SEVERED SILENCE: SOCIAL BOUNDARIES AND FAMILY HONOR IN BOCCACCIO’S “TALE OF LISABETTA”

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The unhappy “Tale of Lisabetta,” the fifth story of the fourth day in Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron (ca. 1350–53), contains multiple layers of social meaning: it is simultaneously a story of mutable power structures, a mirror of the familial and cultural upheaval in fourteenth-century Florence, and a parable about the dangers of choosing wealth over traditional family obligations. Such upheaval is vividly demonstrated in the tragic story of Lisabetta and Lorenzo which revolves around the possession and control of Lorenzo’s severed head. Lorenzo’s murder, burial, disinterment, and subsequent beheading all point to a misdirection of established familial and social roles. The politics of family and culture are challenged by role reversals, exchanges of power, movement into spaces outside the threshold of civilization, and desperate attempts to maintain control of a situation that rapidly devolves into chaos. The pot in which Lisabetta plants her lover’s head becomes a womb that will never produce offspring or continue the family and social line because of her brothers’ monstrous actions. Instead, the pot-as-womb holds a rotting head, an internal threat that has already invaded the boundaries of the social structure Lorenzo’s murderers have tried so hard to maintain. The repeated revelations of Lorenzo’s head, along with the decline of Lisabetta and the hasty departure of her brothers, display the inefficacy of once stable familial traditions to preserve social order. All attempts to remove the threat of social encroachment are thwarted, and the continual reappearance of the head in various situations points to a loss of power and control within the foundations of familial and social structure.

From the very beginning, this story presents uncertain and even contradictory images of power and control. Lisabetta’s three brothers are left rich by the death of their father, yet “e avevano una loro sorella chiamata Elisabetta, giovane assai bella e costumata, la quale, che che se ne fosse cagione, ancora maritata non aveano” [for some reason or other they had failed to bestow [Lisabetta] in marriage, despite the fact that she was
uncommonly gracious and beautiful] (The Decameron, 4.5:4). The wealth of the brothers gives them status and power in the town, yet they have not completed the most basic masculine duty for their sister. The rather vague explanation of “che che se ne fosse cagione” [for some reason or other] implies a lack of effort or concern. Ordinarily, the main reason for not marrying off a female relative as early as possible was the lack of a dowry. This, however, is not the case here, as the tale specifically states that the brothers are wealthy. The brothers’ failure to arrange a suitable match for Lisabetta shows a clear neglect of their primary familial duty to their sister and to the family structure itself.

In the first tale of the fourth day, the “Tale of Ghismonda,” Boccaccio provides a model for the later situation of Lisabetta, giving a fuller explanation of who is to blame for a woman’s fall from grace. In this story, Ghismonda chastises her father, Tancredi, for not finding her a husband, holding him responsible for her sexual transgressions with Guiscardo: “ma a questo non m’indusse tanto la mia feminile fragilità, quanto la tua poca sollecitudine del maritarmi” [“I was prompted to act as I did, not so much by my womanly frailty as by your lack of concern to marry me”] (4.1:32). Tancredi’s motive for not marrying his daughter is his inability to part with her: “Costei fu dal padre tanto teneramente amata, quanto alcuna altra figliuola dal padre fosse giammai: e per questo tenero amore, avendo ella di molti anni avanzata l’età del dovere avere avuto marito” [He was as passionately fond of this daughter as any father who has ever lived, and being unable to bring himself to part with her, he refused to

1 All Italian textual quotes are from Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron: Edizione Critica Secondo L’autografo Hamiltoniano, ed. Vittore Branca (Firenze: Presso l’Accademia della Crusca, 1976). All English translations are taken from The Decameron, trans by G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin Books, 1972). I would like to acknowledge the aid of my colleague Maria Adele Romagnoli, whose help with Boccaccio’s Italian was invaluable. Her proofreading and advice on the article was also very helpful in making the article more concise in its structure and argument.


3 “Erano adunque in Messinatre giovani fratelli e mercatanti, e assai ricchi uomini rimasì dopo la morte del padre loro.” [In Messina there lived three brothers, all of them merchants who had been left very rich after the death of their father]. The Decameron, 4.5:4.