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Paper #2

Frame Story Interpretiaton

Did you read that as interpretation or did you interpret it as the correct word? Did something look off? Depending on how you are reading this, you might have skipped over it or caught it. It really depends on you. In the same way, who you are affects everything you do and how you interpret the world. Boccaccio realizes this and makes a point to tell the reader that the stories of the Decameron can mean different things to different people. He parallels his literary license with that of other professions. “I could not have told them otherwise without totally distorting their form.” pg. 802-803 (Boccaccio) and “moreover, my pen should be granted no less freedom than the brush of a painter…”pg. 803. (Boccaccio) The Decameron is meant for entertainment and Boccaccio doesn’t want readers to misinterpret or reinterpret his work for other purposes. Some of these stories put a bad light on certain people, the story that comes to mind first is the nuns and the gardener, and might color the readers view toward those people. I don’t believe Boccaccio intends any disrespect to any of the characters or people represented in the Decameron. This then leads him to preface all of these stories and give them a context that will at lease remove the blame of preconceptions from Boccaccio.

Literary works for entertainment may not have been very popular when Boccaccio was writing and harsh criticism from creating a work intended for entertainment might be what Boccaccio is expecting. This is why I think he creates a frame story and says he is only retelling these short stories. No one will be able to prove if these 100 stories are his or being written down for posterity. The idea of frame story and retelling / reproducing reminds me of pen names for authors who think they are not suitable to write in certain genres, or more relevant to Boccaccio, authors who wish to avoid criticism or blame. The rebuke of your peers can be detrimental to any professional, if he were alive today, might he simply say these writings are fiction?

Boccaccio still comes up with a convincing argument for anyone trying to look past and interpret the words as something they are not. His conclusion is devoted to curtailing the readers’ misinterpretation. Boccaccio clearly states the who, where, and why of these stories.

I said I was offering this work of mine to idle ladies and to no others; and for those who read to pass the time of day, no tale can be too long if it serves its purpose. pg. 805.

But they were told in gardens, in a place suited for pleasure, in the presence of young people who were, nevertheless, mature and not easily mislead by stories, and at a time when going about with your trousers over your head was not considered improper if it helped to save your life, (pg. 803).

I think he is saying, ‘Is this you? If not then you are reading my book for another purpose’. He even mentions specific uses and misuses of everyday things to parallel the idea of improper use being wicked. “But as they stand, these tales, like all other things, may be harmful or useful depending on who the listener is” (Pg. 803).

He does try very hard in his conclusion to convince the reader that if they take away something, either positive or negative, from his stories they are doing so by their own will. This is also reinforced when we realize that we are a secondary audience. These stories are not intended for our pleasure directly, but for the ten fleeing the Black Death. “the Decameron as a book that designs and contains its own ideal audience and its own interpretive rules…” (Riva). We are on the outside looking in. We are not allowed to interpret firsthand by the fact that these are already first hand recounts told to another who subsequently retold them to Boccaccio. Our interpretations cannot be accurate firstly because we are not hearing the stories firsthand and second we ourselves will have our own personal misinterpretations because of personalities and culture differences. Boccaccio is driving home the point that if readers take anything away besides entertainment from the Decameron, they are going beyond the scope of the texts.

Although Boccaccio speaks directly to his intended audience in the frame story and interacts with them when talking about others who will read his story and find faults with it, I think he is poking fun at the other unintended audience. While he specifically addresses the ladies it feels like he is in a conversation with these ladies and is being interrupted by a rude third party who has over heard all that has been said. So while addressing the ladies he works in retorts for objections the third party raises, “A corrupt mind never understands a word in a healthy way!” (pg.804). If we were present for this conversation, this is where I think Boccaccio would cast a glance at the third party indicating this was specifically intended for them. These idle ladies are not the sort who would understand words in an unhealthy way.

There are, without a doubt, some others among you who will say these stories are too full of nonsense and jokes and that it is not proper for a man of weight and gravity to have written them this way. To them I am obliged to render thanks, and I do so for their zeal and concern for my reputation, (Pg. 804-805).

I find this retort the most enjoyable as it takes what is clearly intended as an insult to Boccaccio, he is full of nonsense and jokes, and turns it into a compliment. In my opinion this sarcasm serves at least two purposes. It is humor for the idle ladies and increases their enjoyment of the Decameron, and it also angers those who are finding faults and causes them to become more emotional and lose sight of being objective in their criticism and lessens the impact it might have on Boccaccio. I don’t think Boccaccio is afraid of criticism but intends to curtail the amount and types he might receive.

His defense is to create a mirror for those looking to ridicule his work. A kind of check yourself at the door or the pot calling the kettle black ploy to put the reader in line and think before they speak. How you have viewed my work has been unique to you and may not be what I intended. Have you seen yourself and understood that you are maybe not the appropriate person for these texts? I would say that his intention would be akin to someone reading a magazine that they have no interest in. They already have preconceptions and negative feelings toward something they view as uninteresting and this affects how they read the magazine, finding fault where ever they can or criticizing minor details that could be overlooked. They focus on their misinterpretation and miss the intention of the whole. He is not saying that the text is perfect, but that a specific audience was intended and if you read this while not being part of the idle ladies audience you are already misinterpreting the Decameron and might possibly be interpreting in a wicked way that would reflect badly on Boccaccio. See your own interpretive lens and understand that it bends my texts in ways that my own lens might not be able to see.

Some might believe the frame story is intended to tell us all about our personal interpretations and is intended to be thought provoking and scholarly or intellectual… I do not agree, it is too specific and clearly directed. The frame is only a few pages that were probably thrown together as a get out of jail free card. The Decameron is intended, as Boccaccio clearly states, for entertainment and not as a scholarly work so why suddenly would the frame or stories be scholarly? It strikes me as a rebuff and serves as additional entertainment, especially the conclusion, for those who have finished reading and are about to digest and discuss the Decameron.

# Bibliography

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