

The female universe in Giovanni Boccaccio's works

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Abstract

This article aims to address the importance of the works of Giovanni Boccaccio as they can be considered as the first attempt in the history of literature to attach importance to the role of women.

The article begins with a brief description of the social context where women, submissive to men and excluded from education and culture, are transformed by Boccaccio into the undisputed protagonists of his novellas. The innovations that Boccaccio's work brings compared to other writers of that period will then be analyzed. The study ends with an analysis of some of the female characters of *Decameron*, the most famous work of this writer that gives special value to the female figure. It is specifically through this work that the woman gains dignity as a character, no longer dependent on man but is independent and unafraid to express her feelings. The Tuscan poet, in addition to revolutionizing the idea of woman, also overturns the hitherto concept of love, paving the way for secular love in all its nuances, which will be reflected in the multiple personalities of Boccaccio's female characters. Through his works, Boccaccio aims to provide them with role models, instructions on how to eliminate melancholy and peacefully enjoy the pleasures of life.

Keywords: female characters, concept of love, medieval court culture, introspective novel, innovation.

Introduction

Feminism, beginning with the Provençal literature of the eleventh century is exalted through courtly love, where the feeling of love has the feminine features and whose virtues the knights strive to reproduce; it is then refined by *Scuola Siciliana* through the concept of sublimation that can be actualized when the male enters a spiritual journey that will make him feel equal to and close to the female; and then continues with "*dolce stil nuovo*" and Dante's oeuvre, where these themes reach an extreme intensity due to the death of the woman and the journey that the man has to take to be at her height. We then come to Giovanni Boccaccio, who presents himself as a writer who undoubtedly adored the female universe in its entirety. With his masterpiece *Decameron* he gives life to an extraordinary gallery of female characters by analyzing all the feelings they can display. The description of women in *Decameron* reaches a previously unexplored level: real women, mothers, daughters, sisters and girlfriends who are placed at the center of their men's lives and at the same time superhero women who act beyond human capabilities, i.e. women who overcome inevitable obstacles and life tests with ingenuity and cunning, but with wisdom too. The ethical problem posed by Boccaccio and reflected in his female characters

is complex as they acknowledge their social dependence and their weakness of character, but are at the same time aware of their strength.

Boccaccio turns Decameron into the land of melancholic women who, thanks to novellas, can be freed from their suffering. He decides to talk about women who are unjustly struck by a fate that locks them in their rooms and thoughts, unlike men who are free to do what they want. It is inspiring to see how a writer of the medieval period displays such an ability and vision to address the issue of comparing the world of women and men so clearly and without prejudice. What is most impressive is the clarity with which the writer describes the lifestyle of women, isolated in a world of expectations and loneliness, completely different from that of men, characterized by action such as hunting, work, play.

As it usually happens, it is love that changes things. The men described by Boccaccio are not always at the height of the love challenges required of them, as women display a skill that men not only cannot achieve in this area, but cannot even imagine it. Some of the female characters display virtues such as sensitivity, cunning and courage that we do not always encounter in male characters.

The concept of the female figure in Boccaccio

In Giovanni Boccaccio's work, his interest in the world of women is undeniable. His most famous work Decameron is a dedication to women. The work is dedicated to them in particular as, unlike men engaged in hunting, fighting and activities of various kinds, they had to spend most of their time at home. Decameron will also help women deal with emotional issues through novellas that provide an example to imitate or avoid, and most novels have female protagonists. The greatest merit that Boccaccio should be recognized is that through the narrative structure of the work "Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta", which can be considered as the first psychological novel of Italian literature, it treats for the first time the thoughts and feelings of a female character as the whole event focuses on her inner world. Boccaccio speaks in the first person with Fiammetta's voice and addresses a female audience, asking for their mercy and understanding, as he is aware of the fact that he would be ridiculed by men.

It is the first time that another writer after Ovid writes from the point of view of a woman. Although Boccaccio refers considerably to medieval court culture, he comes out of the *stil nuovo* schemes and his female characters are not only passive object of male love but characters who act according to their will and feelings. Fiammetta is an earthly figure who does not aspire to salvation in Paradise but rather chooses earthly fame beyond moral or religious scruples. In this way, she becomes the subject, not the object of love, and this is a great innovation compared to the previous literary tradition. Boccaccio also aims to combat sexual discrimination by highlighting that women are able to betray just like men.

Differences with Dante and Petrarch

Three writers who made the women they loved famous. In the Divine Comedy, Beatrice goes through a process that transforms her into a celestial being. Petrarch,

like Dante, thinks that his woman is an angel and when he sees her he feels as if he is in heaven, not on Earth. Laura is an ideal and perfect woman who, with her love, leads you to God. Meanwhile, Boccaccio's Fiammetta no longer represents the female object of spiritual love inherited from the stil nuovo, but is an active figure with a high level of sensitivity.

The main difference between Dante and Boccaccio is the theoretical and celestial concept of love in antithesis to Boccaccio's practical concept. According to Dante, woman was the only mediator between man and God. In almost all of his works, the female is presented as an almost celestial being, as if she were an angel.

In contrast, Boccaccio's vision is quite the opposite. To him, woman is not an angel, like to Dante, but it is simply a human being. Moreover, love is no longer conceived as something theoretical but turns into a human and earthly feeling, more physical than spiritual, which can bring a lot of happiness but also disappointment, suffering, jealousy and hatred.

In addition to not being considered an angel, woman is the sole protagonist for Boccaccio. The dedication of his masterpiece, the words he addresses women whenever the author intervenes in the first person, the role of the protagonist they take in many of his novels, are all elements that point to Boccaccio's historical and social evolution of women.

His characters are no longer shadows and reflections of the passion of men but women facing their feelings, which is not the case with the other two writers. In Dante, women are never protagonists but superior beings to men, who can only reach God through women.

In his oeuvre, Boccaccio identifies in women the audience of his works. At the moment he chooses the female audience as the ideal audience due to a series of limitations that come from their role in society, they are more attentive and experience the feeling of love more intensely. The moment Boccaccio chooses women as his ideal audience to whom his works are addressed, he enters into controversy with Dante, as this audience is composed of women who are not content with simply housework and a quiet life, but live in a fantastic and creative dimension without suppressing their imagination.

With his work arises another concept of love that is no longer considered a sin but a completely legitimate instinct. The female characters of Boccaccio, from this point of view, can then be regarded as an inversion of the figure of Beatrice, representing a spiritual and sublimated conception of love.

Despite the differences between them, these three writers managed, through their works, to change the concept of female figures who after a long time of submission succeeded in occupying a worthy position that belongs to them in society. Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, managed to understand the greatness of the female figure and each of them, in their own way, gave their contribution to present her as worthy of being loved, respected and appreciated.

Female characters in Decameron

Boccaccio's work can be considered as the first attempt in the history of literature to

attach importance to the role of women. As a consequence, in *Decameron*, the most important work of this author, one of the main themes is that which has to do with the female figure and the concept of love.

Boccaccio's *Decameron*, besides being one of the most famous and important works of fourteenth century European literature, is a homage to women and an interesting parade of female typologies.

The female characters described by Boccaccio through the words of young people who are entertained by telling the novellas summarized in this book carry the features of the period in which the author lived, but are already projected towards a more modern image.

Decameron's gallery of female characters consists of figures through which Boccaccio can present all possible ways of being female, from the most negative to the most positive and magnificent. Within these boundaries, Boccaccio manages to convey to us all possible nuances.

In the novellas of this book, which are narrated over ten days by a group of young people, seven women and three men, who leave Florence due to the plague, it is observed that Boccaccio has managed to present different characters and personalities without neglecting anything. The female characters described by him are cunning, non-devilish, virtuous, vicious, smart, devoted, loyal, and unfaithful.

Thus, a very diverse gallery, but what matters most is the vitality that these very well described characters bring. Many of these stories reveal a view of being female that transcends not only the limitations of that period, but also most of the following centuries.

Certainly, we do not find rebellion in these characters. Where could a woman who would break the rules set by society go? One can speak of a kind of resistance in order to find some areas of independence and pleasure, but without being able to escape reality.

Despite their variety, the female characters in *Decameron's* novellas can be grouped into four categories: submissive, disobedient, intelligent, and heroic women.

They are a fantastic projection of the author, who loved women in all their numerous nuances. The Marquess of Monferrato or Madonna Oretta represent the ideal of an independent and true woman that even a king fails to subdue. It is likely that Boccaccio did not describe reality through these characters but imagined it in a whole new way and perhaps, from some points of view, ideally. From the fantasy of a writer who grew up without his mother, it was created the idea of a femininity with extraordinary virtues but also with a great sensual, positive and energetic load that contradicts the literary tradition so far, where sensuality was always guilty and diabolical. This description corresponds to the historical reality of women's living conditions.

Ghismonda is probably the most accomplished female figure of Boccaccio's work. Beautiful and intelligent, strong and passionate, protagonist that is conscious of her story. Ghismonda also talks about equality between women and men when it comes to passions. Thus, in a way, Boccaccio relies on her for description of his ideology of love.

Boccaccio, through his description of Ghismonda, but in general of all his female

characters, goes beyond the concept of love and the woman brought about by court literature, especially *dolce stil nuovo*.

Boccaccio's female characters are no longer celestial females like Dante's, and he no longer employs the binomial "love - courtyard". Unlike the previous female characters of past literature who seem to seek justification for their passion according to the rules of *stil nuovo* poetry, Boccaccio's characters proudly accept their choices while defending their feelings and underlining their dignity. Ghismonda's novella, which Boccaccio has not unintentionally placed in a feudal courtyard, i.e. in the typical environment of courtly love, reveals the crisis of this world and precedes the secular ideals of humanism.

Conclusions

Although *dolce stil nuovo* poets had placed female figures at the center of their work as never before, it cannot be denied that Boccaccio was innovative in this respect as well, as he not only wrote the first introspective novel from the point of view of a female character, not only did he dedicate to women, as his audience, his masterpiece *Decameron*, but he is also the first writer to provide a summary of prominent women *De mulieribus claris*, through which he gives exemplary dignity to female figures unrelated to Christian history.

The female figure has been around for a long time and probably still continues to be a victim of a masculine society. It took millennia before this mentality changed and without a doubt one of the main initiators of the beginning of this change is the writer Giovanni Boccaccio.

The writer of the 1300^s overturned the concept of woman and the position she held as submissive to men, excluded from education and culture, and did this through the power of his novellas, which if had been written only a few decades before, would have led him to be one among those accused of heresy.

Boccaccio's female characters are not shy about their feelings and even more so they are not afraid to express them. They are liberated from the absurd social convictions typical of chivalric literature, according to which men should try and show interest while women should simply be the object of this interest. Although in Boccaccio the ideal of court literature for women which considers them as divine and unattainable, the object of any *courtesy* on the part of men, coexists with the bourgeoisie's one, which is more concerned with the materialization of feelings, the woman is no longer the object of desire, but the subject who desires, free to have an interest in a male and to display it, and is appreciated not only for her outward beauty but especially for her intelligence.

Although the vision that Boccaccio brings about the woman implies that she can express her feelings and have courage, the revolutionary force of the writer's ideas was limited to the erotic point of view. Women suffer from love and are locked in the house prison from where they can escape only through imagination. In conclusion, we can assert that Boccaccio, the writer who understood women, is one of the few authors able to analyze the human being in its entirety.

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