Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Bawdy Medieval Literature

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**REQUIRED TEXTS:**


- Additional readings: PDFs of the following will be distributed, and will be referenced throughout the semester as background to Boccaccio’s tales:
  - Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (selections)
  - Selected Goliardic Poets: Hugh Primas, the Archpoet of Cologne, and Henry settimello
  - Selected poems by Rustico Filippi and Cecco Angiolieri
  - Selected Fabliaux
  - Selected *lais* by Marie de France
  - Works by Pietro Aretino, Antonio Vignali, and Thomas Nashe
  - Dante’s *Inferno*, canto 10
  - Selected poems by Guido Cavalcanti
  - Tales by Franco Sacchetti, and Giovanni Sercambi, and Geoffrey Chaucer

**SCHEDULE:** Subject to change as necessary.

**Week 1:** January 23, 2018

TOPIC: Introduction to the class; Introduction to the Italian Middle Ages; Introduction to Boccaccio (biographical and historical material); Introduction to Boccaccio studies, including discussion of Boccaccio’s other literary works

**Statement:**

Literature, at its core, constitutes the use of fantasy to treat real-world issues. Since it is based in questions and concerns of the day, there are no issues that are off-limits to great works of literature. Such topics include (but are not limited to):

- Questions of sex and sexuality
- Questions of gender, and of gender-roles
- Questions of politics
- Questions of religion and theology

One definition of a “classic”—and Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is considered a classic of world literature—is that it has continuing relevance even beyond the historical period in which it was written. In other words, the questions raised by the work, listed above, do not only have pertinence in their historical periods, but may have continuing relevance in our contemporary society.

Some students might find Boccaccio’s very frank representations of sex and sexuality, in particular, challenging to strongly-held beliefs.
Week 2: January 30, 2018

WEEK'S ASSIGNMENT: Read: “Author’s Introduction”, “Introduction to Day I”, and Day I, Story 1; discuss PDFs related to Dante’s Vita Nuova and to the definitions of Comedy. Read Day I, stories 2, 3, 7. Read also the PDFs of the Goliardic Poets.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Discussions will include: reference to Dante’s Vita Nuova and to Boccaccio’s explanations of the genre “comedy”; references to hagiographical literature and how Day I, Story 1 subverts that literature; Boccaccio’s representation of the Jews and how it differs from that of most other medieval authors; anti-clerical literature; and the poetry of the Goliards.

Week 3: February 6, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day II, introduction, and stories 1, 5, 7; Day III, introduction, and stories 1, 4, 9, 10.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Discussions will include ways that Boccaccio borrows from religious literature; also further discussion of his anti-clericalism, especially the slander of nuns.

Week 4: February 13, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day IV, Introduction, and stories 1, 2, 8, 10. Read also PDFs of Marie de France’s lais.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Discuss the author’s defense in the introduction to Day IV; discuss how Boccaccio re-works traditional stories (the lais) in the day dedicated to “sad love stories.” Discuss how Boccaccio subverts the sad love stories with tales #2 and #10.

Week 5: February 20, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day V, Introduction, and stories 4, 8, 9, 10. Read also PDFs of works by Pietro Aretino, Antonio Vignali, and Thomas Nashe.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Discuss the naturalism of the lovers of story 4, and the representation of homosexuality in story 10. Discuss the representation of sex and sexuality in Boccaccio and other literary works (Aretino, Vignali, and Nashe).

Week 6: February 27, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day VI, Introduction, and stories 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10. Read also PDF of Dante’s Inferno, canto 10; and of Cavalcanti’s poetry.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Discuss the day that deals with quick retorts. Compare the representation of Guido Cavalcanti in story 9 to Dante’s representation in Inferno 10.
Week 7: March 13, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day VII, Introduction, and stories 1, 2, 3, 5. Read also selections of medieval misogynous / misogynistic tracts.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Discuss the day that deals with the tricks married women play on their husbands. Compare them to medieval misogyny: how does Boccaccio’s representation of women differ from that of other, more typical writers? How can we explain the difference?

Week 8: March 20, 2018


WEEK’S TOPIC: Discuss the tales of Bruno and Buffalmaco (#3, #6).

Week 9: March 27, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day VIII, stories 7, 9. Read also the PDF of Boccaccio’s Corbaccio (selection).

WEEK’S TOPIC: Compare the story of the scholar and the widow (#7) to Boccaccio’s Corbaccio: what do we make of the misogyny in these works? Listen also to the song “Una vecchia sempiternosa.”

Week 10: April 3, 2018

WEEK’S ASSIGNMENT: Read Day IX, Introduction, and stories 2, 3, 4, 5, 10. Read also the PDF of the poetry of Cecco Angiolieri. Read Day X, story 10: Griselda. Read also the versions of the same tale by Chaucer and Petrarch. Read author’s conclusion to the work.

WEEK’S TOPIC: Compare the story of the abbess (#2) to the song from later in the fourteenth century; continue the discussion of the tales of Bruno and Buffalmaco (#3, #5). Compare the representation of Cecco Angiolieri in the tale (#4) to that of his poetry. Discuss the versions of the Griselda story. Did Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer intend the same things with their tales? What might account for the popularity of the tale in the fourteenth century.