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**Prue Shaw, Fictions for future leaders**

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Five Frames for the Decameron: Communication and Social Systems in the Cornice

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The relationship between the one hundred tales told in the *Decameron* and the *cornice* or frame-story which surrounds them – the story of the story-telling itself – constitutes one of the enduring conundrums of literary history. Ten aristocratic young Florentines (seven women, three men) abandon their plague-ravaged city and withdraw to a secluded and idyllic country retreat, where they entertain one another by recounting a story apiece on each of ten days. The contrast between the world of the story-telling and the world of the tales is absolute. The group of story-tellers is homogeneous (they are all young, of noble birth, and scarcely characterised as individuals); their daily routine is repetitive, patterned, collaborative (a procedure is established in which each in turn is king or queen for a day and rules the others); their behaviour is utterly decorous. The world of the stories, by contrast, seems to have the richness and variety, the conflict and unpredictability, of life itself. The plots frequently turn on the outwitting of an adversary; the characters are drawn from all social classes; their conduct is rarely decorous, many of the tales being concerned with illicit sexual relationships or the shortcomings of those in religious orders. What is the reader to make of the juxtaposition of these two worlds?

Some critics limit the significance of the *cornice* to an extrinsic, architectonic function – it imposes the pattern of ten groups of ten – dismissing it as an exercise in the outworn courts-of-love convention, and locating Boccaccio's true energy and originality in the tales; most, however, see the juxtaposition as significant and bearing on the question of the meaning of the book, or at least the meaning Boccaccio intended it to have for his readers. Certainly the pairs of terms which tend to recur in this context – ideal vs. real, order vs. chaos, aristocratic-feudal vs. bourgeois-mercantile, medieval vs. humanist – suggest not only the profundity of the abyss which separates the two worlds, but also the purposefulness of the juxtaposition, which must inevitably raise questions in the reader's mind about behaviour, codes of conduct, man's role as a social being.

Professor Potter, in this interesting new study, sees the *Decameron* as a profoundly serious work, whose seriousness can be defined precisely in terms of the interplay between *cornice* and tales. The book, she argues, is educative in the broadest sense, its aim being social and political. Those to be educated are, firstly, the story-tellers themselves; ultimately, through them, Boccaccio's readers. The story-tellers are a privileged elite, future leaders of a society in a state of transition and crisis. Their retreat from the world is, in anthropological terms, a "liminal"

experience, a ritual preparation for future responsibilities, in which the story-telling is the learning experience, the stories themselves the “learning content”. A skeleton plot of the book might run “a visitation by God that precipitates a ritual in which the elite of society are taught the enduring values of their world”.

The anthropological model enables Professor Potter to characterise the book’s seriousness, while accounting for all its component parts: if Boccaccio’s claim that the tales are meant as harmless entertainment to while away the idle hours of lovesick ladies were true, there would be no need for the *cornice*, nor for the long and graphic description of the Black Death in Florence in 1348 and the breakdown of social order in the city which followed the plague. The ambiguity created by the author’s mock-modest statement of intent is a deliberate strategy to protect the subversiveness of his message.

Both the essential seriousness and the deliberate ambiguity of the *Decameron* are further analysed by Professor Potter using concepts and terminology borrowed from semiotics and frame-theory. The five frames of her title refer to the layered construction of the text, which can be represented geometrically as a series of concentric circles: at the centre, the world of the stories; surrounding it, that of the *cornice*; then that of the plague; then that of the ladies for whom Boccaccio claims to be writing; finally, the outermost shell, the world of Boccaccio’s book and its readers. By a constant play of “frame-shifts” and “frame-breaks”, that is by deliberately slipping from one frame to another, Boccaccio disorients the reader, sustaining ambiguity about the frivolity or seriousness of his intentions. At the same time the framing points to the value, the importance, of what is framed: the stories occupy the privileged position at the centre and carry the full weight of what Boccaccio wants to communicate.

Seriousness masquerading as frivolity is not a difficult concept to grasp, and perhaps does not require the painstakingly thorough demonstration that Professor Potter provides. If the intention is serious, as she claims, what is it that the story-tellers learn?

Her answer is so generic as to be almost empty of content: “Boccaccio set out to teach his ten protagonists a good set of values that would enable them to preserve the old virtues and also to function effectively as leaders in their world”. But what values? The difficulty is not so much that different stories reflect conflicting values – conflict can be instructive – but that it is notoriously difficult to pinpoint the “values” even single stories embody or celebrate. Does Boccaccio admire or condemn the nimble-witted but scandalous behaviour of his engagingly self-serving friars? At what point does tolerance become complicity? What “value” is being exhibited in the story of Alibech, the young girl who goes off into the desert alone in order to serve God, meets a monk who teaches her to “put the devil in hell”, and develops such a taste for this new religious exercise that she exhausts her mentor who views her

eventual return to civilisation with considerable relief? (Strangely, Professor Potter says nothing of this outrageously funny story, but if her thesis is correct it surely becomes a key text, being the only tale which parallels and parodies the *cornice* itself: the only story in the collection about a retreat, a “learning” experience, and a return to the world, although the “learning content” has become not discourse – stories – but sex.)

In fact, although Professor Potter spends a whole chapter analysing Boccaccio’s “desacralisation” of the church as a social institution – and here the anthropological terminology adds little or nothing to what common sense suggests – she offers no comment about the many stories explicitly concerned with the fulfilment of sexual passion (yet here surely is where the true subversiveness of the book lies). If these are the raw materials of instruction, just what is being learned? Again the blandness of the formulation is disconcertingly inadequate: “The ten future leaders of a regenerated society must learn to understand the passions that form part of everyday living and to give both reality and the ideal its due. As the incredibly rich gamut of the stories shows, they must also learn to control their desires when it is necessary for the greater good of society.”

One unguarded remark of a more specific kind – to the effect that equality of the sexes “is not part of the values they are to learn” – enables us to pinpoint another difficulty. If the learning experience is the centre of the book’s meaning, then the reactions of the listeners to the various stories becomes crucial: but these are never much more than perfunctory, and often seem to contrast with the spirit in which the story itself has been told. One of the ladies expresses at some length the traditional misogynist view of women’s natural inferiority to men; yet both *cornice* and stories, in very different ways but with equal insistence, seem to assert the opposite. The most striking of all contrasts between the story-tellers and their characters is that the story-tellers, although each of them loves or is loved, are without exception chaste, while in the tales the characters who have amorous urges almost invariably find sexual fulfilment; yet the most striking *parallel* between *cornice* and tales is precisely that in both of them men and women are shown to be equals: absolute social and intellectual equals in the highly stylised and artificial world of the story-telling, absolute equals in human dignity and in their sexual natures in the tales. Set against this powerfully and repeatedly reinforced message, the conventional declaration of women’s inferiority seems merely a token gesture. If the educational model requires that we “privilege” what the story-tellers say, as Professor Potter does in this instance, then it imposes a naively one-dimensional reading on the rich ambiguity of the text; but in fact there seems to be an unresolved logical contradiction here, for Professor Potter herself insists that the stories themselves carry the message.

The appeal of Professor Potter’s model is that it does justice to our sense that the *Decameron* is more than just a glorious romp, and that its claim to seriousness is in some sense, however difficult to define, ethical as

well as artistic. That the book forces its readers to examine their values can be confirmed by anyone who has ever had the experience of discussing it with undergraduates: in all the Italian literary canon it is perhaps the text which most effectively compels this kind of scrutiny. But to impose the educational model too rigidly raises more problems than it solves. Professor Potter surely overstates her case when she concludes that a book condemned for many generations as obscene is in reality offering its readers a “training for leadership and responsible civic behaviour on the upper levels of society.”