

The story of Ser Ciappelletto:
“What manner of man is this?”
Pre-Reformation themes in
medieval literature



Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (1353)

“A medieval Catholic would have thought it heretical to suggest that God was free to operate only in those ways that human language and religious institutions had prepared for him. Fourteenth-century...theologians distinguished between God’s *potentia ordinata*, his power of entering into historical covenants and agreements with us, and his *potentia absoluta*, his absolute freedom to act outside or beyond them. Boccaccio’s (story) celebrates this freedom and explores its consequences.”

—David Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*

Any good that he was able to accomplish with the false confession, despite his wicked life?

- **Promise to the two brothers; ending up “saving” their reputation**
- **Friar’s hope is that many miracles will be wrought through Ser C. after his death**
- **Miracles being performed through Ser C. from God; townspeople are amending their lives in accord with the “example” set by Ser C.**
- **“What manner of man is this?” Same language used for Ser C. to describe...Christ by the disciples**

Does this story mock holy things? Celebration of evil winning out over good?

- **Biblical principle of “What you meant for evil, God meant for good...” (Joseph with his brothers, crucifixion)**
- **However great or abundant the sin, on whatever time-scale, nothing can defeat the goodness and compassion of God.**
- **Biblical doctrine of sainthood miraculous/scandalous (1 Tim. 1:15, 16)**
- **Importance of frame narrative in imparting primary lessons of story: not what you might expect! (Gal. 6:7)**

“It is proper, dearest ladies, that everything made by man should begin with the sacred and admirable name of Him that was maker of all things. And therefore, since I am the first and must make a beginning to our story-telling, I propose to begin by telling you of one of His marvelous works, **so that when we have heard it out, our hopes will rest in Him as in something immutable, and we shall forever praise His name.** It is obvious that since all temporal things are transient and mortal, so they are filled and surrounded by troubles, trials and tribulations, and fraught with infinite dangers which we, who live with them and are part of them, could without a shadow of a doubt neither endure, nor defend ourselves against, if God’s special grace did not lend us strength and discernment. **Nor should we suppose that His grace descends upon and within us through any merit of our own, for it is set in motion by His own loving-kindness,** and is obtained by the pleas of people who like ourselves were mortal, and who, by firmly doing His pleasure whilst they were in this life, have now joined Him in eternal blessedness. To these, as to advocates made aware, through experience, of our frailty (perhaps because we have not the courage to submit our pleas personally in the presence of so great a judge) we present whatever we think is relevant to our cause.

“And our regard for Him, who is so compassionate and generous towards us, is all the greater when, the human eye being quite unable to penetrate the secrets of divine intelligence, common opinion deceives us and perhaps we appoint as our advocate in His majestic presence one who has been cast by Him into eternal exile. Yet He from whom nothing is hidden, paying more attention to the purity of the suppliant’s motives than to his ignorance or to the banishment of the intercessor, answers those who pray to Him exactly as if the advocate were blessed in His sight. All of which can clearly be seen in the tale I propose to relate; and I say clearly because it is concerned, not with the judgement of God, but with that of men.”

“It was thus, then, that Ser Cepperello of Prato lived and died, becoming a saint in the way you have heard. **Nor would I wish to deny that perhaps God has blessed and admitted him to His presence. For albeit he led a wicked, sinful life, it is possible that at the eleventh hour he was sincerely repentant that God had mercy upon him and received him into His kingdom.** But since this is hidden from us, I speak only with regard to the outward appearance, and I say that the fellow should rather be in Hell, in the hands of the devil, than in Paradise. And if this is the case, we may recognize **how very great is God’s loving-kindness towards us, in that it takes account, not of our error, but of the purity of our faith,** and grants our prayers even when we appoint as our emissary one who is His enemy, thinking him to be His friend, as though we were appealing to one who was truly holy as our intercessor for His favour.”

- Jesus “holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:24-25)