

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# The Decameron (1351)

Giovanni Boccaccio)

## OVERVIEW

Along with poets Dante (1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374), Boccaccio (1313-1375) is one of the 'three crowns' of Italian literature. *The Decameron* was written in the vernacular (Tuscan Italian) as opposed to Latin, making it accessible to a broader audience. It is a masterpiece of medieval Italian prose, influencing subsequent generations of authors.

Boccaccio completed *The Decameron* (*Ten Days*) between 1349 and 1351. It is a collection of one hundred tales, connected by way of a frame narrative. Set during the plague ravaging Florence in 1348, Boccaccio introduces ten young nobles (seven women and three men) who have fled the city (and the sickness) to take shelter in a remote villa in the countryside. To pass the time, they complete chores during the day and tell stories at night. Each night, someone is appointed the "king" or "queen" and they determine what the theme of the stories should be. At the conclusion of the book, Boccaccio addresses his intended audience of noble ladies, imagining and responding to their critiques and observations of his work.

## LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Boccaccio's frame story for *The Decameron* directly references the Black Death, a bubonic plague which reached Florence, Italy in 1348 and killed roughly half of the city's population. Boccaccio's fictionalized account of the ten young nobles who escaped the city is informed by his first-hand experience as a survivor of the plague and a witness to its devastating impact on Florence. This makes *The Decameron* a significant historical document.

Boccaccio leverages a defense of his character and his creative project in the introduction, the conclusion, and the middle of the work. He anticipates criticism that the themes of his stories are inappropriate for noble ladies: if the words are decent, he writes, there is no topic so indecent that it can't be broached. He also reminds us that painters are not criticized for depicting violent or suggestive themes in their works (and provides examples of biblical scenes), and that these stories are not intended to be told in church. Whether the stories have a positive or negative influence on a reader, he insists, depends on that individual and their own proclivities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that *The Decameron* was condemned by the Catholic Church for its offensive content, and it ended up on a list of banned books. It was also heavily censored for its anti-clerical and sexual content throughout its publication history, resulting in the circulation of "corrected" editions in Italian.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Ser Cepparello:	a corrupt man who gives a false confession at the end of his life
Peronella:	a beautiful girl who takes a lover and deceives her husband
Griselda:	a virtuous woman and loyal wife who is subjected to trials by her husband

## FRAME STORY

*The Plague:* The narrator, Boccaccio, addresses his audience of noble ladies. He warns them that what follows may be distressing before describing the events leading up to the plague in Florence and the chaos that ensued: symptoms of illness, medical misinformation, and the destabilization of the social order. Those suspected to be sick are abandoned by their family members and neighbors, and the dead are too numerous to receive last rites.

*The Storytellers:* Boccaccio then shifts his attention to a group of friends: seven noble ladies, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven, who live in the same neighborhood of Florence. To protect their identities, Boccaccio gives them nicknames. One day, when these friends meet at a church, one of them suggests they leave the city to protect themselves from sickness and social unrest. The others agree and invite three young noblemen to join them. The group departs from the city and travels to a remote villa in the countryside. To occupy themselves, they nominate a leader for each day who will take charge of the entertainment.

## STORIES

### Story 1. Ser Cepparello

*An Immortal Accomplice* A wealthy merchant searches for someone devious enough to recover money he had lent to a group of Burgundians. The Burgundians have the reputation of being two-faced and unethical, so the merchant is in the market for a man with an equally duplicitous reputation. He comes across Ser Cepparello, who takes great pleasure in immorality. The merchant employs Cepparello and sends him to Burgundy, where he is not well known.

*An Unexpected Illness* During his stay, Cepparello contracts a fatal illness. His condition worsens and on his death bed, he overhears his caretakers debating what to do with him: they are afraid if they turn him out that will damage their reputation. If he dies without a confessor, his body will be tossed into a ditch, but who would forgive such an evil man? Cepparello assures his caretakers that if they summon the holiest friar they know, he will take care of it.

*The Confession* The friar arrives at Cepparello's bedside, and he gives a false confession to the holy man, painting the picture of a virtuous man, one who is chaste, devout in his prayers, generous with charities, and proactive in defending the victimized or downtrodden wherever he encounters them. The friar is so persuaded by this confession that he not only grants Cepparello absolution but believes him to be an extremely devout man.

*A Liar's Legacy* Following Cepparello's death, the friar provides evidence to his fellow friars, detailing the deceased's virtues according to his confession. The other friars are persuaded by his case and hold a vigil over Cepparello's body. News of his virtuous character spreads, inspiring great devotion in others. He is eventually canonized as a saint.

### Story 2. Peronella and the Jar

*The Scheme* In the city of Naples, a poor man marries a pretty girl named Peronella. With his labor and her spinning, the couple gets by on a meager living. But Peronella attracts the attention of a young man who seduces her. The lovers hatch a scheme to see each other without getting caught, taking advantage of her husband's work schedule.

*A Man in a Jar* One day, Peronella's husband arrives home earlier than expected. As soon as she hears his knock on the door, she urges her lover to climb into a large storage jar to hide. She greets her husband and he gives her good news: he has agreed to sell a large storage jar in exchange for five silver ducats, which will keep bread on the table for over a month.

*Quality Control* Peronella lies to her husband, claiming that she has arranged to sell the pot for seven ducats to a man who has just climbed into the pot to determine whether it is of good quality. Her lover jumps out of the jar to play along with the charade, agreeing to buy it. While her husband cleans out the jar, Peronella and her lover have another amorous encounter. Afterwards, the lover pays for the jar which the husband delivers to his home.

### Story 3. Griselda

*A Marriage Under Pressure:* The Marquis of Saluzzo is pressured by his subjects to find a wife. He eventually settles for an impoverished young woman in a nearby village who strikes him as both virtuous and beautiful. Her name is Griselda. The Marquis arranges to marry her on one condition: that she promise to do everything in her power to please him, to always be agreeable and obedient to him. Griselda consents and the two are married.

*A Daughter's Death* Following the birth of their first child, a daughter, the Marquis decides that he needs to test his wife's patience by subjecting her to mind games. He begins by making hurtful remarks about her upbringing and eventually orders the pretend death of their daughter. A servant arrives to take the child away. While Griselda believes she is dead, in truth the Marquis arranges for her to be secretly raised and educated in a distant city.

*The Son's Demise* The Marquis decides on the same cruel course of action after their son is born. A servant arrives to take him away under the same illusion. Leading his wife to believe their child has been murdered, the Marquis instead sends him to be raised alongside his sister. Griselda bears this grief with perfect obedience to her husband, while the Marquis' actions make him unpopular with his subjects.

*The Fake Annulment* The Marquis arranges for counterfeit letters to come from Rome, giving his wife the impression that the marriage has been annulled by the Church. He decides to strip her of her finery and send her back to her father's house with nothing. Griselda accepts her husband's decision and returns to work for her family, while the Marquis spreads a rumor that he has found another wife, the daughter of a count.

*The New Wife* The Marquis summons Griselda and tells her to prepare the household for his new wife, a task which she accepts out of love for him. In advance of the wedding banquet, the Marquis arranges for his son and daughter to be brought home. He leads the banquet attendees and his wife to believe their daughter is his future bride. Only then is the Marquis satisfied that he has tested his wife enough. He reveals that his cruelty has been an act, reunites mother and children, and promises to honor her as a husband should.

## THEMES

In *The Decameron*, each day is assigned a particular topic which the storytellers must incorporate into their tales. Themes that recur throughout *The Decameron* are stories about misfortune, love, gender roles, cleverness, and hypocrisy (particularly of the church). Both class and religion play prominent roles in the stories, particularly in representations of the merchant class and medieval Christianity. Many stories are comedic in nature, involving happy endings or satisfying comeuppances for the characters. This reinforces the purpose of storytelling within the frame narrative: to entertain a group of young men and women.

*Religion:* A central theme of *The Decameron* is religion. Some stories deal with conversion, examining the relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Others critique the shortcomings of the Church, including its corruption and hypocrisy. In the story (above) of Ser Cepparello, the friar who takes his confession is depicted as devout but flawed in his judgment (resulting in the canonization of the devious Cepparello). This underlines the larger point of the story: the clergy may serve as intermediaries between people and God, but they are human, too. Priests and friars make mistakes and exercise poor judgment.

*Love:* Romantic love is one of the prevailing themes of *The Decameron*. The power of love to cloud one's judgment can be seen in the figure of Peronella's husband (story 2), who is so enamored with his young, beautiful wife that he weathers her criticisms and insults and accepts what she says at face value, never suspecting that she may be cheating on him. The power of love is also reflected in Griselda's unwavering devotion to her husband (story 3): it is said that she loves her children deeply, and yet she submits to her husband's wishes and gives them up. Even the storyteller acknowledges that it would have served the marquis right if Griselda had found another husband who treated her better. Out of love for him, she forgives the deception.

*Class:* Throughout *The Decameron*, Boccaccio emphasizes that virtue is not linked to class. Many of the stories reflect the conditions of the merchant class, to which Boccaccio belonged, and examine the impact of wealth on relationships. Rich merchants of dubious character are present throughout the tale of Ser Cepparello, and the strain of poverty on a relationship is reflected in the interactions between Peronella and her husband. The marriage between Griselda and her husband, the Marquis of Saluzzo, is notable because it is a union of two social classes. The distinction between Griselda's humble origins and her husband's nobility is a point of contention during his tests, as he emphasizes that neither she nor her children are good enough for him or for his subjects. His decision to kill the children (which is not carried out) is motivated, in part, by the fact that no one will accept them as legitimate heirs. Although it is revealed that the Marquis does not genuinely believe what he has said, the words reflect some of the challenges of pursuing romantic relationships across class boundaries.

*Romance and marriage:* Relationship dynamics between men and women are a common theme in *The Decameron*, reflecting the attitudes of the young storytellers. There are tales of deception, mind games, and one-upmanship between spouses, exploring themes of seduction, heartbreak, love, and patience. The story of Peronella and the Jar, for example, is told in response to the day's theme: stories of women who trick their husbands to get what they want. The story of Griselda reflects another romantic dynamic: that of a virtuous and steadfast wife who, when subjected to horrific torments and tests by her husband, remains loyal, obedient, and deferential to him in accordance with her marriage vows.

*Wit:* Many of the stories in *The Decameron* deal with human nature, inviting the reader to reflect on their own virtues and vices. One of the celebrated virtues in the collection is a quick wit, or

intelligence, which allows an individual to avoid misfortune and/or achieve their goals. While Ser Cepparello is irredeemable, he achieves sainthood posthumously because of his cleverness. On his deathbed, he knows what to say to the friar to ensure that he is absolved and will be buried in the church. Peronella's story is another celebration of quick wit, as she improvises a scenario to hide her infidelity from her husband. The marital infidelity is not commented on by the narrator because the focus of the story is on her cleverness. It fulfils the storyteller's goal of demonstrating how women are as capable of trickery as men.

*Vices:* In addition to exploring virtues, the stories of *The Decameron* also examine vices with special emphasis on greed and lust. The wealthy merchant who hires Ser Cepparello is motivated by greed and Ser Cepparello himself can be read as an amalgamation of vice, due to his many crimes: he has drawn up false documents, given false witness, instigated conflict, blasphemed, committed murder and theft. He is described as a gluttonous pervert, gambler, and cheat. Passing judgment on Cepparello, the narrator declares that he is the worst man in the world. The vice of lust is present in Peronella's story of marital infidelity, but interestingly, it is neither explicitly critiqued nor punished. The lack of moralizing in these stories emphasizes their purpose: not to teach lessons, per se, but to entertain an audience.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Ser Cepparello** Cepparello is an exaggerated figure who embodies all the worst vices of his time. According to the storyteller, Panfilo, he revels in deceit, violence, and self-indulgence. He seeks out opportunities to sow discord and engage in sinful behavior. Given a choice, Cepparello will always opt for the evil course of the action. The character doesn't have much depth or nuance beyond his reputation as a wicked man. This is deliberate, heightening the contrast between his "true" nature in life and his canonization as a saint after death.

*Corrupt:* Cepparello's reputation precedes him. He is the only man the merchant can only think of who is duplicitous enough to best the two-faced Burgundians. Some of his most egregious sins are recounted in the story: from false testimony and blasphemy to murder and theft. Cepparello not only engages in unethical behaviour, but he enjoys it. He draws up false documents for free and give false oaths unprovoked for the sheer satisfaction of deceiving others. He also delights in sowing discord, corrupting those around him by stirring up disagreements between friends, family members, and strangers. At the end of his life, Cepparello reasons that he has wronged God so many times that to tell untruths on his deathbed will make no difference.

*Manipulative:* Cepparello finds the most pious friar in town to take his deathbed confession, and unintentionally succeeds in convincing this holy man that he is deserving of sainthood. In response to each question the friar poses, Cepparello calculates a response that will most impress the clergyman with the illusion of purity, goodness, and virtue. Not only is this evidence of his duplicitous nature (presenting a contradictory image of himself to the friar), but it also reveals how clever he is. Cepparello is insightful. He understands what the friar wants to hear, and he improvises effectively: none of the questions catch him off guard.

**Peronella** Peronella is a clever and opportunistic woman. She is described as beautiful and winsome, skilled with spinning but restricted to a modest lifestyle. Her lover actively pursues her and eventually she consents to a relationship. Peronella demonstrates improvisational skill during the unexpected encounter between her husband and her lover. As a result of her quick thinking, the story ends without any major revelations for the husband.

*Opportunistic:* Confronted by the surprising return of her husband, Peronella is opportunistic in her strategy for hiding – and getting rid of – her lover. She spots the large storage jar and urges her lover to climb into it. When her husband reveals that he has agreed to sell the jar, she immediately fabricates a counteroffer to prevent him from discovering the man inside. She takes control of any potential confrontation between her husband and her lover by creating a believable reason for the latter's presence: that he has come to inspect the jar. While her husband climbs into the jar to clean it, Peronella takes advantage of his distraction to have sex with her lover in the same room. Her ability to think on her feet is rewarded at the end of the story, as her infidelity is not discovered.

*Clever:* Peronella not only acts quickly to control the circumstances of her husband and lover meeting, but she also creates an effective distraction. She greets her husband with a series of demanding questions; by framing her inquiry in terms of disappointment and regret at what she perceives as his laziness or lack of interest in securing financial stability for their family, she creates a

persuasive argument for why she is so upset that he is home early. She also utilizes guilt effectively in the second half of her complaint: she insists that she should have married someone else, and that if she wanted to have an affair, she could, but she is loyal to a man who doesn't appreciate her. While the reader knows she is lying, her husband is convinced. He is quick to reassure her of his loyalty before trying to placate her with his five-ducat deal. Peronella exploits the expectations of men and women (i.e., that good husbands should provide for and honor their wives, especially if they are loyal, beautiful and virtuous) to manipulate and distract him from questioning the presence of another man in their home.

**Griselda** Griselda is a feminine ideal: beautiful, righteous, and patient. She is subjected to severe torments designed to test her virtue. Her husband verbally abuses her, pretends to have their children murdered, and abandons her after thirteen years of marriage. Throughout these trials, Griselda remains resolute and faithful. She is dubiously rewarded for her steadfast nature at the end of the story when her husband declares himself satisfied with her as a wife.

*Generous:* Griselda's story is told in response to the day's theme of generosity, and it can be said that Griselda is generous in terms of her love and devotion. She keeps her marital vows to her husband, showing perfect obedience and a lifetime commitment to making him happy. But it is not only an obligation she fulfills as a wife. Griselda loves her husband so deeply that she is willing to give up her children, her marriage, and the comforts of her lifestyle to please him. Beyond her husband, Griselda is also popular with his subjects due to her generosity and kindness towards them. As a result, they are deeply sympathetic to her plight.

*Patient:* Griselda unwittingly submits to several degrading tests of her virtue and goodness; she believes that she has lost both her children and the love of her husband, and when he casts her out, he sends her home barefoot. Griselda bears each of these indignities with patience, and throughout the story she attributes her current state to the whims of Fortune rather than her husband's capricious nature. She appears to be passive in the acceptance of her fate, but that passivity is framed as a virtue: patience. She has been wronged by Fortune but does not respond impulsively. Her patience is rewarded at the end of the story, when it is revealed that her husband's cruelty was a test which she has passed successfully.