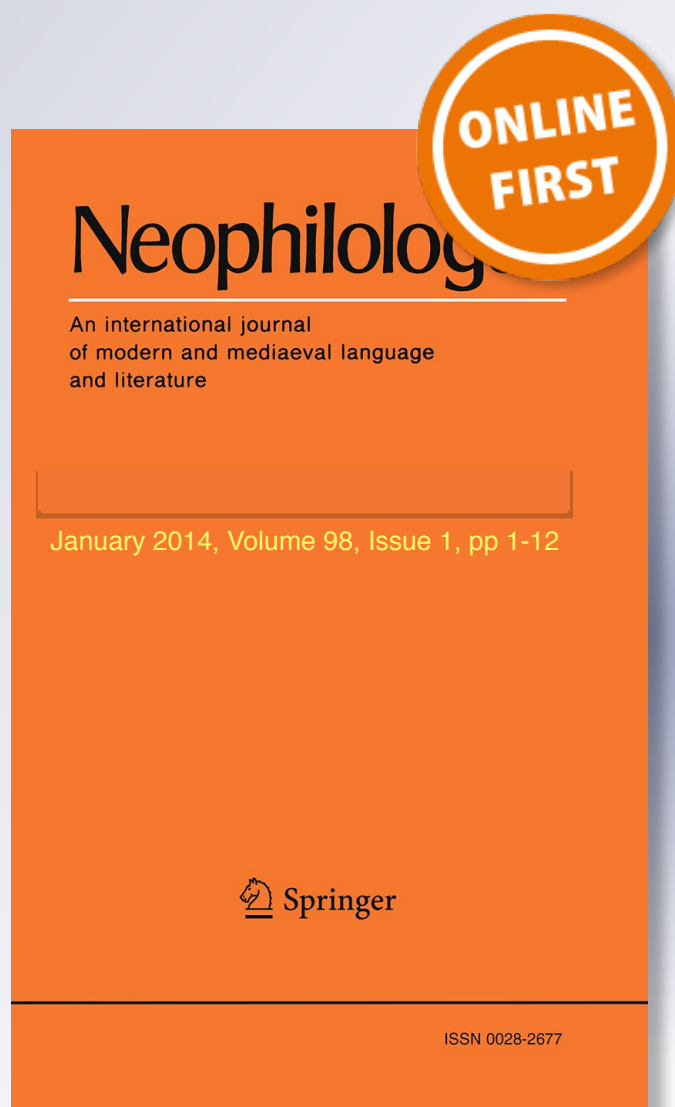


One Adam and Nine Eves in Donald Siegel's The Beguiled and Giovanni Boccaccio's 3:1 of The Decameron

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One Adam and Nine Eves in Donald Siegel's *The Beguiled* and Giovanni Boccaccio's 3:1 of *The Decameron*¹

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Abstract

Donald Siegel's 1971 film entitled *The Beguiled* is compared to Tale 1 of Day 3 from Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Both stories are about a man who arrives in a garden setting and finds nine sexually starved women. In Boccaccio's tale, a male gardener finds himself in a convent occupied by nine nuns with whom he proceeds to have sexual relations to everyone's satisfaction. Siegel's film is about a wounded soldier taken in at a girls' finishing school whose nine female residents become the objects of the hero's amorous attention. While Boccaccio adopts a philogynist tone with respect to the material, *The Beguiled* appears to be a virulently misogynist film projecting its female characters as jealous demons who end up mutilating and then killing their male suitor. Findings from evolutionary psychology pertaining to female jealousy and reproductive strategies are used to consider the respective attitudes toward women in the medieval tale and the twentieth-century film. Conclusions are drawn about the difficulty of placing either of the stories within a clear-cut philogynist or misogynist category.

Key words: Donald Siegel; *The Beguiled*; Clint Eastwood; Misogyny; Philogyny; Giovanni Boccaccio; *The Decameron*; Evocriticism; Evolutionary Psychology; Sociobiology; Reproductive Strategies; Jealousy.

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The film director Donald Siegel made a number of features with Clint Eastwood. In addition to the fact that most of these films are mainly about violent competition among men, the plotlines concentrate on Eastwood's characters almost entirely to the exclusion of women. *Dirty Harry* in particular exemplifies this hypermasculine approach, building on the detached manner of Eastwood's memorable Man With no Name character from Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns and anticipating the numerous other iterations of the legendary actor's unflinching persona. Most of Clint Eastwood's roles — and in particular those featured in Siegel's movies — are based on little emotional investment and a great deal of steely-eyed confidence, leaving little room for anything like a nuanced engagement with the opposite sex. In this context, Siegel's 1971 film *The Beguiled* appears on first glance as an anomaly which Dennis Bingham rightly calls "a far cry from the Eastwood formula" (199).

In *The Beguiled*, Eastwood plays John McBurney (McB) — a Union soldier who is wounded on Confederate territory in the American Civil War and taken in by the residents of a girls' finishing school. McBurney is at first delighted to be "the only rooster in a hen house" — especially because his female hosts have not had any male company in a long time. As one of them puts it, "if the war goes on much longer I'll forget I ever was a woman." These women are initially so receptive to McBurney's desires that he proceeds to seduce or encourage a number of partners. The problem arises when it turns out that the women do not share McBurney's idea of male-female relations, each one demonstrating strong resentment of the man's promiscuity. What starts out as a potential romantic adventure with the promise of a giggly roll in the hay, turns into a tale of gothic horror involving intense resentment and hatred. This eventually results in the demise of the male protagonist who has clearly overestimated himself and underestimated the fury of enraged femininity. Gina Herring sums up the logic of the events in Siegel's film as follows: "The male fantasy of keeping a harem turns into a nightmare when McB is made the prisoner and finally the victim of female desire" (217).

However, who is the victim in this film, and whose desire is at fault? Does McBurney get what's coming to him or is he the unwitting sacrifice on the altar of

women's villainy? The latter interpretation of the film's stance is followed by Paul Smith who writes:

In this film, then, McBurney is offered as suffering hero whose only crime appears to have been his sexual philandering, and the real crime in the movie is what is taken to be the condition of femininity. The females are hysterical, whatever their age, race, or status, and their revenge on McBurney is a result of the sexual disorders and frustrations that, in the movie's intendment, an all-female community will necessarily produce or provoke (79).

This appears corroborated by the director himself in an interview on *The Beguiled* where Don Siegel goes beyond merely talking about the film. In the following passage, he seems to be outlining a general attitude toward the female sex:

[It is] the best film I have done, and possibly the best I will ever do. One reason that I wanted to do the picture is that it is a women's picture, not a picture for women, but about them. Women are capable of deceit, larceny, murder, anything. Behind that mask of innocence lurks just as much evil as you'll find in the members of the Mafia. Any young girl, who looks perfectly harmless, is capable of murder (Quoted in Paul Smith: 79).

The key point here is that we are dealing with "not a picture *for* women, but *about* them." And what the film has to say about women is downright medieval. The female characters in *The Beguiled* are every bit as satanic, destructively seductive and ruthless as Eve's image in the rhetoric of the church fathers and later theological demagogues. By the time Siegel's story is done, the hero has been mutilated, murdered and buried by a group of vindictive females who calmly accept this turn of events and go on with their lives. To quote Karen Kay, "Don Siegel hates women — and fears them. In film after film, he depicts females as manipulative and evil, plotting to destroy men" (32). In fact, Kay demonstrates that this misogyny characterizes practically all of Siegel's films — beyond those made with Clint Eastwood.

Six centuries before *The Beguiled*, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his strikingly diverse hundred tales of *The Decameron*. As opposed to Siegel, who did not want to tell a story

for women, Boccaccio's authorial persona declares in the preface that his aim is to do just that, namely, to entertain women who are confined to their homes by male relatives: "So in order that I may to some extent repair the omissions of Fortune, which (as we may see in the case of the more delicate sex) was always more sparing of support wherever natural strength was more deficient, I intend to provide succour and diversion for the ladies" (Boccaccio: 47). The framing narrative of this "diversion for the ladies" involves seven young women and three young men who flee to the countryside in order to escape from the Bubonic Plague ravaging Florence in 1348. To pass the time, these refined people tell stories to each other and end up spending ten days in this pleasant manner. In the process, they cover numerous aspects of late medieval life, concentrating predominantly on love and its multiple permutations. Despite the tenor of the preface, Boccaccio's work is not entirely consistent in its positive and compassionate view of the female condition. There is a number of tales where women appear in line with medieval misogynist rhetoric, e.g., Day 8, Story 7, or function as doll-like props for working out the problems of males, e.g., Day 1, Story 4. However, many of the tales are indeed rather unusual for a fourteenth-century work precisely because the author appears to adopt a point of view favorable to women. As Millicent Marcus says, "at the time of writing of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio knew the poverty and the sterility of misogyny as a premise for fiction-making" (39).

One of Boccaccio's apparently philogynist tales bears a striking resemblance to *The Beguiled* — right down to the numbers and configuration of the characters. On day three of *The Decameron*, the first tale related by Filostrato, one of the ten narrators, is about Masetto — a roguish male who, like Siegel's McBurney, tries to create a harem-like situation in order to satisfy the ultimate male fantasy. For this purpose, Masetto presents himself at a nunnery where a gardener is required. He pretends to be a deaf-mute and is hired on the spot, but his idea of the job description goes considerably beyond gardening. Before long, Masetto finds himself having sex with the nuns one after another, the women assuming that a deaf-mute cannot reveal these transgressions to anyone. Soon, the abbess in charge of the convent finds out what the other nuns have been up to and refuses to be left behind: "Finding herself alone, the lady [...] was seized by the same craving to which her young charges had already succumbed. So,

having roused Masetto, she led him away to her room, where she kept him for several days" (Boccaccio: 239). However, at this point, the overambitious, sexually exhausted gardener admits that he is not a deaf-mute after all: "'I have always been given to understand, ma'am,' he said, 'that whereas a single cock is quite sufficient for ten hens, ten men are hard put to satisfy one woman, and yet here am I with nine of them on my plate. I can't endure it any longer'" (240). After this, the Abbess makes arrangements for an orderly system of sexual encounters with all the nuns whereby Masetto is no longer placed under such amorous performance stress.

Of particular importance for the comparison between *The Beguiled* and Boccaccio's story of Masetto the gardener is the number of women faced by the lusty male protagonist. In both stories, there are 9 females of whom one occupies a leadership position. Martha, the headmistress of the finishing school in Siegel's film is the equivalent of *The Decameron's* abbess. And in both cases, the senior female has sexual designs on the male character — in addition to similar desires on the part of the other women. In *The Beguiled* and in *The Decameron*, the male is initially involved with the female rank and file, but eventually, the head woman finds out what has been happening behind her back and intervenes. This intervention ends well for Boccaccio's Masetto and badly in the case of Siegel's McBurney — largely because of the different respective approaches that the two stories adopt in connection to beguilement. Masetto lies that he is a deaf-mute but incurs no more punishment than having his sexual self-image slightly shaken by the demands of more women than he can handle. However, once the truth is revealed and order is introduced into the sexual situation of the convent, Masetto's life turns out very well indeed. Not so in the case of McBurney who, being no less of a beguiler than Boccaccio's fake deaf-mute, misrepresents his past and his intentions. A series of flashbacks indicates to the viewer that Siegel's protagonist has been an active participant in the war, committing cold-blooded murder and burning crops produced by the South's farmers. However, he passes himself off as a peace-loving farmer whose aim has been to help rather than hurt people. He also seeks to project the image of a sexually honorable man rather than the philanderer that he really is.

In both stories, the enterprise of seduction is initiated by the female side. In *The Decameron*, a nun sees Masetto sleeping and says to one of her companions:

I have often heard it said, by several of the ladies who have come to visit us, that all other pleasures in the world are mere trifles by comparison with the one experienced by a woman when she goes with a man. I have thus been thinking, since I have nobody else to hand, that I would like to discover with the aid of this dumb fellow whether they are telling the truth (Boccaccio: 238).

Similar female sexual assertiveness is observed in *The Beguiled* where it is not McBurney who makes the first move but rather Carol — a scheming, brazen teenager who makes it clear to the only male guest of the finishing school that she wants a passionate relationship right away. In *The Decameron*, the nuns do not allow the satisfaction of their sexual desire to undermine the harmony characterizing the life of the monastic community, i.e., they all grasp the importance of sharing: “[She] led him into the hut, where Masetto needed very little coaxing to do her bidding. Having got what she wanted, she loyally made way for her companion. [...] [Then the others] took up shares in Masetto’s holding” (Boccaccio: 239). The nuns’ nine counterparts in Siegel’s film, however, claim proprietary rights when it comes to McBurney. The latter, trying to achieve results similar to those sought by Boccaccio’s Masetto, leads Carol on at first but then, when she is away, begins to woo the shy, virginal assistant teacher Edwina. Carol’s reaction, upon her discovery of McBurney with Edwina, is immediate revenge. She alerts the local Confederate militia who almost arrests McBurney and is prevented from doing so only thanks to a lie told about the man’s identity by the head mistress Martha.

Martha, in her turn, intends to have a relationship with the finishing school’s dashing guest who is more than happy to feed her sexual aspirations. However, just as Masetto ends up biting off more than he can chew, so too, Siegel’s hero overextends himself and pays the price. He is discovered in bed with Carol by Edwina to whom he has promised something like a real engagement. Edwina’s reaction to McBurney’s infidelity turns into a fit of violent rage. She pushes the philanderer down a steep staircase, thereby causing him to break his leg and pass out. Martha, who witnesses the scene, is also outraged

because she has assumed that McBurney would be hers alone. When Martha sees the traitor lying at the bottom of the stairs — unconscious with a broken leg, she decides to take revenge by amputating the injured appendage before the man comes to. Upon recovering from his surgery, the livid amputee changes his attitude toward his female hosts and begins to see himself as the victim of collectively inspired villainy. He drops all pretense of gallantry and reveals his true motives: “His postamputatory threats about how he won’t leave ‘till I’ve had my fill’ suggest that what sexual ‘conquests’ he can’t make by charm and cajolery he’ll take by force” (Bingham: 204). That is when a fourth amorous female enters the picture — a seemingly sweet prepubescent girl called Amy. She too has been entertaining (albeit childish) hopes of love with respect to McBurney. However, her attitude toward the man changes radically when he — in a fit of anger over the amputation of his leg — threatens all nine residents of the school with a gun and then dashes Amy’s pet turtle against a wall.

The ending of Siegel’s movie illustrates more than any other part what the director meant when he said: “Any young girl, who looks perfectly harmless, is capable of murder” (see above). Whereas Carol, Edwina and Martha are adults, and so their jealous anger can be contextualized in the power of adult reproductive emotions, Amy is still a child. And so, when Martha suggests to Amy that the girl gather lethal mushrooms in the woods in order to poison McBurney, the viewer is truly taken aback by Amy’s grim resolve as she agrees to this murderous plot. The somber, darkly menacing expression on the face of Pamelyn Ferdin — the talented young actress who plays Amy — at the moment of her acquiescence to Martha’s deadly proposal bears no trace of childhood. Amy’s grim countenance embodies the film’s tone of gothic horror which reaches its apex at this moment. After all, evil childhood is an oxymoron which one finds rarely on the screen or in other story-telling media. However, what counts here is not Amy’s evil as such, but rather her *female* evil which is so fundamental according to Siegel that it knows no age boundaries. Regardless of her tender age, Amy appears to be as much an heir of Eve as are the other duplicitous and blood-thirsty women in *The Beguiled*.

The Eve-related subtext is also evoked in both stories, among other things, by their respective settings — the remote, rural location of the monastery in *The Decameron* and

the lush greenery of the Southern finishing school in *The Beguiled*. Marga Cottino-Jones points out the Eden-like atmosphere of the convent in Boccaccio's tale where the hero's job is to work the garden for the nine nuns (8). The women in Siegel's film also have a garden, and when McBurney arrives, he falsely claims to have farming experience which can help his female hosts run their earthly paradise. *The Decameron* and *The Beguiled* diverge from their biblical antecedent in that paradise is not lost by the time Boccaccio's and Siegel's respective stories are over. The difference between the Italian tale and the American film lies in the position of Adam's equivalent — respectively Masetto and McBurney. The latter is expelled from Eden, leaving the garden to the nine Eves who have learned that a male is not required for and is in fact a hindrance to paradisiac bliss. As Gina Herring puts it, "[the women] restore their manless world, with one important difference. They have discovered the source of their own power. They end not in the apocalyptic flames of traditional gothic (Day 167), but in a calm resumption of the rhythms of female routine. The community has been preserved with a sacrificial scapegoat" (215). Boccaccio's Masetto, on the other hand, is allowed to stay with his nine Eves on the condition that he does not get to run the sexual show on the basis of his original masculine bias: "[The nuns] divided up his various functions among themselves in such a way that he was able to do them all justice. And although he fathered quite a number of nunlets and monklets, it was all arranged so discreetly that nothing leaked out. [...] And this, [Masetto] maintained, was the way that Christ treated anybody who placed a pair of horns upon His crown" (Boccaccio: 241).

The introduction of Christ into the equation is significant for our purposes because god is projected as the hub around which the sexual permutations in Boccaccio's tale revolve. The nine women are brought together for the satisfaction of Masetto's lust by their association with Christ, i.e., they are nuns in a convent. In a typically Decameronian reversal of accepted medieval norms, the author uses religion itself to undermine both the notion of clerical celibacy and the church's efforts to take sexual agency away from women. This carnivalesque inversion of traditional religious values is also present in *The Beguiled*, but what we witness is a grotesque and malignant version of Christ's relationship with the women around him in the Gospels. Just like Boccaccio's abbess, the school's headmistress Martha contextualizes the male's presence in the

Edenic setting religiously. Martha has a dream where she imagines the animation of the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* — Sandro Botticelli's painting which hangs on her bedroom wall. As the picture comes alive, we see McBurney turn into Christ while Edwina and the biblically-named Martha play the roles of the women lamenting the savior's death. In no time at all, this lament morphs into a three-way sexual encounter where the two females not only have relations with McBurney as Christ but also enjoy a lesbian experience — all to the sounds of Baroque organ music that would be more appropriate at a church service than in an almost pornographic scene. Pointing out two other significant instances of McBurney's association with the savior, Paul Smith writes:

At other moments McBurney is turned into a Christ figure—he is shown passing by various pictures of Christ's passion on the walls of the school, and the scene in which his leg is amputated is shot from above in such a way as to suggest the crucifixion. [...] the status of a Christ implicitly endorses a judgment against the movie's women, who are to be read as hysterically and viciously overreacting to the sexual presence of a man in their midst (79).

The idea of being "wedded to Christ" appears prominently in Boccaccio's and Siegel's respective narratives, and in both cases — metaphorically. The nine nuns of the *Decameron* are the brides of Christ, which is a way of symbolizing and simultaneously obfuscating their sexual deprivation. Of course, the marriage of flesh-and-blood women with real human needs to a non-human fails to give the marriage metaphor any concrete expression. As Filostrato, the narrator of Boccaccio's tale, points out, "there are a great many men and women who are so dense as to be firmly convinced that when a girl takes the white veil and dons the black cowl, she ceases to be a woman or to experience feminine longings, as though the very act of making her a nun had caused her to turn into stone" (Boccaccio: 234). No more stone-like are the nine heroines of Siegel's film, which is clear from the fact that even the initially suspicious headmistress quickly formalizes the status of their male guest by offering him a job at the finishing school: "The place needs a man," says Martha. "My brother isn't here and you are. Would you be interested in staying on?" And as if to seal this semi-marital offer, minutes later Martha has the above-mentioned *ménage à trois* dream based on Botticelli's painting. This vision of McBurney as Christ spending a kind of wedding night

with his two “wives” appears to give the Yankee soldier the same sort of sanctified permanence as what Masetto achieves in *The Decameron*.

Gina Herring is a rare critic of *The Beguiled* in that she argues against a misogynist interpretation of the film: “If we examine *The Beguiled* from a feminist perspective, we find that the so-called ‘misogynist’ elements of the story are the result of the film’s violation of the expectations generated by the conventions of sexual politics” (214). Herring’s position is that Siegel’s movie shows women as active shapers of their sexual destiny rather than passive recipients of male solicitation. This argument could work in principle if it were not for certain aspects of the film’s female characterization that concentrate the notion of sinfulness to the level of hysterical caricature. There are several striking instances of behavior that would be considered “perverse” by conventional society. Martha’s lesbian attraction to Edwina and the sexually-based desecration of Botticelli’s pietá painting are by no means the most extreme examples of what goes beyond mere feminine empowerment. Truly significant is a dirty secret from the headmistress’ life that comes to the surface through a number of flashbacks from Martha’s memory. The finishing school, it turns out, used to be run jointly by Martha and her brother — a scoundrel who had sexually abused Hallie, the black female slave living on the property. The brother and sister were lovers, and eager ones at that as we can tell from the lecherous expression on Martha’s face in a scene where she lets the brother into her bedroom. This, coupled with the cold-blooded violence on the part of McBurney’s mutilators and eventual killers, creates the impression of female sinfulness so extreme that not only misogyny but specifically traditional and fundamental Christian misogyny appears as the inescapable reading of Siegel’s film.

When this is pitted against Boccaccio’s sympathetic portrayal of female sexuality in the story of Masetto the gardener, one feels tempted to conclude that a curious reversal has taken place. A medieval male author manages to sound more modern than a late twentieth century film-maker, presumably demonstrating proto-feminist thinking hundreds of years “ahead of schedule.” However, this turns out to be only part of the picture as we consider the two tales of nine women and one man in their Edenic garden. It would seem that Boccaccio presents a situation of complete harmony in his tale where

everyone's desires have been satisfied and no one has been exploited or disadvantaged. The question is to what extent this seemingly perfect arrangement corresponds to real human psychology. Whereas the violent ending of *The Beguiled* is caused by female jealousy, the peaceful resolution of Boccaccio's tale rests on the complete absence of sexual competition among Masetto's nine wives. The matter would be settled if the emotions underpinning human sexuality could be divorced from its ultimate biological basis.

What follows is based on Evocriticism which Brian Boyd defines as a humanist field of inquiry linking "the whole of life, with other human activities and capacities, and their relation to those of other animals. [...] It can connect literature [...] with ongoing research of various kinds that can refine and challenge our understanding of human nature and thought" (384–385). This approach is inspired by the past three decades of work in the new fields of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. The basic premise of sociobiological research is that the human mind evolved under the pressure of natural selection many thousands of years ago — in the Pleistocene when existence was precarious and the line between life and death was very thin. Behaviors favoring the most successful reproductive strategies, along with the emotions responsible for these behaviors, are what ended up surviving in the human gene pool. Women bring utterly helpless offspring into the world, as compared to other mammals such as our near primate relatives. A chimp mother can raise her baby without any help from a male because the child can hold on to her hairy underbelly very soon after birth, allowing for unimpeded movement and food gathering. The human newborn cannot even lift its head and ties the mother down for several years (cf. Gazzaniga: 46). This would have made it vital for the ancestral human female to secure assistance from her children's father beyond the mere act of mating. Stone Age females without sufficient paternal investment or with none at all were considerably less likely to ensure the survival of their progeny. They would have been outcompeted in the gene pool by females who did have paternal support.

Because the human male is able to impregnate many females while a female can typically bear only one young at a time and must then spend many years taking care of

it, the ancestral male could have benefitted genetically from multiple matings in quick succession (cf. Brown and Amatea 2000: 293; Riddley 2003: 179). Here, quantity could compensate for quality, i.e., even though the male might have been unwilling to provide any paternal investment or could have decided to redirect his support from one female to another, some of his neglected children may still have survived. The female could not have counted on this approach and therefore would have evolved a vital emotion aimed at countering the male's potential for withdrawal of paternal assistance: jealousy. As David Buss explains,

the redirection of a mate's investment to another female and her offspring is reproductively costly for a female, especially in environments where offspring suffer in survival and reproductive currencies without investment from both parents. In human evolutionary history, there were likely to have been at least two situations in which a woman risked losing a man's investment. First, in a monogamous marriage, a woman risked having her mate invest in an alternative woman with whom he was having an affair (partial loss of investment) or risked his departure for an alternative woman (large or total loss of investment). Second, in polygynous marriages, a woman was at risk of having her mate invest to a larger degree in other wives and their offspring at the expense of his investment in her and her offspring (Buss et al. 1992: 251).

The reference to polygyny is significant for our purposes because *The Beguiled* and Boccaccio's tale deal precisely with this topic. The story of Masetto deals explicitly with the reproductive *consequences* of polygynous mating: children and the provision for their support. How are we to read the utter absence of jealousy on the part of the nuns in Boccaccio's tale? To what extent is this about female psychology? Marga Cottino-Jones argues that the story of Masetto is fantastic and essentially a male dream. She points out that the monastery is unnamed and situated in a vague place suggestive more of the imagination than of a concrete setting (7). This, coupled with the allusions to the garden of Eden, creates a sense of unreality amounting not to a female point of view but to that of Masetto — very much in line with the sexual asymmetry outlined above:

The image of the garden creates at once a symbolic connection with an Earthly Paradise situation [...] and consequently with an imaginary space even further distanced from real life than the monistero or the orto. It is within this carefully constructed imaginary context that the female desire is voiced in such a way that it becomes also securely contained within the parameters of this fantastic abode, where the sexual games between Masetto and the nuns take place (Cottino-Jones: 8).

Genetically speaking and from a sociobiological point of view, the "mute" gardener is the one who stands to gain from being in a harem — not the nine nuns. And yet, no plausible emotional reaction comes from these women who, despite their initial sexual assertiveness, end up acting like sexual dolls at the beck and call of the male. This casts Boccaccio's favorable attitude toward women in a peculiar and ironic light.

On the other hand, the self-avowed misogynist Siegel, ends up portraying female emotions and behavior in a much more believable and sociobiologically well-grounded manner. The women at Martha's finishing school cannot bear the thought of non-exclusive mating rights with respect to McBurney and reject him precisely because he is unwilling to commit. His role as the proto-male is well illustrated by the great suspicion toward all men harbored in the minds of the females in *The Beguiled*. Hallie, for example, says to McBurney: "Men are the same, no matter what color" while Edwina generalizes as follows: "I don't suppose Yankees are different from other men. I don't trust any of them." In this tragic vision of human reproductive emotions, the male and female are like the incompatible compass points from Kipling's "Ballad of East and West": "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

Another female stance undermining Boccaccio's allegedly philogynist position has to do with pregnancy. An ancestral woman who had not secured a male's support before mating would have been endangering the survival of her future offspring, i.e., this would have constituted a maladaptive behavior, and corresponding emotions would have evolved to favor a cautious female attitude. As David Buss puts it,

in human evolutionary history, asymmetries with respect to reproduction have led men and women to pursue different reproductive strategies (Trivers 1972). These strategies sometimes conflict with one another. [...] In humans and other mammals, male investment tends to be smaller than female investment. [...] In this context, female reproductive strategy is expected, relative to male strategy, to be more discriminating, involving withholding of mating until sufficient resources have been invested or promised by the male or until the “best” male is found. Indiscriminate copulation tends to be costly for females (1989: 735–36).

In this respect, Edwina’s prudent reaction toward McBurney’s advances and her insistence on the promise of a real engagement to him correspond to what should be expected of a real woman equipped with a real evolved mind and existing in the real world as opposed to a masculine fantasy. Such a fantasy, on the other hand, should feature women who never worry about pregnancy precisely because this recklessness corresponds to the male’s reproductive interests (see above). This is what we find in Boccaccio’s tale where two nuns are considering the possibility of seducing Masetto: “But what if we become pregnant?” said her companion. “What’s going to happen then?” “You’re beginning to worry about things before they’ve even happened. We can cross that bridge if and when we come to it” (Boccaccio: 238; cf. Limoli 289). This accommodating behavior certainly makes Boccaccio’s nine women seem “nicer” than their nine demonic counterparts in Siegel’s hateful vision of femininity, but the nuns around Masetto essentially disappear as females *beings* and exist only as vague female outlines. This is summed by Marilyn Migiel as follows: “Boccaccio [...] provides women with the opportunity to speak their desire — but the voice of female desire appears to emerge more clearly when female desire is consistent with male desire” (82).

Finally, when considering the behavior of Boccaccio’s nuns, one is struck by its homogeneity: all nine pursue the same reproductive strategy, namely, throwing all caution to the winds and mating with Masetto as much as his vigor allows. His sexual exhaustion, although it may look like a setback, can also be viewed in the context of the masculine dream of unlimited sexual access, i.e., it is a “pleasant” form of fatigue. This absence of variety in female behavior is not what we find in *The Beguiled* where Edwina’s prudent position comes into sharp contrast with Carol’s aggressive sexuality.

Karyn Kay calls Carol “the school hussy” (32) as does Gina Herring (214) — an understandable evaluation in light of the adventurous seventeen-year-old’s willingness to throw herself at McBurney even while he is immobilized by his battle wound. However, in sociobiological terms, “hussy” is merely an expressive label for a real reproductive strategy discussed by evolutionary psychologists as part of the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy. As Helen Fisher puts it, “during our long evolutionary history [...] some women elected to be relatively faithful to a single man in order to reap a lot of benefits from him; others engaged in clandestine sex with many men to acquire resources from each. [...] Woman—the Madonna or the whore” (94). And so, while Edwina adopts the Madonna approach to her relationship with McBurney, Carol plays the “whore.” The Madonna connection is all the more poignant here in light of the above-mentioned pietá painting at the centre of Martha’s sexual dream where Edwina plays a prominent role. And of course, Martha’s sexual approach to dealing with McBurney is yet a third form of mating behavior in the story. The bottom line is that the different female reproductive strategies illustrated by Siegel’s film constitute a realistic representation of women as individuals rather than a sexualized collective image produced by Masetto’s mind in Boccaccio’s tale. It ought to be noted that every one of the nine women in *The Beguiled* has a name while the nuns in *The Decameron* remain nameless. Boccaccio’s male, on the other hand, does have a name, which makes sense since the story is his dream.

Despite my disagreement with Gina Herring’s attempt to acquit *The Beguiled* of misogyny, I must partially agree with her when she writes: “Although the movie does perpetuate some stereotypes about female sexual repression, jealousy, and hysteria, it allows women to be passionate protagonists rather than passive victims. To say that the film hates women is to accept the notion of fierce sexual desire and competition is unnatural, predatory, dangerous, potentially fatal in women” (215). The film does project a hateful image of women, but it does not view them as mere wind-up toys, the latter being precisely the problem with Boccaccio’s approach. Thus, paradoxically, Boccaccio’s more “progressive” representation of women ends up failing to do justice to the female mind while Siegel’s “backward” approach is more true to life — despite the film’s misogyny. Foster Hirsch says that *The Beguiled* is “seemingly feminine in its

point of view, yet ultimately a fiercely misogynistic film” (16). I would modify and reverse the two opposing parts of this assessment, i.e., the film is “fiercely misogynistic” and yet “feminine in its point of view.”

Conversely, in light of the foregoing, one can follow only up to a certain point Millicent Marcus’ assessment of the way Boccaccio represents female characters: “[*The Decameron* is] a collection whose framestory owes much to the *Frauendienst* of the courtly love tradition and whose *novelle*, if not always reverential toward women, nonetheless accord them a freedom and dignity equal to that of their male counterparts” (23). Admittedly, female sexual desire is satisfied in the tale of Masetto, but this satisfaction is still part of Masetto’s original scheme: the acquisition of mating rights to a group of women. And this scheme does not take into account the dynamics of inter-female competition — an oversight with no consequences for the male. The fact that Siegel’s film does deal with these consequences cannot be ignored. Therefore, Dennis Bingham is absolutely right in arguing that “[*The Beguiled*] is a film divided against itself, fascinating and maddening in its contradictions, contradictions exacerbated by obligatory last-minute attempts to redeem the Eastwood character, a stab at recuperation of which the film itself doesn’t appear convinced” (205). Just as Boccaccio delivers only in part on the promise made in the preface to accommodate the female point of view, so too Donald Siegel’s misogynist position gives us a limited amount of rhetorical firepower for drawing clear ideological battle lines. In the end, neither the twentieth-century film nor the medieval tale corresponds to initial expectations.

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