Decameron Essay, Research Paper

Boccaccio?s View of Woman

For centuries Boccaccio?s view of woman has been disputed by those who have

read his work. Some state that Boccaccio was merely writing to entertain the people of

his time, others believe that he was sexist and that his writings hold woman in an inferior,

negative light. It is widely found that the people of the twentieth century find the constant

downgrading of woman offensive. Throughout his stories Boccaccio tends to depict

woman as sexual objects and not as people. There are also cases where woman are

portrayed as unintelligent cheaters that are not loyal to their husbands nor to themselves.

This has began the debate whether or not Boccachio is a sexist. It may be the views of the

culture and the time but for people of today?s world it is offensive and sexist against

woman.

On the Seventh Day, Second Story, Boccachio shows Peronella as an evil women,

who has no feelings for her husband and doesn?t mind she is cheating on him. She is

devoid of all morality, values, and love. It was all about sex for her, she was an object of

lust and not of love. She even made her husband help her lover, which is a huge insult to

him. Then, if that wasn?t enough, while her husband was cleaning the barrel, Peronella

had sexual relations with her lover.

?No, the deal won?t be called off for that; my husband will clean

the whole thing.? And her husband said :Of course?; and

laying down his tools and rolling up his to scrape it. And Peronella,

pretending to be interested in what he was doing, put her head,

one shoulder, and a arm into the mouth of the barrel, which

was not very large and began saying to her husband ?Scrape

here, and here, and also over there- and- see there where you

left a little.? (p#118-119)

This quote shows how conniving Peronella was and how she had no feelings for her

husband. She did not just think of an excuse for why the man, who was her lover, was in

the house but she added insult by making the husband work so hard on cleaning the barrel

when it was not necessary. She shows no remorse, no guilt, no feeling. She did not love

her husband. Peronella says, ?Take this light my good man and see if is cleaned to your

satisfaction.? This quote may be the most bothersome quote in the entire book. She asked

her lover to check if her husband had done a good job cleaning the barrel. The husband

had no idea who the man was or what had transpired while he was busy cleaning.

Peronella did not care she had no values or morals. There are other instances where

female characters have no morals.

On the Ninth Day, Second Story, Boccachio once again shows how he feels about

women. First, he shows them without morals and values as he does in the other stories,

but he also shows them as not intelligent. Religion is a very sacred thing that is based

upon morals, values, and the ten commandments. There is nothing more sacred than

being part of the holy order. The abbess, Madonna Usimbalda and Isabetta where part of

the covenant which means they were not to have any sexual relations. Once again

Boccachio shows woman as sexual objects, not as caring, loving, intelligent people. The

Boccachio shows the abbess as not very intelligent because she puts on the priest?s pants

as her veil. There as a big difference between pants and a veil and the only reason Isabetta

had any idea what was going on was because of she saw the pants on her head.

That night the abbess was in the company of a priest whom she

had often had brought into her bedroom in a chest, and when

she heard the noise, fearing that the nuns, in their excessive

haste and zeal, might beat down her door, she got up quickly,

and dressed, in the dark as best she could; and thinking that

she had picked up her folded nun?s veil of the sort which is

called ?psalters,? she picked up the priest?s pants instead (p.129)

This quote makes two points. First is that the abbess is the leader of all the nuns. If any

female in the whole world should have morals, respect, values it would be her. Yet

Boccachio portrays her as someone that wants sex as does everyone else. Boccachio also

portrays her as un-intelligent. When she gets flustered, she mistakes the priest?s pants for

her veil. Boccachio took the leader of the convent and shows her as a cheating,

un-intelligent, sex lover. This shows exactly how Boccachio felt about woman. He took

the most holy sacred thing a woman can do and totally tainted it.

Boccachio very clearly shows in his writings how he feels about women. He

shows them in a very negative light. He takes some of the most sacred things such as

marriage and religion and shows the females not caring about what they are supposed to

do, having to values, no morals, no sense and doing what they want. He also puts sex at

the focal point for women in many of his stories. He shows women as people that are

looking for sex and really do not care about anything else. These woman had no loyalty

to God, no loyalty to their husbands and tried their best to cover up what they had done,

only admitting after they were caught. No matter what Boccachio says about holding

women in the ?highest esteem? he clearly shows in his writing that his statement is not

true. Many of his stories are degrading toward woman and in my personal opinion

offending to women. It is obvious that Boccachio believed that the female sex was the

weaker sex, he did not trust women, and he was sexist.

It is very clear by evaluating the past history of Italy during this time period that

Boccachio?s feelings were not unique to only him but were felt by all men. It was normal

for men to view women as uncable of handling money or holding any high political

office. It is very difficult for a reader from modern times to view Boccaccio?s writing in

any other way but narrow minded, vulgar and offensive.

?This perception may be due to the fact that, historically the oppression

of woman suffered by Italian woman because of their gender has been

greater than the Anglo societies, especially as regards white women in those

societies:… (p.19)

Italian women of this time could do very little to improve their situation. It was widely

believed that a woman?s duty was to get married, be a mother and a wife. In our society

where women have made so many contributions to the world and particularly to our

society it is hard to accept the ideas that are conveyed in the Decameron. Women of today

are much more independant and have fought to be considered equal in a society which

not long ago was dominated by men. The Decameron signifies the opression that the

modern woman have fought to stop.

In Europe at this time it was also considered beneficial to give birth to a male

rather than a female. Males were considered to be special at birth and grew up with the

belief that they more important that females. The men were the people who made the

money and made the decisions.

?These Italian feminists say that neither laws nor rights conferred upon

woman can give her freedom, because they cannot inspire her

with self assurence or a deep sense of entitlement that bourgeois men

receive as a birthright. (p.22)

Societies from the time women were very young forced them to be passive. It was

unacceptable for a woman to strive to become rich or enter a higher class on her own.

Often times the only way a woman could gain high stature in society being alone was to

marry a wealthy man after he passed on, becoming a widow. In this fashion she would

inherit the money and become independant although society felt that, if the woman was

young enough she would remarry.

As another source of information for this paper I spoke to a woman who teaches

the Decameron every year to highschool seniors. She views the book as an excellant work

to analyze and study. ?Over the years I have had a number of female students approach

me with questions concerning the Decameron as a whole. They want to know why

women are degraded in many of the stories. I try to tell the students that the writing is

based on the cultural and social beliefs of the time. Over the ten years I have taught this

book I have had an overwhelming negative responce to the material presented. The

students really read into the stories and don?t think of it as a literal work but as a social

problem. I like to see the reactions of the students. I must say as each year goes by there

are more students who find the material sexist, and vulgar. As today?s society progresses

and woman feel more confident they will not stand for being oprresed.? This shows how

in the modern times the society has progressed to a point where woman will not except

being put down anymore.