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Filomena, Dioneo, and an Ass

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Filomena, Dioneo, and an Ass

On the second day of the *Decameron*, Filomena tells the tale of the merchant Bernabò and of his wife Zinevra, who is wrongly accused of adultery by her husband. After many difficult adventures, Zinevra finds a way to let her innocence be known. The man who tricked her husband into believing her infidelity is appropriately punished, and Zinevra and Bernabò are happily reunited. “E così,” concludes Filomena, “rimase lo ’ngannatore a piè dello ’ngannato.”¹ All of Filomena’s listeners praise her story, most of all Dioneo, who heaps many compliments (“molte commendazioni”) upon it. This praise belies Dioneo’s skepticism of Filomena’s tale and its narrative objectives. After examining Filomena’s valorization of monogamy and condemnation of extra-marital sexual desire, I will show the ways in which Dioneo criticizes the story of Zinevra in his own stories on days two and five. I will pay particular attention to the way in which Dioneo cleverly links his fifth tale to the story of Zinevra through the use of a common proverb: “quale asin dà in parete tal riceva.” Finally, I will argue that Dioneo redeploys this saying, introduced in Filomena’s tale, to propose a radical solution to the problems caused by extra-marital sexual desire.²

Filomena’s story opens with a group of Italian merchants on business in Paris discussing their sexual exploits and wondering whether or not their wives back in Italy are being faithful to them. With the exception of Bernabò, all the merchants agree that their wives probably have lovers. It’s only fair, one merchant says, since he takes lovers, too: “... [P]er ciò a fare a far sia: quale asin dà in parete, tal riceve.” The ass in the proverb as it is used here represents the merchant, who, just as he cheats on his wife, is cheated on in turn by her. Bernabò Lomellin da Genoa, however, insists that his wife is “la più compiuta di tutte quelle virtù che donna o ancora cavaliere in gran parte o donzello dee avere, che forse in Italia ne fosse un’altra.” He then lists her skills, which include working with silk, serving a gentleman’s table, riding horses, handling falcons, reading, writing, and keeping accounts. His wife is also beautiful and young, and, most importantly to the discussion at hand, “niuna altra più onesta né più casta potersene trovar di lei; per la qual cosa egli credeva certamente che, se egli diece anni o sempre mai fuori di casa dimorasse, che ella mai a così fatte novelle non intenderebbe con altro uomo.”

¹ All quotations from the *Decameron* are taken from the edition edited by Cesare Segre (Milano: Mursia, 1987). This edition is a reprint of the text presented by Vittore Branca (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1960).

² My reading of these tales is informed by the work of Marilyn Migiel (who read and commented on a very early version of this essay, which I presented at the annual conference of the American Association of Italian Studies in 1997). In her recent book *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, Migiel brings into sharp relief the ways in which the male and female members of the *brigata* “struggle to claim authority for competing narratives about institutions and individuals” (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) 3. I read the exchange between Filomena and Dioneo in II.9 and 10 and V.10 as part of this struggle.

Bernabò's description of his wife is striking because, although he praises her beauty and her skill in every task "che a donna appartenesse, sì come di lavorare lavorii di seta e simili cose," working with silk is the only "woman's work" he names. Yet he lists at length the skills important to a man, praising his wife for skills such as falconry and account-keeping, which were not at all the province of fourteenth-century Italian women of the merchant class. To be sure, the ground is being laid here for the rest of the story, in which Bernabò's wife successfully passes herself off as a man, in part because of these skills.³ Additionally, Bernabò shows his wife to be someone who can cross gender boundaries with impunity. Even though she can keep accounts as well as a merchant, she is not a real threat to gender boundaries because of her chastity. Furthermore, Bernabò insists on his wife's uniqueness ("forse in Italia ne fosse un'altra," "niuna altra più onesta ne più casta potersene trovar di lei") in both the breadth of her skill and the depth of her chastity.

Ambrogiuolo da Piagenza, the merchant who challenges Bernabò, laughs not at the claims that Bernabò's wife is good at falconry or account-keeping, but rather at the claim that she is chaste. Ambrogiuolo argues that such chastity would go against nature:

[T]u hai poco riguardato alla *natura* delle cose[...]. Io ho sempre inteso l'uomo essere il più nobile animale che tra' mortali fosse creato da Dio, e appresso la femina; ma l'uomo, sí come generalmente si crede e vede per opere, è più perfetto; e avendo più di perfezione, senza alcun fallo dee avere più di fermezza e così ha, per ciò che *universalmente* le femine sono più mobili, e il perché si potrebbe per molte *ragioni naturali* dimostrare [...]. [S]peri tu che una donna, *naturalmente mobile*, possa fare a' prieghi, alle lusinghe, a' doni, a' mille altri modi che userà uno uomo savio che l'ami? [italics mine]

Ambrogiuolo's insistence on the universality of women's sexual suggestibility denies Bernabò's claim of Zinevra's uniqueness. Bernabò counters that a wise woman's concern for honor is stronger than any natural urges she might feel: "io conosco ciò che tu di' potere avvenire alle stolte, nelle quali non è alcuna vergogna; ma quelle che savie sono hanno tanta sollecitudine dello onor loro, che elle diventan forti più che gli uomini, che di ciò non si curano, a guardarlo." In other words, women can become unnatural, that is, manly, in defense of their honor. By describing her many skills and claiming her uniqueness, Bernabò has already begun to suggest that Zinevra is unnatural. Ambrogiuolo counters that "... la vergogna e 'l guastamento dell'onore non consiste se non nelle cose palesi: per che, quando possono occultamente, il fanno, o per mattezza lasciano." He thus argues that such adherence to chastity is "mattezza," that is, outside of natural or normal behavior. So although the two men disagree on the extent of Zinevra's chastity, they agree that the chastity reported by Bernabò is unnatural.

Bernabò challenges Ambrogiuolo to seduce his wife, claiming that she would never concede. After failing to seduce Madonna Zinevra, Ambrogiuolo sneaks into her room, steals a few of her personal belongings, and notices a mole under the breast of the naked, sleeping

³ Guido Almansi writes, "... la vicenda successiva di Sicuran da Finale potrebbe essere considerata come la proiezione fantastica della descrizione di Zinevra come moglie che è donna + uomo, sposa + compagno: la descrizione sarebbe quindi squisitamente indiziale, e non funzionale." "Lettura della novella di Bernabò e Zinevra (II 9)," *Studi sul Boccaccio* 7 (1973): 134. For a detailed reading of Bernabò's speech, see Migiel, 101-04.

woman. He presents these items and his knowledge of the mole as evidence to Bernabò, who, furious, admits defeat. Bernabò returns secretly to Genoa and arranges to have his wife killed for her infidelity. Apparently Zinevra's skills also include rhetoric, for she convinces her would-be executioner to let her go. She dresses as a man and lives in this disguise for six years, after which, according to the rubric of the story, "... ritrova lo 'ngannatore, e Bernabò conduce in Alessandria, dove, lo 'ngannatore punito, ripreso abito femminile, col marito ricchi si tornano a Genova." Zinevra thus becomes, as Bernabò had promised, stronger than a man in defence of her honor, and thus unnatural. In this ultimately conservative tale, Zinevra does nothing to challenge the efficacy of her role as a virtuous wife or the usefulness of a hegemony that would rather see her dead than unchaste.⁴

The gloss Filomena provides at the beginning of her story rejects the merchant's proverb, "quale asin dà in parete tal riceva," according to which men's marital infidelity is matched by that of women. She chooses instead a different moral for her story:

Suolsi tra' volgari spesse volte dire un cotal proverbio: che lo 'ngannatore rimane ai piè dello 'ngannato; il quale non pare che per alcuna ragione si possa mostrare esser vero, se per gli accidenti che avvengono non si mostrasse. E per ciò, seguendo la proposta, questo insieme, carissime donne, esser vero come si dice m'è venuto in talento di dimostrarvi; né vi dovrà esser discaro d'averlo udito, acciò che dagli 'ngannatori guardar vi sappiate.

It is not at all clear what Filomena expects the ladies to learn from her tale. Although Zinevra is the apparent protagonist of the story, Filomena presents Bernabò as the victim of a plot against his wife's chastity, even though the bet was his idea in the first place. The "'ngannato" here is not Zinevra, unjustly accused of adultery and the victim of attempted murder and forced exile, but rather Bernabò, as is indicated by the masculine "ingannato." Bernabò is not punished for his foolishness and cruelty and, although the story praises Zinevra for her chastity, her virtuousness has no part in the moral of the story, which is about the relationship between Bernabò and Ambrogiuolo. What is important to Filomena is that Ambrogiuolo is punished for attempting to seduce a virtuous wife and that Bernabò and the chaste Zinevra are reunited. Indeed, Filomena's moral privileges the punishing of Ambrogiuolo as the key to the happy ending. Bernabò, the one stupid enough to fall into Ambrogiuolo's trap, is not punished, nor are the men of the *brigata*, the ones who conceivably might fall into a similar trap, warned by Filomena's introduction.

⁴ My conclusions regarding Zinevra are the same as those of Migiel, who writes, "But as Pampinea and Filomena tell of the infractions of gender roles, they reaffirm the necessity of those roles and they reaffirm virtues — among them loyalty, chastity, and deference to men — that traditional gender roles help to foster" 84. Also see Daniela Cavallero, who sees in Zinevra "un femminile passivo, fatto di sopportazione e sottomissione al marito ed alle regole sociali del tempo." "Alatiel e Zinevra: Il 'peso' del silenzio, la leggerezza dei 'vestiti,'" *Romance Languages Annual* 9 (1998): 168.

⁵ It seems unlikely that Filomena intends this to be ironic, given the lack of sympathy she shows to women elsewhere in the *Decameron*. For example, her response to Pampinea's initial suggestion that the women leave Florence: "Ricordivi che noi siamo tutte femine, e non ce n'ha niuna si fanciulla, che non possa ben conoscere come le femine sien ragionate insieme e senza la provedenza d'alcuno uomo si sappiano regolare. Noi siamo mobili, riottose, sospettose, pusillanime e paurose: per le quali cose io dubito forte, se noi alcuna altra guida non prendiamo che la nostra, che questa compagnia non si dissolve troppo più tosto e con meno onor di noi che non si bisognerebbe..." (I, *introduzione*).

In his response to Filomena's tale, Dioneo is quick to shift the focus away from Bernabò's revenge against Ambrogiuolo and his (sexual) repossession of Zinevra, and back to the question of women's extra-marital sexual desire:

Belle donne, una parte della novella della reina m'ha fatto mutare consiglio di dirne una, che all'animo m'era, a doverne un'altra dire; e questa è la bestialità di Bernabò, come che bene ne gli avvenisse, a di tutti gli altri che quello si danno a credere che esso di creder mostrava: cioè che essi andando per lo mondo e con questa e con quella ora una volta ora un'altra sollazzandosi, s'imaginano che le donne a casa rimase si tengano le mani a cintola, quasi noi non conosciamo, che tra esse nasciamo e cresciamo e stiamo, di che elle sien vaghe. La qual dicendo, ad un'ora vi mosterrò chente sia la sciocchezza di questi cotali, e quanto ancora sia maggiore quella di coloro li quali, sé piú che *la natura* possenti estimando, si credono quello con dimostrazioni favolose potere che essi non possono; e sforzansi d'altrui recare a quello che essi sono, non patendolo *la natura* di chi è tirato. (II.10) [italics mine]

Aligning himself with Ambrogiuolo, Dioneo insists that men who believe in their wives' fidelity are deluding themselves. In the introduction to her tale, Filomena suggests that actual events support the moral she gives her story ("... il quale non pare che per alcuna ragione si possa mostrare esser vero, se per gli accidenti che avvengono non si mostrasse"), and Dioneo adopts the same strategy to insist that most wives are unfaithful. He bests Filomena, however, by pointing not just to generic happenings, but to the lived experiences of the *brigata* as proof of wives' infidelity.

Dioneo then proceeds to tell the story of Ricciardo da Chinzica, an old lawyer who takes the beautiful young Bartolomea as his wife. He is unable or unwilling to satisfy her sexually, and when Bartolomea is kidnapped by the pirate Paganino da Monaco, who is able and willing, she decides to stay with him despite the entreaties of Ricciardo. Bartolomea tells her husband, "... voi dovevate vedere che io era giovane e fresca e gagliarda, e per conseguente conoscere quello che alle giovani donne, oltre al vestire e al mangiar, bene che elle per vergogna nol dicano, si richiede..." (II.10). Bartolomea thus insists that her husband, in denying her sexual satisfaction, denies her natural desire. She goes as far as to say that she has God himself to thank for her happy union with Paganino: "Sonmi abbattuta a costui, che ha voluto Iddio, sí come pietoso ragguardatore della mia giovinezza." When Bartolomea's husband dies of grief, she marries Paganino. Both Filomena's story and Dioneo's story are tales of women who wind up far away from home and who are eventually invited to return home with their husbands. In a reversal of Filomena's tale, Dioneo's Bartolomea rejects her husband to follow what Dioneo would argue is her natural inclination to sexual pleasure. Dioneo concludes his tale by saying, "Per la qual cosa, donne mie care, mi pare che ser Bernabò disputando con Ambrogiuolo cavalcasse la capra in verso il chino." The women agree: "tutte le donne dissono che Dioneo diceva vero e che Bernabò era stato una bestia." Dioneo's story meets with a much more enthusiastic response ("Questa novella diè tanto che ridere a tutta la compagnia, che niun ve n'era a cui non dolessero le mascelle...") than that of Filomena, which is called simply "bella."

Despite this positive response, Dioneo apparently does not feel that he has criticized Filomena's tale strongly enough, and in his story on the fifth day, he returns to finish the job.

This story begins with Pietro's wife complaining that her husband doesn't have sex with her because he prefers men to women:

Io il presi per marito e diedigli grande e buona dota sappiendo che egli era uomo e credendol vago di quello che sono e deono esser vaghi gli uomini; e se io non avessi creduto ch'è fosse stato uomo, io non lo avrei mai preso. Egli che sapeva che io era femmina, perché per moglie mi prendeva se le femine contro all'animo gli erano?

Pietro's wife feels wronged because although she thought her husband was a man, she has discovered that, according to her definition, he is not. Pietro's wife defines men according to their sexual inclination, and men who do not like women are not men. Dioneo is complicit in the woman's complaint, describing her as an earthy, sexual being who is not getting the satisfaction she needs and deserves: "era una giovane compressa, di pelo rosso, e accesa, la quale due mariti piú tosto che uno avrebbe voluti."⁶

According to the logic of the story, Pietro violates a number of laws. He goes against the law of nature in two things: his refusal to have sex with his robust, beautiful wife, and his predilection for men, described in the rubric as "la sua tristezza." Pietro's homosexual activity also violates ecclesiastical and civil law codes.⁷ Finally, Pietro goes against social laws by accepting his wife's apparently sizeable dowry but neglecting to consummate the marriage. She decides to take a lover, rationalizing, "io offenderò le leggi sole, dove egli offende le leggi e la natura."

Pietro's wife invites her lover to a tryst when Pietro is at a friend's house for dinner. When he returns unexpectedly, his wife hides her lover and asks Pietro why he is home so early. Pietro explains that while he and his friend Ercolano were sitting down to dinner, they heard sneezing, and Ercolano discovered his wife's lover hiding under the stairs. The wife ran away, and Pietro managed to prevent Ercolano from killing her lover, but they never got to their dinner. After hearing this story, Pietro's wife heaps abuse on Ercolano's wife for having betrayed her husband. At that moment, an ass who had broken its tether and gone in search of water steps on Pietro's wife's lover's hand, causing him to cry out, whereupon he is discovered by Pietro. Pietro asks his wife how she could berate Ercolano's wife when she herself was doing the same thing. She replies, "[I]o starei pur bene se tu alla moglie d'Ercolano mi volessi agguagliare, la quale è una vecchia picchiapetto spigolista e ha da lui ciò che ella vuole, e

⁶ Laura Sanguineti White writes, "In Boccaccio la donna è colta con estrema efficacia nella sua giovinezza e solidità fisica. Un aggettivo come *compressa* non solo evoca un corpo sodo e compatto ma anche, proprio per la sua immediata vicinanza a *giovane*, una vitalità giovanile e una potenzialità sessuale nascosta e a mala pena contenuta, resa visualmente da quella notazione coloristica della capigliatura rossa. *Accesa*, di nuovo, descrive un incarnato quanto mai sano ma suggerisce anche, proprio nella sua connotazione di participio passato, la presenza di un fuoco già acceso e ora ardente. La vitalità della donna *compressa* affiora prepotente in quel *rosso* ed esplose nel crescendo coloristico di *accesa*. L'uso di un termine come *pelo* aggiunge un tono istintivo e quasi animalesco a questa vitalità, che due mariti, invece di uno, necessitano per soddisfare." *Apuleio e Boccaccio: Caratteri differenziali nella struttura narrativa del Decameron* (Bologna: Edizioni Italiane Moderne, 1977) 75.

⁷ According to Michael Goodich, the Perugian law code of 1342 "proved that forty men were to be chosen, eight from each of the five quarters of the city, to investigate and denounce sodomites." Goodich also gives a background of the ecclesiastical philosophy of homosexuality. *The Unmentionable Vice: Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period* (Santa Barbara CA: Clio Press, 1979) 82.

tienla cara come si dee tener moglie, il che a me non avviene.” She concludes, “[A]lmeno ti fo io cotanto d’onore, che io non mi pongo né con ragazzi né con tignosi.” According to Pietro’s wife, not all adulterers are to be excused. She is only righting the wrong done to nature through her husband’s neglect, whereas Ercolano’s wife is an indiscriminate adulterer. Like Bartolomea, Pietro’s wife insists that she is deserving of sexual satisfaction and that blame for her infidelity lies with her husband for not treating her as he should.

As in II.10, Dioneo’s female protagonist trades an unsatisfactory husband for a new lover, but Dioneo has something further in mind for Pietro and his wife. Pietro asks his wife to prepare some food, and the three eat supper together. Dioneo concludes his tale by saying, “Dopo la cena, quello che Pietro si divisasse a sodisfacimento di tutti e tre, m’è uscito di mente; so io ben cotanto, che la mattina vegnente infino in su la piazza fu il giovane, non assai certo qual piú stato si fosse la notte o moglie o marito, accompagnato.” Dioneo, instead of punishing the husband of the lusty female protagonist for neglecting his wife, rewards both husband and wife with a night of pleasure. The naturalness or unnaturalness of Pietro’s sexual predilection for men becomes unimportant, as it is he who shows his wife how both her desire and his (not to mention that of the young man) can be satisfied.

A brief consideration of the changes Boccaccio makes to this tale, whose antecedent is found in Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, sheds further light on Dioneo’s surprise ending. In Apuleius’ tale, when the baker (Pietro in Dioneo’s story) finds his wife’s hidden lover, he tells the boy, “... tam venustum tamque pulchellum puellum, sed plane cum uxore mea partiaro tractabo; nec herciscundae familiae sed communi dividundo formula dimicabo, ut sine ulla controversia vel dissensione tribus nobis in uno conveniat lectulo.”⁸ Rather than taking both his wife and the boy to bed, however, the baker locks his wife in one room and takes the boy to bed himself, “cubans gratissima corruptarum nuptiarum vindicta perfruebatur.”⁹ The next day, the baker has the boy beaten and thrown out of the house: “... at ille adulterorum omnium fortissimus insperata potitus salute, tamen nates candidas illas noctu diuque diruptus, maerens profugit.”¹⁰ The baker also drives his wife out of the house, but she, by means of witchcraft, subsequently has him killed. Thus the story ends badly for everyone involved.

In Dioneo’s story, however, the solution jestingly if maliciously proposed by the baker in Apuleius’ tale is actually implemented, and Pietro, his wife, and the boy really do spend the night together, “a sodisfacimento di tutti e tre.” In Apuleius’ tale, the baker takes the boy to his bed for revenge, while in Dioneo’s story, Pietro is only interested in pleasure. Dioneo’s so-

⁸ “... you are such a charming and beautiful wee boy; [...] I shall share you with my wife. I shall not contest ownership so as to partition our estate, but rather seek to divide you between us, so that without any argument or dispute the three of us may agree to share the one bed” (442). All quotations of the Latin text are from *The Golden Ass, Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*, with facing-page English trans. W. Adlington, revised by S. Gaselee (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). Because of the inadequacy of the Adlington-Gaselee translation, I quote the translation of P. G. Nash (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 179.

⁹ “... where he enjoyed the sweetest possible revenge for the damage done to his marriage.” Adlington-Gaselee 444, Nash 179.

¹⁰ “So that stoutest of all adulterers unexpectedly got away in one piece, but his swift departure was painful because those white buttocks of his got a pounding both during the night and by day.” Adlington-Gaselee 444, Nash 179.

lution is not concerned with what the role of a husband or a wife should be. The only law to be obeyed is the law of sexual desire, and in Dioneo's tale, everyone's desire is satisfied. If husband and wife are not reunited conjugally, at least peace reigns in the household where there was formerly strife.

Dioneo concludes his tale with a word to the ladies: "Per che così vi vo' dire, donne mie care, che chi te la fa, fagliele; e se tu non puoi, tienloti a mente fin che tu possa, acciò che quale asin dà in parete tal riceva." Dioneo thus unequivocally links his story to Filomena's tale of Zinevra, embracing, however, the merchant's proverb that Filomena's story denies. Dioneo rejects Zinevra's chastity as absurd and calls for women to seek sexual fulfillment, outside of marriage if necessary. Dioneo's story itself recalls this proverb, as it is the ass, acting on the natural impulse of thirst, that causes Pietro's wife's lover to be discovered, thereby pushing the narrative forward. This reworking of Apuleius' story, together with Dioneo's assessment of it, also recall the theme of revenge so important to Filomena in II.9. In Apuleius' and Filomena's stories, the adulterers are punished.¹¹ Dioneo also suggests a kind of revenge: "... chi te la fa, fagliele." According to Dioneo, however, it is women who should "punish" their husbands for neglecting them by seeking sexual satisfaction outside of marriage. I use scare quotes here to stress that this punishment is carried out less in retribution than in the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

In his second story, Dioneo discounts Filomena's valorization of female chastity and marital fidelity on a number of levels. But in his story on Day V he goes even further, proposing that nature itself becomes irrelevant when it cannot accommodate sexual pleasure. While admitting that Pietro's homosexual proclivities are perhaps not natural, Dioneo does not condemn them. He instead incorporates them into a new order in which the lusty wife and the homosexual husband, characters with seemingly irreconcilable desires, can be brought together. The details of this arrangement are left to the listener to imagine. Dioneo claims memory loss ("quello che Pietro si divisasse a sodisfacimento di tutti e tre, m'è uscito di mente") and the young man from Perugia is dizzy with confusion. Only Pietro and his wife know what really happened, and they're not telling.

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¹¹ As Jonathan Usher points out, Ambrogiuolo's punishment recalls the punishment of another character in *The Golden Ass*: "... si tratta di una punizione per aver violato l'onore matrimoniale. Nel caso di Ambrogiuolo, la dipendenza della pena del passo apuleiano sembra più stretta, soprattutto se si consideri il dettaglio del lungo sfacimento del corpo come obbrobrio pubblico." "Desultorietà' nella novella portante di Madonna Oretta (*Decameron* VI, 1) e altre citazioni apuleiane nel Boccaccio," *Studi sul Boccaccio* 29 (2001): 100.

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