

A WOMAN AS SAVIOR: ALIBECH AND THE LAST AGE  
OF THE FLESH IN BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON

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**ABSTRACT**

*Looking more closely at the clever metaphors in Boccaccio's Tenth Story of the Third Day of the Decameron, especially "putting the Devil back in Hell" and "the resurrection of the flesh," this essay playfully suggests a rethinking of the novella from a theological perspective that makes the female character Alibech a female savior and initiator of a new last age in the service of a playful, happy and loving God as promised in the Book of Revelations.*

*Key words: Boccaccio, Decameron, sex, love, God, female savior, the Last Age, Garden of Eden, the Fall, Eve, resurrection*

LA DONNA SALVATRICE: ALIBECH E LA ULTIMA ETÀ DELLA CARNE  
NEL DECAMERONE DI BOCCACCIO

**SINTESI**

*L'articolo considera più da vicino le brillanti metafore che Boccaccio utilizza nel Decamerone (decima novella della terza giornata), in particolare "il rimettere il diavolo in inferno" e "la resurrezione della carne". Si suggerisce una rilettura in una prospettiva teologica, secondo la quale il personaggio femminile di Alibech viene dipinto come la donna salvatrice ed iniziatrice di una nuova ultima età, al servizio di un Dio scherzoso, felice ed amorevole, come promesso nel Libro delle Rivelazioni.*

*Parole chiave: Boccaccio, Decamerone, sesso, amore, Dio, donna salvatrice, terza età, Il giardino dell'Eden, la Caduta, Eva, resurrezione*

"Looking at that garden, its beautiful order, its plants and fountain with the little streams that flowed from it, so pleased each of the young women and the three young men that they all began to proclaim that if paradise was to be created on earth they could not imagine it taking a different form [...]" (Boccaccio, 1952, 187).<sup>1</sup>

After the second day of tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it is often forgotten that the queen appointed to rule the third day, Neifile, actually stops the daily round of ten tales that the group of youths escaping from the trials of the plague in Florence had organized for two days of rest and reflection on the sufferings of Christ on the Cross (on Friday) and the Virgin Mary (on Saturday); and only on Sunday did the new queen rule over a day of tales about people who gained by the dint of great labor what they desired. But suggestively Neifile that day also moved the gathering of youthful story-tellers to a new glowingly described garden which for its peace and beauty was deemed by all to be virtually a paradise on earth. There, not only was nature in perfect harmony, but wild animals lived peacefully together with each other and even the air was perfumed with the odor of flowers and fruits – it seemed almost as if that Sunday Neifile had returned her charges to the earthly paradise, the Garden of Eden. And in a way that was fitting for a woman whose name, Neifile, evoked youthful love or even the love of a new love, for the original Garden of Eden was also a place of love: the first love of God where God's creatures in God's perfect order existed in perfect loving harmony with Him.

Yet for all its Eden-like echoes and for all Neifile's positive qualities as a youthful lover and lover of love – revealed throughout the *Decameron* – the stories told during her day seem at variance with the apparently deeply religious symbolism of that opening scene, as commentators have often noted. In fact, the day starts out quite badly for things religious with the famous tale of the wood cutter, Masetto da Lamporecchio, who pretending to be mute managed to seduce all the nuns of the convent he served including the abbess; father a number of "nunlettes"; and after he reached a ripe old age when he was no longer capable of serving his mistresses, he retired to live happily ever after. And the tale ended with, Filostrato, the irreverent narrator concluding that "this was the way that Christ repaid one who gave him horns" (Ruggiero, 2007, 194).<sup>2</sup> With that witty comment Boccaccio seemed to go beyond the anticlericalism that is a theme of the *Decameron* to evoke a deeper apparently blasphemous humor at the expense of Christ himself – one might even wonder if this was supposed to be the result of the group's Friday reflections on Christ called for by Neifile!

1 This essay is a further exploration of a reading first suggested in my *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Ruggiero, 2007, 50–53, 59–65) portions of which are repeated here with permission of the press. All translations are mine.

2 The humorous blasphemy of this comment turns on the fact that nuns were seen in the renaissance (as today) as the brides of Christ; thus sexual relations with them were seen as adultery where the wronged spouse was Christ (and thus his horns). For this vision of sexual intercourse with nuns, see: Ruggiero, 1985, 70–88.

Anticlericalism has perhaps its most virulent moment, however, in the little discussed Seventh Tale of the day when Emilia interrupted her story of the ultimately successful adulterous love of Teldaldo for Ermellina wife of Aldobrandino Palermini to present a long diatribe against Friars and their corruption. There is hardly a crime that they did not commit according to her indictment and most negatively of all they interfered with young love (which was natural and good) often to pursue their own sexual desires which were frequently self-serving and hypocritical (Boccaccio, 1952, 234–237).<sup>3</sup> A lighter tone returns in the Eight Tale of the day when the jealous and credulous husband, Ferondo – drugged and believed to be dead – was sent to a simulated Purgatory by an abbot to suffer for his sins while his wife and the abbot enjoy a "fruitful" adulterous relationship. When the husband was finally "resurrected," he had learned his lesson and treated his wife with respect and without jealousy, as his beatings in the abbot's pseudo-Purgatory had taught him was just; his reformed ways were rewarded by his wife's and his abbot's continued adulterous sexual pleasures at his expense (Boccaccio, 1952, 256).<sup>4</sup>

But tellingly for a day that starts out with such religious symbolism only to then focus on clerical corruption and blasphemy, the declared theme of Neifile – gaining something much desired by dint of great labor – success in every tale is marked by gaining a sexual relationship, often a very questionable one at that. In fact, the sexual relationships gained are in eight of ten cases adulterous and in four cases with people in holy orders bound by a vow of chastity. This apparent contradiction at a deep level has led some commentators to argue that the stories of the Third Day are actually meant to be read as an indictment by Boccaccio of the sexual immorality of his times. Yet the stories told are too funny, the characters too positive, the punishments for their behavior virtually non-existent and Boccaccio's evident sympathy for young love, young lovers and the "small", "natural" sins of their sexual desires too pervasive to make convincing even the most brilliant attempts to make the day and Boccaccio's vision a negative one.

Nicely, the last tale of the day suggests a different way to view the day that might allow readers and Boccaccio to have both their sex and religion, both the pleasures of the flesh and the pleasures of the spirit, both sin and salvation. For one of the most intriguing and enjoyable literary scenes of sexual play and pleasure from the renaissance is found in the famous tale of Rustico and Alibech told by the ever-irreverent Dioneo, the narrator who seems to be always pushing the sexual edge of the stories in

3 "Once friars were most holy and excellent, but today those who are called friars or wish to be so called, have nothing more of a friar than the hood [...]" (Boccaccio, 1952, 284).

4 Perhaps even more noted is the Fourth Tale of the day where Puccio, a credulous religious enthusiast, is convinced by a Friar to do penance through the night saying prayers outside his bedroom while the Friar and Puccio's wife enjoy themselves in his bed. Her famous quip "You have [...] Puccio do penance and because of that we gain paradise" again has the ring of blasphemy, albeit playful blasphemy.

that tenth tale. In Dioneo's narrative sexual pleasure and the Devil come together in the hard small bed of the Christian desert hermit Rustico; a bed which suddenly blossoms with bliss when he shares it with a naive young pagan Alibech in the name of showing her how to serve the Christian God in a rather original manner.

Dioneo begins his story pointing out that although love's pleasures are well suited to the soft beds, the luxury of palaces and the riches of an aristocratic life, love is by no means limited to such ambiances. For love's power is so great he claims that it is felt even in "the deep forests, the frozen Alps and desert caverns" (Boccaccio, 1952, 265–266). To exemplify the truth of this assertion he turns to the case of the "young", "beautiful", "courteous" and "rich" pagan Alibech, an innocent girl of about fourteen who lived in the city of Gafsa in Tunisia. Youth, beauty, courtesy and wealth, of course, were necessary to make this love story important for his renaissance listeners, but a certain innocence was necessary as well to make Alibech more than a mere attractive and humorous victim/beneficiary of the tale. This Alibech had decided with youthful enthusiasm that she wanted to serve the Christian God inspired by the highly positive things she had heard about such service from the Christians of her city. When she pressed these Christians about how to serve Him she was told that he was best served by those who eschewed the distractions of this world and retired to the solitude of the desert to live as hermits.

As a result she fled the comforts of her home and her father's riches and journeyed to the nearby desert in search of the pleasures of serving the Christian God. Fortunately, although she suffered "great fatigue" traveling alone she didn't lose her desire or her way and after a few days wandering in the desert, she came upon a holy man at the door of his poor hut. Amazed to find such a young and beautiful girl there alone, he asked her what she was doing and she explained that she had come to the desert to learn how to serve the Christian God. Suitably impressed, but fearing the temptation of the Devil, he provided her with the meager hospitality of his hovel, a quick meal of "roots of herbs, wild melons, dates and water;" then sped her on her way, suggesting that she find another hermit more capable of teaching her how to serve God and although he did not admit it less tempted by her beauty and the Devil (Boccaccio, 1952, 266). But the next hermit she found presumably troubled by similar concerns about her youthful beauty and his own Devils sent her on her way to yet another. Dioneo's tale might well have ended there with Alibech wandering the desert unable to find a hermit to help her serve the Christian God – a humorous comment on the problems that even desert hermits had resisting sexual temptation that would have fit in well with the anti-clerical tone of many of Boccaccio's tales. But the tales of the Third Day were ones where people found what they were seeking by dint of their efforts; so Alibech was destined to find what she sought, yet humorously not quite as she or Dioneo's audience might have imagined at first.

Finally, she discovered a desert hermit who was willing to take her in, one Rustico, "young, quite holy and good." Alibech's dangerous beauty was not lost on him either, "but unlike the others in order to make a great trial of his *prowess* he did not send her away [...] but kept her with him in his cell" (Boccaccio, 1952, 266). Of course, true to Boccaccio's and Dioneo's humor, poor Rustico's "prowess" in self-denial failed almost immediately to be followed rather quickly by a failure of his sexual prowess as well, but nicely his failures manifested themselves in a quite original way that made his fall particularly laughable. But that is getting ahead of the story. First with oblique questions he confirmed his suspicion that this young girl was as innocent as she seemed and knew nothing about sexual intercourse; and thus he decided that "she ought to give him his pleasures, under the pretense of serving God" (Boccaccio, 1952, 267). He began his conquest, then, with a short sermon on how the Devil was the enemy of the Christian God and how the best service to God was to help Him put the Devil back in Hell where God had damned him.

Quickly taking the bait Alibech enthusiastically asked how one could provide this aid to God. And, of course, Rustico, more than willing to be her guide, instructed her to begin by undressing as he did so. Naked and unwittingly returned to the original prelapsarian state of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, "Rustico more than ever burning with desire now that he saw her so beautiful experienced *the resurrection of the flesh*." Alibech, seeing his "resurrection" asked in her innocence the obvious question, "What is that thing that I see sticking out in front of you that I don't have." "Oh my dear child" Rustico replied with perfect guile, but also with a ring of everyday poetic truth, "this is the Devil about which I was telling you just now. And do you see that now he is giving me great tribulations, so much that I can hardly stand it." Without the slightest trace of pre-Freudian penis envy, Alibech exclaimed, "Oh thank God, for I see that I am better off than you for I don't have that Devil myself" (Boccaccio, 1952, 267) But Rustico was ready to spring his neat little theological/sexual trap, pointing out that while she did not have the Devil she had the other part of the holy equation, Hell: "You have Hell and I say that I believe that God sent you here for the good of my soul, given that this Devil gives me so much pain. For if you were willing to take pity on me and let me put my Devil back in your Hell, you would give me the greatest consolation and at the same time give God the greatest service and pleasure" (Boccaccio, 1952, 268).

Thus it was that Alibech learned to her great pleasure how to serve the Christian God and put the Devil back in Hell. At first, given her lack of experience and renaissance assumptions about sex, she found Rustico's Devil rather demanding and rather painful as a Devil returning to Hell might have been expected to be. But Rustico assured her with his male self-confidence, perhaps augmented by the fact that he was a fiction in a happy tale where the pleasure of sex was bound to succeed, that "the Devil will not always be so [painful and demanding]." And that indeed was the case,

for young Alibech was assiduous in her service to God and "it came to pass that their play began to give her *pleasure* [italics mine]" (Boccaccio, 1952, 268). The perfectly innocent Alibech believed that she was serving God, not as a duty, not as something demanding, but rather as a pleasure, the ultimate pleasure. In fact, she was totally converted to serving the Christian God confessing: "I see clearly the truth of what those good men told me in Gafsa, that serving God is such a sweet thing: certainly I don't know of any other thing that I have ever done that gives me so much *pleasure* [italics mine] as putting the Devil back in Hell" (Boccaccio, 1952, 268). For Alibech putting the Devil back in Hell was the ultimate pleasure and with a humorous reversal of formal orthodoxy it was so because it was the ultimate human way of serving God as well.

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But if we follow Boccaccio and Dioneo's lead and approach this tale of pleasure in the desert hovel of Rustico with a similar playful and irreverent attitude I would like to suggest that not so much lurking behind it as perhaps smiling behind it we may find a number of playfully serious ways of rethinking Christianity itself true to Dioneo's character if not true to Boccaccio's; ways that transform the innocent Alibech from the dupe of Rustico to an innocent Christ-like savior. The first suggestion of this is to be found in the charming and clever, but clearly blasphemous metaphors that underlay the humor of Boccaccio's prose. Naming what we would call today heterosexual intercourse as "putting the Devil back in Hell" as noted in the tale itself was a reference to a contemporary euphemism for sex (Boccaccio, 1952, 270).<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, for all its humor as it is used in Dioneo's story, it equates sexual intercourse explicitly with one of the central meta-historical goals of God: confining the fallen angel Lucifer to Hell. And this metaphor does so in a way that has deep and potentially dangerous resonances with many of the most traditional theological concerns about the dangers of sex, even if it does so in an apparently humorous and lighthearted manner.

For the Devil himself was often portrayed as highly phallic, a sexual and aggressively penetrating master. Moreover, as the Church father, St. Augustine stressed in his *Confessions*, the primary danger of sex was that it made humans turn from the pleasure of God – the only real pleasure – to seek the false pleasures of the body. Exactly what Alibech innocently did putting the Devil back in Hell. This rejecting what

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5 Dioneo laughingly relates that Alibech innocently confessed that she had served God by putting the Devil back in Hell to the women who were preparing her for marriage after she returned to Gafsa. When they understood from her gestures what that service entailed, the phrase quickly became popular and spread rapidly from city to city and Dioneo points out that "the said way of speaking passed over the sea and is still used here [in Florence] today."

does truly exist – the pleasure of seeking and finding God – for what ultimately is only a passing and hardly real thing at all, in this case sexual pleasure – is the ultimate basis of all sin. Clearly in this vision the phallus could well be seen as a primary agent of the Devil as it could easily be viewed as a major deception that leads humans away from God. At a deeper level yet what caused the fall of Lucifer himself was his own turning away from the truth of God and thus one might see an even stronger connection between the Devil and the phallus – the phallus in its capacity to make one turn away from God might be seen as a personal Devil exactly as Rustico portrayed it to the innocent Alibech. Turning to Alibech's Hell one also could find suggestive deeper theological resonances. The essence of Hell is absence – the absence of God. And of course, a woman's genitals for all their real physical presence were often in the renaissance represented as an absence, a void. Paradoxically, an absence that had great power, like the absence that is sin; and again the parallel is intriguing. Putting the Devil back in Hell and finding pleasure in doing so from this perspective seems a little less like humorous light play.

Yet the sense that there is a deeper core to the story is strengthened by the other famous metaphor of the tale, Rustico's "resurrection of the flesh." The outrageousness of the scene of Rustico's "resurrection" before the naked Alibech may so catch the modern imagination that one misses the simple fact that here we are faced with a sexual metaphor that turns on and seemingly mocks the central mystery of Christianity. Although the theological context has moved away from *Old Testament* teachings about the fall of Lucifer and the ultimate conflict between evil and good, non-being and being, Devil and God, we are still in the realm of St. Augustine – since for him, and what had become the mainstream of Christian theology, the key to the message of the *New Testament* was that Christ had come to save humanity as both fully God and fully man as the Nicene Creed proclaimed. And Christ in one of the deepest mysteries of the faith was therefore resurrected *in the flesh* as a man as all humans who are saved will be resurrected thanks to His sacrifice.

Yet here in Boccaccio's tale we have the resurrection of the flesh turned to a completely different end, to enjoying sexual intercourse with the innocent Alibech. Moreover all this is done under the apparently false pretenses and in the name of leading her to the Christian God and his service, when it is instead misleading her to her fall – again from St. Augustine's perspective, the ultimate evil. Evidently in the process she also loses her virginity, and enjoying the pleasures of Rustico's Devil she clearly forgets about any chastity that she may have had or valued before her trip to the desert. In fact, one might well be tempted to argue that Rustico's Devil was a real devil; for his Devil and the real one were both empty of God, literally false gods that led humans away from truth to their damnation.

But I am tempted by a radically different reading of the tale and the thing that tempts me in that direction is once again the crucial metaphor of playing with the

Devil. For Alibech does not fall as a result of her play and that changes the valence of the metaphor itself. In fact there is no indication that she is a victim or even a sinner in any way. In the end she returns to civilization, marries, and lives happily ever after putting the Devil back in Hell with her new husband, who presumably is happily unaware of the full range of her earlier theological pursuits. There is nothing in the story to indicate that she is any the worse off for her adventures or her service to God, which gave her only the greatest pleasure as promised. In fact, there is only one blemish on her happy and pleasurable adventure and that was the inability of Rustico's Devil to live up to the demands of her Hell; for in a typically renaissance vision of female sexual desire Boccaccio portrays her desire for the Devil as insatiable and thus maliciously her desire to serve God as well. "Rustico," she implores as his virility begins to fail him, "if your Devil is now chastened and does not trouble you, my Hell still does not give me peace, so you would do me a favor if you with your Devil would help quiet the rage of my Hell as I helped you subdue the pride of your Devil" (Boccaccio, 1952, 269).

Yet crucially the comic failure of Rustico's Devil underlines the humor of this tale, a fact that is confirmed by the laughter of the entire band of youths at its conclusion, both the young men and women. In the face of that laughter and the humorous tone of the story, I would suggest that we have a tale that turns on a clever reversal of the accepted vision of things, so typical of renaissance humor; but with a deeply significant twist, because this reversal presents a playfully pseudo-Christian mythic rationale for a vision of sex that may well be at the heart of Boccaccio's portrayal of sexual intercourse and the pleasures of the flesh presented throughout the *Decameron*. For Alibech's search for the pleasures of serving the Christian God in putting the Devil back in Hell may also be re-read as a wistful rewriting and reversal of the story of the Fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In the traditional theological vision with their first sin Adam and Eve were thrown out of the terrestrial paradise, discovered shame and their nakedness, were burdened by sin and knew all the negatives of the binary sexual division imposed upon them as punishment, for their Fall from grace.

This order of things marked the First Age of human history described in the *Old Testament* which endured until the *resurrection of the flesh* that was brought by Christ's suffering and death on the Cross; a death and a resurrection which heralded the opening of a new era and a new order in the Christian vision of history, a Second Age, revealed in the *New Testament*. With the resurrection of Christ, humanity's relationship with God changed in a fundamental way, punishment and alienation were replaced by love and the possibility of salvation – and all this turned crucially on the suffering of Christ and on the resurrection of the flesh.

If we can leave aside the blasphemy of the concept of Rustico's own resurrection of the flesh for a moment, it is interesting to note that that resurrection also provides

a crucial turning point in the couple's micro-history. For it initiated the sexual intercourse that turned their desert into a new garden of Eden where the young Alibech willingly served God and not only enjoyed that service, she found it the ultimate, virtually transcendent, pleasure that she innocently assumed Christianity as a superior religion should provide. While other desert hermits in contrast led a hard life of suffering and privation in search for their Christian God – and the tale has taken us to their bleak huts which have little in the way of true Christian love to offer, only poor hermits isolated from any Christian community or solidarity and confirmed by their fear of Alibech's youthful innocent beauty – Alibech with a pure desire to serve God found "great" pleasure in doing so and for her the desert blossomed. For to return to Alibech's happy proclamation as she learned to appreciate the pleasures of sex noted earlier, hers is an innocent claim of ultimate pleasure: "I see clearly the truth of what those good men told me in Gafsa, that serving God is such a sweet thing: certainly I don't know of any other thing that I have ever done that gives me so much pleasure as putting the Devil back in Hell" (Boccaccio, 1952, 268).

Suggestively, this blossoming of the desert, this return to the Garden of Eden is predicated also upon undoing the temptations of the Devil – Rustico's Devil forced into serving God by going back to Hell. And while Rustico in his clever misuse of the language of Christianity was intentionally misleading Alibech to what might seem to be her private Fall, in fact, such a reading appears self-evidently incorrect as the desert became Eden-like for her in her service to God and she concluded with a virtually beatific vision, "And because of this [pleasure to be found in the service of God] I hold that anyone who does anything else than serve God is not human" (Boccaccio, 1952, 268). In a striking fashion she had indeed returned to the Garden of Eden and, as was the case for Adam and Eve, there she was perfectly content to only serve God – and even if clearly we must concede that her service was not quite what was portrayed in the *Old Testament*, it was a pleasurable service and literally outside the normal time and space of the post-Fall world.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve knew God as the source of their pleasure and certainly the innocent Alibech did so as well. Yet it might well be objected that in the Garden of Eden there was no knowledge of sex and that that knowledge was one of the punishments inflicted upon humanity following the Fall. Nicely, however, as Michel Foucault and his followers would point out, Alibech in her innocence did not know sex either in her new Garden of Eden, only the pleasure of her service to God. For her, sexual intercourse did not exist; her pleasure with Rustico was simply the Christian pleasure that one dedicated to a loving God in the name of an ongoing meta-quest to return the Devil to Hell. In fact, the point might be pressed further by noting that in the original biblical story of the Fall it was the woman, Eve, who pressed Adam to eat the apple – and, of course, as portrayed in the renaissance Eve was the one held normally responsible for the Fall – whereas in this story it was the

man Rustico who pressed the woman, Alibech to put the Devil back in Hell and the woman, then, who in accepting that request regained admission to the Garden of Eden.

Perhaps the reversal is not a perfect one, however, for Rustico lacked Alibech's saving innocence. Clearly part of the humor of the story is found in the fact that while he may have enjoyed for a while the results of his irreverent deceits – he too enjoyed his new found sexual pleasures and his desert blossomed as well – rather quickly, however, as noted earlier the desert re-asserted itself in the form of his inadequate diet and his inability to serve God as frequently as Alibech would have liked. As a result he seems more trapped than saved by his own misuse of the Christian myth and his multiplying lies. Yet even in this there is a certain reversal for in the biblical story it is Eve the woman who is responsible and in this tale it is Rustico the male who plays that role. In the end while the story focuses on Alibech living happily ever after in her return to the world with her knowledge of the pleasures of serving God, Rustico is quietly forgotten in his reformed desert, although admittedly "with great pleasure" (Boccaccio, 1952, 270) to have escaped Alibech's demanding faith.

Yet, sinning boldly, this suggests a still more radically irreverent re-reading of the tale. For if instead of suggesting a mere reversal of the Garden of Eden story, we posit a fundamental reversal of the entire myth of Christianity as suggested earlier, some additional elements of the story fall intriguingly into place. Rustico, for example, might well be seen as the Anti-Christ who uses the central tenets of the Church in an ultimately evil way – the battle of God with the Devil and the resurrection of the flesh – to seduce a young woman away from the Church and destroy it. But in the process of seeking the ultimate evil inadvertently he fulfills God's master plan and ushers in a new last age and a new last dispensation, just as the Antichrist was supposed to do. For in the Trinitarian vision of Christianity where there were two ages one dominated by God, the Father, and a second dominated, by Christ, logic seemed to require a third, dominated by the Holy Spirit. That last promised age much like the age that preceded it ushered in by Christ, would change in fundamental ways humanity's relationship with God – certainly Alibech's approach to serving God was fundamentally different from that of the Second Age of human history at least as interpreted by St. Augustine and the Church. Sex in Alibech's new last age would no longer be in the service of procreation in pain and suffering as *Genesis* promised or to fulfill the needs of family continuity from a more traditional renaissance perspective, but in the service of a playful and pleasure-giving Holy Spirit where innocent pleasure truly led to the negation of the Devil and the end of time.

Many expected a new age and a new dispensation in the Fourteenth Century, an age to be ushered in by an Anti-Christ who would destroy the Church, clearing the way for a last age before the Last Judgment and the End of Time. While there was

considerable uncertainty about what that last age would be like, clearly virtually no one thought it would be an age of happy, playful, innocent sex in the service of a loving, smiling Holy Spirit in a new blossoming Garden of Eden. Probably not even Boccaccio or his fictional story teller Dioneo. Yet preachers like St. Francis of Assisi and his followers, especially his more radical followers, preached the imminent arrival of a third and last age of love led by the Holy Spirit. One of the central signs of this new age would be the conversion of the pagans and, of course, Alibech was an enthusiastic convert to serving the Christian God and love. Another sign would be the destruction of the old corrupt Church to be replaced by a new Christian community rapt in its love of God and the tales of the Third Day (and earlier) confirmed the corruption of the Church while suggesting that the pleasures of sex were transformative even for clerics.

And at a deeper level yet one wonders why Dioneo told his tale of resurrections on Sunday in the frame story of the *Decameron*, the last tale of the third day – the day of resurrections; resurrections of the flesh and of saviors and the beginning of new, last dispensations it should be recalled. And one wonders why on this day in that frame story, as we have seen, the band of story tellers is moved to a new beautiful garden which is explicitly compared in its beauty, order and loving pleasures to the Garden of Eden by Neifile (the new lover or lover of love). And of course one might also wonder a bit about Dioneo's name (literally New God), as it conjures the image of a very different age and the Greek God of play, pleasure, and sex – Dionysius.

So let me just suggest that we imagine a woman as savior – Alibech. A simple innocent woman, who in her pleasure in sex and her service to the Christian God, at least in Boccaccio's fiction/prophecy, promised to open a new, last age of love and the spiritual pleasures of the flesh: a last age where her followers would serve God, Christ and the Holy Spirit in a new earthly paradise putting the Devil back in Hell.

#### ŽENSKA KOT ODREŠENIK: ALIBECH IN ZADNJE OBDOBJE MESENOSTI V BOCCACCIOVEM DEKAMERONU

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#### POVZETEK

*Prispevek na igriv način preizprašuje prikaz zgodnjerenesančnega pojmovanja spolnosti in užitka v zadnji zgodbi tretjega dne v Dekameronu Giovannija Boccaccia*

*in nespoštljivo predlaga precej drugačno teologijo v ozadju očitno svetoskrunskega humorja v tej znameniti noveli. Pozornejši pogled na bistrourne metafore v zgodbi, posebej tisto o "vračanju zlodeja v pekel" in "vstajenju mesa" skupaj z načinom, kako se razvija zgodba in kakšen položaj zavzema znotraj Dekameron, nakazuje, da je Alibech igrivo (ali morda ne tako igrivo) prikazana kot fiktivni novi odrešenik, ki poseduje moč, da popelje človeški rod nazaj v rajski vrt, da razveljavi padec Adama in Eve z nedolžnim užitkom spolnosti, tako da izniči Evin izvorni greh s puščavnikom Rustikom. Njena erotična srečanja z Rustikom, glede katerih je zavedena v prepričanje, da z njimi služi Bogu preko vračanja njegovega "zlodeja" nazaj v njen "pekel", na koncu Boccacciove zgodbe povzročijo, da puščava vzcveti v nov rajski vrt, v katerem se služenje krščanskemu Bogu izkaže za največji možni užitek, prav tako, kot je to veljalo za prvotni rajski vrt in prav tako, kot so Alibech obetali tisti, ki so jo poskušali prepričati, da je krščanstvo najboljša in edina prava religija. Morda pa zgodba na globlji ravni in z globljim preobratom, ki je značilen za pomemben del renesančnega humorja, sporoča, da je ljubezniva odrešenica Alibech, ki jo prekani antikristovski lik Rustika, obljuba nove odveze in znanilka tretje in zadnje dobe v službi igrivega, srečnega in ljubeznivega Boga, zadnje dobe, ki jo obljublajo apokrifne Knjige razodetja, ki so krožile v 14. stoletju.*

*Ključne besede: Boccaccio, Dekameron, spolnost, ljubezen, Bog, ženska odrešenik, Zadnja doba, rajski vrt, padec, Eva, vstajenje*

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