

Book Review: Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance by Guido Ruggiero

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Ruggiero, Guido. *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 306 pages. Hardcover, \$49.95.

Guido Ruggiero, in his most recent entry into the cultural history of the Renaissance, offers a retelling of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, situating the one hundred tales in their historical setting and in a historiographical context in no small measure shaped by Ruggiero's own work on the intersection of power, sexuality, marriage, and love. In doing so, he "marries the interests of the literary critic" with those of the historian, re-reading the masterpiece and imagining how it was "heard in its day and how it might be heard anew today from a historical perspective" (p.3-4). Ruggiero once again approaches a familiar literary text, as he did in his *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Love in the Italian Renaissance*, employing the methods of *microstoria*, or microhistory, to center the history of love and sex in the urban culture of the Italian fourteenth century. Ruggiero again argues that, in the *Decameron* "we jump into a different world and culture" where "love, sexual desire, and their associated feelings were imagined in ways often strange to the modern eye"(p. 29). Yet, the fourteenth-century Italy he richly describes represents a critical and complex transitional moment in the history of the civilization of manners, and in the expression of feelings and passion.

In his approach to the *Decameron*, Ruggiero enriches traditional literary studies of the text, making this work an invaluable complement to literature scholars. Ruggiero asks readers to approach the *Decameron* as listeners to Boccaccio's tales must have done in the fourteenth century, encouraging readers to imagine themselves as Calandrino in the ninth day, fifth novella. In this tale, the Florentine artisan falls in love with Niccolosa, the wife of the son of a gentleman, leading to his public shaming. In asking readers to view the text through the eyes of fourteenth-century Florentines, Ruggiero encourages readers to see love, sex, laughter, sadness and violence

as culturally constructed rather than as psychological or neurological responses common to all humans.

To guide readers through the *Decameron*, Ruggiero divides the tales into stories that evoked laughter and sorrow, others that illustrated the violence associated with sex and love, or that captured the transcendence made possible by sexual pleasure, and finally, stories that served as “mirrors for princes,” encouraging a new ideal of lordship. Each chapter retells and reconsiders these stories, in search of the specific cultural resonances which would have evoked in Boccaccio’s readers their laughter or sadness, or their feelings of disgust or horror, but which alternately provide for Ruggiero’s readers a sense of the tensions and conflicts of Renaissance Italy and the meanings of these emotions in a very different time, place and culture.

In support of his sense of the centrality of fourteenth-century urban culture in the history of love, sex, and marriage, Ruggiero persuasively demonstrates how in Boccaccio’s Florence, *virtù* and *virtù*-ousness, the values of a newer urban elite (the *popolo grosso*), challenged the honor culture of the medieval landed nobility and featured in novel approaches to love, sex, and marriage. The latter emphasized blood, honor, warfare, and rural ideals, while the former valued reason, self-mastery, cleverness, cunning, and foresightedness. Many of the tales of the *Decameron*, like that of the unfortunate Calandrino, evoke these social tensions, and demonstrate how the resolution of these tensions had lasting consequences on later conceptualizations of love, sex, and marriage.

Ruggiero’s analysis of Renaissance Florentines’ preoccupation with the changing meanings of *virtù*, entangles Ruggiero in a historiographical debate involving “how behaviors, especially those involving love and sex, contributed to and revealed a sense of identity at the

time.”(p. 23) Following Foucault, many scholars have argued that modern understandings of an internalized sense of identity, situated in sexual and other identities, were products of nineteenth-century scientific and social scientific disciplines. Ruggiero, however, in re-reading the stories of the *Decameron*, illustrates how, what he called “consensus realities” or understandings shared within the varied social groups in which Renaissance Italians found themselves, shaped individual identities, even as these perhaps differed from the ways in which individuality is often understood in modern western cultures.

Ruggiero also asks readers to reconsider stories that have been largely seen as critiques of the sexual morality of the period. For example, the stories of the third day, which Ruggiero turns to in a chapter entitled “Transcendence,” are predominantly stories of adulterous sexual relationships and sexual encounters with people in holy orders sworn to vows of chastity. Ruggiero argues that these “stories are too funny, the characters too positive, the punishments for their behavior virtually nonexistent” (p. 124) to reflect a negative judgment by Boccaccio. Ruggiero reads these tales through the lens of eschatological theories of the time that perceived the imminence of a new age of the Holy Spirit, an end to the dispensation of a wrathful God and the coupling of sexual intercourse and the fall from Grace. In this, like his other insightful readings of the *Decameron*’s tales, Ruggiero offers readers a cultural framework informed by his extensive work in the Italian archives and his familiarity with the social and intellectual context in which Boccaccio’s *Decameron* was written. In re-reading this text through the lens of fourteenth-century Florentine citizens, Ruggiero engages twenty-first century readers in tales about people, things, and practices that are at once familiar, and which we might be tempted to “fly by” without recognition of the degree to which they worked quite differently in Renaissance

Italy. At the same time, Ruggiero, in this exemplar of *microstoria*, demonstrates the prominent place in the history of modern notions of love, sex, marriage, and power of the Italian Renaissance.

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