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Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy II

Virtue and Expediency:

From Dante to Boccaccio to Montaigne

Dante Alighieri wrote *the Inferno* wandering through Italy in exile from Florence between 1306 and 1315. Giovanni Boccaccio, an avid Dante scholar, wrote *the Decameron* a little over forty years later between 1349 and 1352 right after Italy had been devastated by the plague in 1348. Lastly, a couple of centuries later, Michel de Montaigne wrote his *Essays* between 1571 and 1592. The three works touch upon the theme of virtue versus expediency. Each author either directly through a set of philosophical claims or indirectly through the narrative shows us his judgment over value of virtue versus the value of expediency. How does this judgment evolve as we go from Dante to Boccaccio to Montaigne and why?

Of the three works, Dante's *the Inferno* is the first written and the most fervently religious. Dante grew up in a golden age for Florence where according to the following inscription from the Palazzo de Podesta from 1255: "[Florence] possessed of every good, […] ha[d] defeated her enemies in war and in great battles. […]. She decide[d] everything; she regulate[d] everything with sure laws." The prominence of Florence made it a central point in the battle between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. The Catholic influence in Dante's Florence was very strong, but the Catholic Church's corruption also proliferated. In 1301, Dante was exiled from Florence for fighting against the Black Guelphs, who supported the interests of the papacy. Dante was, therefore, a devout Catholic but at the same time an outsider to the power ladder

within the Catholic Church. These circumstances help us understand Dante's radicalized view on sin and virtue in the *Inferno*.

Because it is mainly a religious view, Dante's assessment in the Inferno of the value of virtue versus expediency is both simple and punitive. For Dante there is only one true path of virtue: "when I had journey half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, I had lost the path that does not stray" (I 1-4). Dante shows great admiration for the Latin classic poets and especially for Virgil: "O light and honor of all other poets, may my long study and the intense love that made me search your volume serve me now. You are my master and my author […]" (I 82-85). He, however, makes Virgil immediately reject his own gods: "And I was born, though late, sub Julio, and lived in Rome under the good Augustus –the season of the false and lying gods" (I:70-73). In doing this, Dante removes any competition to the moral authority of the Christian God to whom he shows great deference as shown in the inscription above the Gate of Hell: "Through me the way into the suffering city, […]; my maker was divine authority, the highest wisdom, and the primal love. […]. Abandon every hope, who enter here" (III 1-9). This last line foreshadows Dante's unyielding and retributive mood through the rest of the poem. Therefore, for Dante there is no real competition to the morality of Christianity and the main concern in *the Inferno* is to walk through life going through the true and only path set by God. Interestingly, Dante associates the sins that are dishonest use trickery and value expediency over virtue with the worse punishments in the lower circles of hell. The flatterers, the seducers, the hypocrites, the fraudulent counselors, the sowers of scandal and schism, the falsifiers are all in the 8th circle of hell, while the worse of all, the traitors, are in the 9th circle of hell. For Dante, fraud is worse than murder or any other sin. This underlines the fact that for Dante any other

consideration for the sake of expediency or even justice is secondary, as all that matters is God's will. In Dante's world, any worldly gains pale in comparison to the consequences in the afterlife.

There is no doubt that Boccaccio was an admirer of Dante and of his Divine Comedy, as his writing of the *Trattatello in Laude di Dante* (a Treatise in Praise of Dante) and of the *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* (Expositions about the Comedy of Dante) shows. And G.H. McWilliam notes that the Decameron falls within the definition of a comedy: "foul and horrible at the beginning, in the end felicitous, desirable and pleasing" (xlii) and that because of this the Decameron has been called the '*Human Comedy*' in analogy to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In spite of this, the purpose and tone of *the Decameron* is markedly different from that of *the Inferno*. Boccaccio states in the prologue that his purpose is "to provide succor and diversion for the ladies, but only for those who are in love" (3). In the epilogue, he further goes on to say that his histories were not designed to be told "in a church, of whose affairs one must speak with a chaste mind and a pure tongue" (799) and that "anyone who studies [the Decameron's histories] for the usefulness and profit they may bring him, he will not be disappointed" (800). Hence, *the Decameron* is clearly not a religious work like *the Inferno* and its purpose is much more pragmatic and mundane: to entertain and to sharpen one's wits for one's own profit.

The characters in many of the histories of the Decameron try to use cunning and trickery for their own advantage sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully. On the one hand, there are the success histories in the use of cunning and trickery. Some characters successfully use cunning to avoid danger such as Melchizedek the Jew. Some successfully use trickery to protect their reputation against prejudice such as the daughter of the Sultan of Babylon. Some others are

successful in using trickery to protect or take revenge against previous acts of trickery against them such as Bernabo de Genoa's wife. Some frivolously and successfully use trickery to satisfy their own desires such as Masetto and Rustico. And yet some others use further trickery to avoid being punished while on the brink of being exposed such as Friar Cipolla and Pietro di Vincolo's wife. On the other hand, we have the examples of trickery being caught and severely punished such as in the histories of Friar Alberto and of the scholar and the widow who is for example "forced to spend a whole day, in mid-July, at the top of a tower, where, being completely naked, she is exposed to flies and gadflies and the rays of the sun" (585) which is not a pleasant result of her use of trickery. All these examples lead us to the conclusion that trickery sometimes has desirable consequences and sometimes is severely punished. Boccaccio does not preach like Dante or elaborates further on philosophical claims about the virtue of his character's actions. There is, however, an underlying and unifying theme in his histories: pragmatism. Trickery is good in so far as we can use it for either or own benefit or even for society benefit as long as we are lucky or adroit enough not to get caught and suffer the consequences.

Montaigne is the most recent of the three authors, and his views on the matter of expediency versus virtue are more complex and nuanced than those of Dante and Boccaccio. Montaigne, for example, associates trickery with intelligence and directness with obtuseness in *on Cannibals*: "[Men of intelligence] never present things just as they are but twist and disguise them. […]. Or one so ignorant that he has no material with which to construct false theories and make them credible" (108). This association of trickery with something good (intelligence) and of honesty with something bad (ignorance) indicates that Montaigne holds a more circumscribed opinion compared to Dante's pious and inflexible view. In spite of this, we find that Montaigne's view

of expediency versus virtue is more scrupulous compared to that of Boccaccio. For example, Montaigne condemns treachery and disloyalty as going against human nature later in *on Cannibals*: "But no man's brain has yet been found so disordered as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty" (114). Also in *the Power of Imagination*, Montaigne tells us his apprehension against trickery: "I am an enemy to all subtle deeds of deception, and I hate to take part in trickery, not only in sport but even to obtain an advantage; if the action is not wicked, the way to it is" (41). But then he goes on to present in the same essay some examples of trickery used for good that he does not seem to condemn such as in medicine or to cure impotence. We must note, however, that for Montaigne, expediency and winning are not the only things that count: "The true victory lies in battle rather than in survival; the prize of valour in fighting, not in winning" (117) and "there are defeats […] that are as splendid as victories" (116).

This duality is what makes Montaigne's view more complex than those of Dante and Boccaccio. Dante seems mostly concerned with strict rules that are applied almost mechanically without any other consideration, and Boccaccio's histories seem mostly concerned with expediency rather than virtue. For Montaigne, however, there is a more perfect and complex moral compass that comes from within: "I have my own laws and my own court to judge me, and I refer to these rather than elsewhere. I certainly restrain my actions out of deference to others, but I understand them only by my own light" (239). In this regard, we see that Montaigne is more egotistical than Dante and Boccaccio. While Dante has a great deference for the Latin classics and for Christianity, Montaigne believes that he possesses a criterion within himself superior to that of others: "To base the reward for virtuous actions on other men's approval is to rely on too uncertain and shaky a foundation. […] the good opinion of the crowd is injurious" (238). And

while Boccaccio seems mostly concerned with pragmatism, Montaigne condemns those who use selfish expediency as their main moral compass: “God preserve me from being an honest man according to the criterion that I daily see every man apply to himself, to his own advantage!” (238).

The simplest of the three views of virtue and expediency is perhaps Boccaccio, as he simplifies things by concentrating on pragmatism and avoiding entering in God’s terrain or in deep philosophical discussions. Dante is next, with a fervent and inflexible religious view where the final consequences of a non-virtuous life are too great to consider any other factors. Finally, Montaigne develops this view into something more complex by focusing on philosophy instead of religion and making his view more egotistical by trying to find the answers of what virtue encompasses and how it is reconciled with expediency within him.

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