel claws and all your arms.

And then you had me bound up with your chains,
To that man who was born to make me die,
And I in bitter tears and suffering
Was given to him as a prisoner;
His lordship is so cruel
That not a sigh or cry from me,
Who waste away, can make him change.

The wind keeps sweeping all my prayers away;
No one will listen, nor do they even care,
And so, my torment constantly increases,
I hate my life, but how to end it all?

Ah, lord, have pity on my pain,
And do for me what I cannot:
Deliver him to me, bound in your chains,

⁵³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P22

⁵⁴ McTighe, "Generating Feminine Discourse in Boccaccio's Decameron: The "Valle Delle Donne" as Julia Kristeva's Chora." "It is, I sustain, a pre-symbolic space that generates and empowers the feminine discourse that defines Day VII. (41)"

If you cannot grant me this wish, at least
Loosen the knot that binds my hope so tight.
Ah, lord, I beg you, grant me this request;
For if you do, I trust that I can still
Return to all my former beauty,
And, sorrow banished, I shall deck
Myself in flowers white and scarlet. (Boccaccio, 484)

The representative of the updated discourse is jealousy. Jealous husbands in Day Seven share the same reason for their close monitoring over their wives: excessive female desire. In VII.4, Tofano takes his wife as a most beautiful lady, of whom he immediately became jealous without any reason whatsoever. In VII.8, Arriguccio, either because of rumor or for some other reason, turns into the most jealous man in the world. In VII.5, the cause is unveiled, Rimini has a most beautiful wife and becomes jealous due to an assumption: he assumes that every man must love her, that she must seem beautiful to them all, and even that she would, as a result, try to please other men besides himself. Under the right of death, the husband's belief in his wife desire and other's desire for her, as men always assume, leads to his unbearable monitoring. Fiammetta describes it as "even those sentenced to death are not so closely watched by their captors." The wife suffers greatly and more impatiently as she is guiltless. Also, Fiammetta responds to Dioneo's in her tale for his insistence on telling such tales:

And if lawmakers had considered the matter fully, it is my opinion that the punishment they established for wives should have been no different from the punishment they established for someone who attacks another person in self-defense, for jealous husbands are treacherous plotters against the lives of young wives and the most diligent seekers of their demise.
(Boccaccio, 508)

The image of the jealous husband is a metaphor for males who put female sexuality under control in both deeds and words. Among the story telling-group, the insistence in telling stories of disloyal wives reveals the surveillance in words. In VII.7, assuming the woman have surplus desire, the jealous husband spies on her.

VII.7 also addresses the cooperation of husband and the church. The fact that Rimini, the husband, disguises himself as a friar to monitor her wife's confession is evidence of their conspiracy. The lady says: "He's been transformed from a jealous husband into a priest" upon seeing him at the church. A confession is a place where they are willing to know a woman's sexuality. The image of husband and church coming together parallels III.3, but the lady in VII.7 is more aware of

the collaboration, she tells her husband: “When I saw you, I knew who the priest I am confessing with, I knew it was really you.”

The cure of jealousy, for the wife, is to give him a real cause for his behavior by finding a lover. Adultery, according to Foucault is "offense against a regularity of a natural function."⁵⁵ Taking the *Decameron* theology, it is to use courtly love to overcome the husband's torture. As said in the Bible, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” so the wife's seeks a lover through the hole in the wall, which is romanticized by the hearsay in the troubadour convention.⁵⁶ Besides providing a sense of romance, the efforts of finding a crack inch by inch on the wall imply the endeavors to find a crack in her strict and unrelenting seclusion – to break the barriers from inside.⁵⁷

2. Suppression and Its Mirror

The strategy in the woman's confession is extremely close to that of III.3 in its theatricalization. The lady conducts another rigid theater in the confessional. Instead of finding a comrade in her struggle, she manipulates the existence of a lover not only in reality but also in fantasy. When she finally gets permission to go to the church, she recognizes how the husband becomes a priest in order to get knowledge of her sins in adultery. The play starts in confession. Pretending not to recognize him, she sits down at his feet and tells him she has fallen in love with a priest who comes to sleep with her every night from the front door. Playing the role of the sinful wife as the husband expects, she makes herself a lover of an unknown priest. The disguised husband, who is a priest now, is furious in hearing this, but takes immediate measures. From this moment, the lady rises from where she has been “kneeling on his feet.” Moreover, in believing her, he suffers from the unbearable suppression he imposes upon his wife. The husband keeps a close watch at the main

⁵⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.P39

⁵⁶ Cesare Segre, "Functions, Oppositions, and Symmetries in Day VII of the Decameron," *Structures and Times: Narration, Poetry, Models*. (1979).P97

⁵⁷ Ibid.P104-105

entrance of the house for many nights in order to catch the priest, and the lady has a good time with her real lover, who comes to her from the roof. The theatricalization, like the one in III.3, blinds the husband in his fantasy, makes his belief untrue as it is theatricalized, and revenges the wife's suffering in the marriage and religious institution.

But different from III.3, the woman awakens the man from the fantasy and makes him see what is unseen to him before – her innocence and her suffering. She reveals the truth first by justifying her brilliance which is no more or less than an intelligent man:

I am always delighted to observe a simple woman leading an intelligent man around by the nose as if he were a ram being led by the horns to the slaughter – not that you are intelligent, nor have you ever been so from the moment you allowed the evil spirit of jealousy to enter your heart without good reason. (Boccaccio, 515)

By justifying her intelligence, she makes her words heard and shifts the role of being inferior to the man. And she rebukes his misdeeds:

Husband, do you really believe that my eyes are as blind as the eyes of your brain? Certainly not! I saw you, I knew who the priest confessing me was, I knew it was really you; but I made up my mind to give you exactly what you were looking for, and that I did. But if you had been as smart as you think you are, you never would be resorted to such a trick in order to learn the secrets of your honest wife, nor would you have succumbed to groundless suspicion, for you would have realized that what she confessed to you was the truth. (Boccaccio, 515)

By revealing the truth, she awakens her husband to the realization that she is the one who knows all the truth. Besides making the husband's truth untrue, she becomes the only one who holds the truth. Segre notices that "the *beffa* (trick) is based on a kind of mirror image,"⁵⁸ – the husband is the priest, the assumed lover of the wife in his illusion. Lover and priest are both the reflections of the husband. "Isn't it time you took a good look at yourself, and return to being the kind of man you used to be?" The wife says to her husband and finally frees herself from his jealousy. The reflection enables power to see its cruelty and suffers its self-examination. Thus, the repressed sex obtains the ability to get a balance in the asymmetrical power structure. Eventually, in VII.5, Elissa's sorrow song is heard and answered.

⁵⁸ Ibid. P116

Conclusion

From I.1 to VII.5, confessions in the *Decameron* develop a whole reverse discourse of sexuality, a discourse rebelling against the dominant power as a resistance to it. Each story addresses different aspects of this reverse discourse.

In I.1, Cepparello illuminates the mechanism of sexuality, pleasure, and power in confession, which is consistent with Foucault's discussion. Based on this mechanism, it manifests a reverse discourse which hides the secrets of private pleasures. The manipulation of truth is not the preserve of repressive power, but is a medium which works in opposite directions. Therefore, Cepparello establishes a new theology and a set of new ethics with words. Succeeding I.1, III.3 keeps challenging the intermediary role of priests and regards confession as a theater to render the friar's truth untrue. III.3 contributes to the anti-repression theme by highlighting the economic issue that leads to the restraint of sexuality. While the protagonist succeeds by establishing a new economy, she faces the inequality imposed on women. VI.7, therefore, delves into the issue of law and traces the origin of men's power by justifying excessive sexuality. While this strategy succeeds in making social and legal changes, it is again absorbed by the discourse it aims to fight against. VII.5, then describes how jealousy develops from the assumption of a woman's excessive sexuality and provides a license of sex by awakening the husband from fantasy in the way of revenge.

In all these stories, confessions in the *Decameron* share the same strategy to resist the repression with its own mechanism – manipulation of truth, the establishment of law, the creation of theology, and the form of confession. Narratives succeed in creating a space where a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an eruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power are possible.

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