

Federigo's Falcon

from *The Decameron*

Tale by GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO (jō-vā'nē bō-kā'chē-ō')

Comparing Literature of the World

The Storytelling Tradition Across Cultures

The Canterbury Tales and *The Decameron* The 14th-century Italian collection of tales known as *The Decameron*, by Giovanni Boccaccio, greatly influenced Chaucer's writing of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Points of Comparison As you read one of Boccaccio's famous tales, compare it with Chaucer's work in terms of **narrative structure** and **themes** relating to love and human nature.



Build Background

Plagued by Love Boccaccio lived during the Italian Renaissance—a time of great achievements in art, music, and literature. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron* is a collection of tales set within a frame story. The frame, or outer story, is about ten characters who flee to the country to escape a plague that is ravaging Florence, Italy. For ten days they amuse themselves by telling stories, each day selecting a "king" or "queen" who presides over the storytelling. Their 100 tales make up the bulk of *The Decameron*. As this selection begins, the queen of the day decides that it is time to tell her own story.

"Federigo's Falcon" is a tale of courtly love. In medieval times, marriages were often arranged. As a result, couples sometimes looked outside marriage for romantic attachments. This practice was not considered scandalous as long as the love remained idealized. Federigo is devoted to a married woman, Monna Giovanna (mō'nā jō'vā'nā), and will sacrifice anything to gain her love.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

anguish compel discretion meagerly presumption
commend deign legitimate oblige reproach



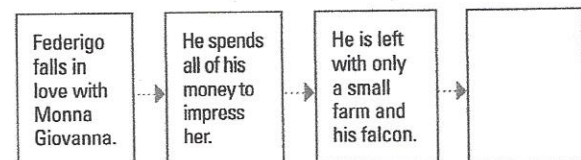
LaserLinks: Background for Reading
Cultural Connection

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS PLOT The **plot** of a literary work consists of all the actions and events in the work. A plot moves forward because of a **conflict**—a struggle between opposing forces. As you read the story, notice how the plot develops around the main conflict.

ACTIVE READING ANALYZING CAUSE AND EFFECT In a well-crafted story, a single event often has an effect that becomes the cause of still another effect and so on. To identify true cause-and-effect relationships in "Federigo's Falcon," make sure the relationship between events is causal by connecting them with the word *because*. If the sentence makes sense, the relationship is causal.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read this story about love and its sacrifices, try to keep track of the relationships between events by making a cause-and-effect diagram like the one started here.



Federigo's

F A L C O N

Filomena had already finished speaking, and when the Queen saw there was no one left to speak except for Dioneo,¹ who was exempted because of his special privilege, she herself with a cheerful face said:

It is now my turn to tell a story and, dearest ladies, I shall do so most willingly with a tale similar in some respects to the preceding one, its purpose being not only to show you how much power your beauty has over the gentle heart, but also so that you yourselves may learn, whenever it is fitting, to be the donors of your favors instead of always leaving this act to the whim of Fortune,² who, as it happens, on most occasions bestows such favors with more abundance than discretion.

You should know, then, that Coppo di Borghese Domenichi,³ who once lived in our city and perhaps still does, a man of great and respected authority in our times, one most illustrious and worthy of eternal fame both for his way of life and his ability much more than for the nobility of his blood, often took delight, when he was an old man, in discussing things from the past with his neighbors and with others. He knew how to do this well, for he was more logical and had a better memory and a more eloquent style of speaking than any other man. Among the many beautiful tales he told, there was one he would often tell about a young

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

man who once lived in Florence named Federigo, the son of Messer Filippo Alberighi,⁴ renowned above all other men in Tuscany for his prowess in arms and for his courtliness.

As often happens to most men of gentle breeding, he fell in love, with a noble lady named Monna Giovanna, in her day considered to be one of the most beautiful and most charming ladies that ever there was in Florence; and in order to win her love, he participated in jousts and tournaments, organized and gave banquets, spending his money without restraint; but she, no less virtuous than beautiful, cared little for these things he did on her behalf, nor did she care for the one who did them. Now, as Federigo was spending far beyond his means and getting nowhere, as can easily happen, he lost his wealth and was reduced to poverty, and was left with nothing to his name but his little farm (from whose revenues he lived very meagerly) and one falcon, which was among the finest of its kind in the world.

More in love than ever, but knowing that he would never be able to live the way he wished to in the city, he went to live at Campi, where his farm was. There he passed his time hawking whenever he could, imposing on no one, and enduring his poverty patiently. Now one day, during the time that Federigo was reduced to these extremes, it happened that the husband of Monna Giovanna fell ill, and realizing death was near, he made his last will: he was very rich, and he left everything to his son, who was just

1. Dioneo (dē'ō-nā'ō).

2. Fortune: a personification of the power that supposedly distributes good and bad luck to people.

3. Coppo di Borghese Domenichi (kōp'pō dē bōr-gā'zē dō-mē'nē-kē).

4. Messer Filippo Alberighi (mās'sēr fē-lēp'pō āl'bē-rē'gē).

WORDS TO KNOW **discretion** (dĭ-skrĕsh'ən) *n.* a sense of carefulness and restraint in one's actions or words
meagerly (mē'gēr-lē) *adv.* poorly; scantily



La Pia de Tolomei (1868–1880), Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Oil on canvas, Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas.

growing up, and since he had also loved Monna Giovanna very much, he made her his heir should his son die without any legitimate children; and then he died.

Monna Giovanna was now a widow, and every summer, as our women usually do, she would go to the country with her son to one of their estates very close by to Federigo's farm. Now this young boy of hers happened to become more and more friendly with Federigo and he began to enjoy birds and dogs; and after seeing

Federigo's falcon fly many times, it made him so happy that he very much wished it were his own, but he did not dare to ask for it, for he could see how precious it was to Federigo. During this time, it happened that the young boy took ill, and his mother was much grieved, for he was her only child and she loved him dearly; she would spend the entire day by his side, never ceasing to comfort him, asking him time and again if there was anything he wished, begging him to tell her what it might be, for if it was possible to obtain

WORDS
TO
KNOW

legitimate (lə-jīt'ə-mīt) *adj.* born of parents who are legally married to each other

*She knew that Federigo
had been in love with her
for some time now.*

it, she would certainly do everything in her power to get it. After the young boy had heard her make this offer many times, he said:

"Mother, if you can arrange for me to have Federigo's falcon, I think I would get well quickly."

When the lady heard this, she was taken aback for a moment, and then she began thinking what she could do about it. She knew that Federigo had been in love with her for some time now, but she had never deigned to give him a second look; so, she said to herself:

"How can I go to him, or even send someone, and ask for this falcon of his, which is, as I have heard tell, the finest that ever flew, and furthermore, his only means of support? And how can I be so insensitive as to wish to take away from this nobleman the only pleasure which is left to him?"

And involved in these thoughts, knowing that she was certain to have the bird if she asked for it, but not knowing what to say to her son, she stood there without answering him. Finally the love she bore her son persuaded her that she should make him happy, and no matter what the consequences might be, she would not send for the bird, but rather go herself to fetch it and bring it back to him; so she answered her son:

"My son, cheer up and think only of getting well, for I promise you that first thing tomorrow morning I shall go and fetch it for you."

The child was so happy that he showed some improvement that very day. The following morning, the lady, accompanied by another woman, as if they were out for a stroll, went to Federigo's modest little house and asked for him. Since the weather for the past few days had not

been right for hawking, Federigo happened to be in his orchard attending to certain tasks, and when he heard that Monna Giovanna was asking for him at the door, he was so surprised and happy that he rushed there; as she saw him coming, she rose to greet him with womanly grace, and once Federigo had welcomed her most courteously, she said:

"How do you do, Federigo?" Then she continued, "I have come to make amends for the harm you have suffered on my account by loving me more than you should have, and in token of this, I intend to have a simple meal with you and this companion of mine this very day."

To this Federigo humbly replied: "Madonna,⁵ I have no recollection of ever suffering any harm because of you; on the contrary: so much good have I received from you that if ever I was worth anything, it was because of your worth and the love I bore for you; and your generous visit is certainly so very dear to me that I would spend all over again all that I spent in the past, but you have come to a poor host."

And having said this, he humbly led her through the house and into his garden, and because he had no one there to keep her company, he said:

"My lady, since there is no one else, this good woman, who is the wife of the farmer here, will keep you company while I see to the table."

Though he was very poor, Federigo until now had never realized to what extent he had wasted his wealth; but this morning, the fact that he had nothing in the house with which he could honor the lady for the love of whom he had in the past entertained countless people, gave him cause to reflect: in great anguish, he cursed himself and his fortune, and like someone out of his senses he started running here and there throughout the house, but unable to find either money or anything he might be able to pawn, and since it

5. *Madonna*: Italian for "my lady," a polite form of address used in speaking to a married woman. "Monna" is a contraction of this term.

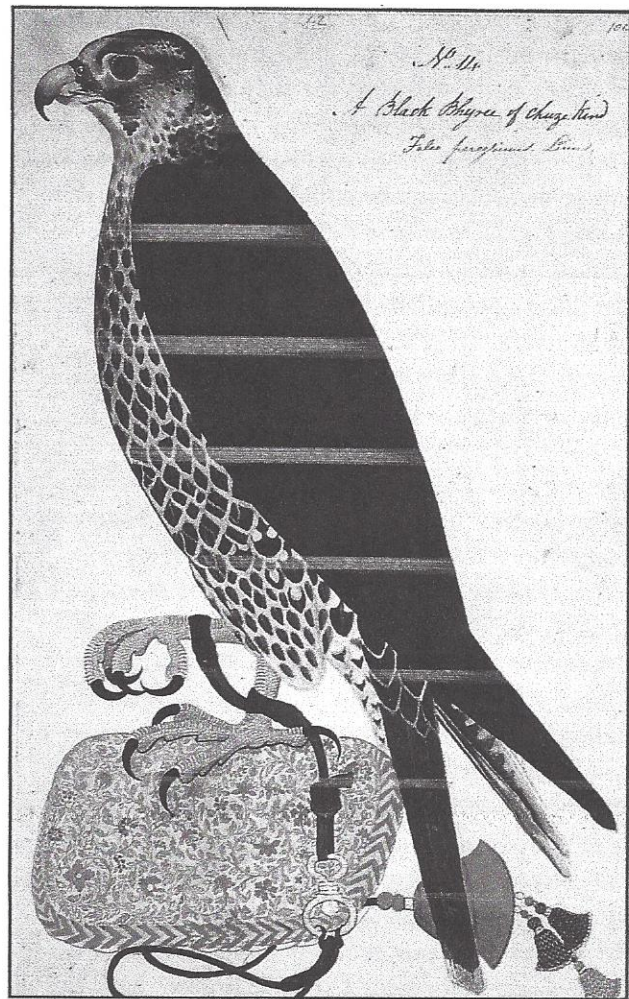
WORDS
TO
KNOW

deign (dān) *v.* to consider worthy of one's dignity; condescend
anguish (ăng'gwīsh) *n.* agony

was getting late and he was still very much set on serving this noble lady some sort of meal, but unwilling to turn for help to even his own farmer (not to mention anyone else), he set his eyes upon his good falcon, which was sitting on its perch in a small room, and since he had nowhere else to turn, he took the bird, and finding it plump, he decided that it would be a worthy food for such a lady. So, without giving the matter a second thought, he wrung its neck and quickly gave it to his servant girl to pluck, prepare, and place on a spit to be roasted with care; and when he had set the table with the whitest of tablecloths (a few of which he still had left), he returned, with a cheerful face, to the lady in his garden and announced that the meal, such as he was able to prepare, was ready.

The lady and her companion rose and went to the table together with Federigo, who waited upon them with the greatest devotion, and they ate the good falcon without knowing what it was they were eating. Then, having left the table and spent some time in pleasant conversation, the lady thought it time now to say what she had come to say, and so she spoke these kind words to Federigo:

“Federigo, if you recall your former way of life and my virtue, which you perhaps mistook for harshness and cruelty, I have no doubt at all that you will be amazed by my presumption when you hear what my main reason for coming here is; but if you had children, through whom you might have experienced the power of parental love, I feel certain that you would, at least in part, forgive me. But, just as you have no child, I do have one, and I cannot escape the laws common to all mothers; the force of such laws compels me to follow them, against my own will and against good manners and duty, and to ask of you a gift which I know is most precious to you; and it is naturally so, since your extreme condition has left you no other delight,



Peregrine Falcon. Raja Serfogee of Tanjore Collection, by permission of The British Library.

no other pleasure, no other consolation; and this gift is your falcon, which my son is so taken by that if I do not bring it to him, I fear his sickness will grow so much worse that I may lose him. And therefore I beg you, not because of the love that you bear for me, which does not oblige you in the least, but because of your own nobleness, which you have shown to be greater than that of all others in practicing courtliness, that you be pleased to give it to me, so that I may say that I have saved the life of my son by means of this

WORDS **presumption** (prĭ-zŭmp'shən) *n.* bold or outrageous behavior
 TO **compel** (kəm-pĕl') *v.* to urge irresistibly; constrain
 KNOW **oblige** (ə-blĭj') *v.* to make it one's duty to act

gift, and because of it I have placed him in your debt forever.”

When he heard what the lady requested and knew that he could not oblige her because he had given her the falcon to eat, Federigo began to weep in her presence, for he could not utter a word in reply. The lady at first thought his tears were caused more by the sorrow of having to part with the good falcon than by anything else, and she was on the verge of telling him she no longer wished it, but she held back and waited for Federigo’s reply once he stopped weeping. And he said:

“My lady, ever since it pleased God for me to place my love in you, I have felt that Fortune has been hostile to me in many ways, and I have complained of her, but all this is nothing compared to what she has just done to me, and I shall never be at peace with her again, when I think how you have come here to my poor home, where, when it was rich, you never deigned to come, and how you requested but a small gift, and Fortune worked to make it impossible for me to give it to you; and why this is so I shall tell you in a few words. When I heard that you, out of your kindness, wished to dine with me, I considered it only fitting and proper, taking into account your excellence and your worthiness, that I should honor you, according to my possibilities, with a more precious food than that which I usually serve to other people. So I thought of the falcon for which you have just asked me and of its value and I judged it a food worthy of you, and this very day I had it roasted and served to you as best I could. But seeing now that you desired it another way, my sorrow in not being able to serve you is so great that never shall I be able to console myself again.”

And after he had said this, he laid the feathers, the feet, and the beak of the bird before her as proof. When the lady heard and saw this, she first reproached him for having killed a falcon such as this to serve as a meal to a woman. But

then to herself she commended the greatness of his spirit, which no poverty was able, or would be able, to diminish; then, having lost all hope of getting the falcon and thus, perhaps, of improving the health of her son, she thanked Federigo both for the honor paid to her and for his good intentions, and then left in grief to return to her son. To his mother’s extreme sorrow, whether in disappointment in not having the falcon or because his illness inevitably led to it, the boy passed from this life only a few days later.

After the period of her mourning and her bitterness had passed, the lady was repeatedly urged by her brothers to remarry, since she was very rich and still young; and although she did not wish to do so, they became so insistent that remembering the worthiness of Federigo and his last act of generosity—that is, to have killed such a falcon to do her honor—she said to her brothers:

“I would prefer to remain a widow, if only that would be pleasing to you, but since you wish me to take a husband, you may be sure that I shall take no man other than Federigo degli Alberighi.”

In answer to this, her brothers, making fun of her, replied:

“You foolish woman, what are you saying? How can you want him? He hasn’t a penny to his name.”

To this she replied: “My brothers, I am well aware of what you say, but I would much rather have a man who lacks money than money that lacks a man.”

Her brothers, seeing that she was determined and knowing Federigo to be of noble birth, no matter how poor he was, accepted her wishes and gave her with all her riches in marriage to him; when he found himself the husband of such a great lady, whom he had loved so much and who was so wealthy besides, he managed his financial affairs with more prudence than in the past and lived with her happily the rest of his days. ❖

*Translated by Mark Musa
and Peter Bondanella*

WORDS
TO
KNOW

reproach (rĭ-prōch’) v. to express disapproval of or disappointment in
commend (kə-mĕnd’) v. to express approval of; praise

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What is your reaction to the events in this story?

Comprehension Check

- How does Federigo lose his fortune?
- What happens during Monna Giovanna's visit to Federigo's house?

Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING ANALYZING CAUSE AND EFFECT** Get together with a classmate and compare your cause-and-effect diagrams in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. What does the story's chain of events suggest about the relationship between Federigo and Monna Giovanna?

3. Do you think Federigo acts nobly or foolishly? Use evidence to support your answer.

4. What is your opinion of Monna Giovanna?

THINK ABOUT

- her response to Federigo's love for her
- her visit to Federigo's house
- her response when Federigo tells her of the bird's fate
- her reason for taking Federigo as her husband

5. What do you think is the most important **theme**, or message about human nature, conveyed by this story?

Extend Interpretations

6. **What If?** Imagine that Monna Giovanna had explained the purpose for her visit as soon as she arrived at Federigo's house. What impact, if any, would this earlier disclosure have had on Monna Giovanna's son? on Federigo? on Monna Giovanna's decision to remarry?

7. **Connect to Life** In Boccaccio's time, women of Monna Giovanna's social class were expected to be married. Do women today feel the same pressure to marry? Are women and men under equal pressure to marry? Support your opinions with examples.

8. **Points of Comparison** Money plays an important role in both "Federigo's Falcon" and Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale." Compare Federigo's response to money with that of the "three rioters" in Chaucer's tale. What do the characters' reactions reveal about their personalities?

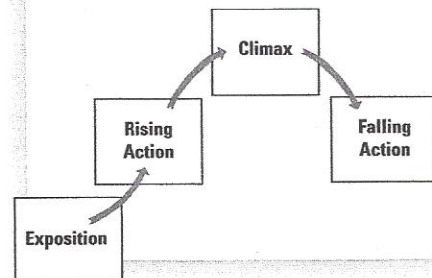
Literary Analysis

PLOT A narrative's **plot** can often be traced by identifying the following four basic elements:

- **exposition**, in which the characters are introduced, the setting is established, and the major conflict is identified
- **rising action**, in which suspense builds as the conflict intensifies and complications arise
- **a climax**, or turning point, which often occurs when a main character makes an important discovery or decision
- **falling action**, which shows the results of the climax and ties up loose ends

The events that make up the plot are driven by **conflict**. In "Federigo's Falcon," the main conflict is that between Federigo and Monna Giovanna. Federigo's attempts to make Monna Giovanna fall in love with him and her indifference to him are at the heart of each element of the plot.

Cooperative Learning Activity Use the cause-and-effect diagram you made on page 171 to help you decide which events make up the exposition, the rising action, the climax, and the falling action of "Federigo's Falcon." Discuss your decisions with a group of your classmates. Then label and briefly describe the story's plot elements on a diagram like the one below.



Writing Options

- 1. Monna Giovanna's Diary** Imagine Monna Giovanna's feelings when she discovers that she has dined on the falcon. Write a diary entry that she might compose to express her thoughts and feelings about the incident.
- 2. Frame Story** Develop an idea for your own frame story. Using *The Decameron* as a model, determine the characters and setting of your frame, a reason for the characters to tell stories, and the duration of their storytelling. Share your ideas with other students.
- 3. Points of Comparison** In a draft of an essay, compare and contrast Monna Giovanna's views about love and marriage with those portrayed in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Include specific examples from both stories.

Writing Handbook

See page 1367: Compare and Contrast.

Activities & Explorations

- 1. Wedding Gift** Think of the perfect wedding gift from Federigo to Monna Giovanna or from Monna Giovanna to Federigo. Then create the gift itself, or make a model or illustration of it. Keep in mind the giver's personality and financial status.



~ ART

- 2. Pantomime Presentation** With a classmate, create a pantomime depicting Monna Giovanna's visit to Federigo's home. Make sure that your facial expressions and gestures reflect emotions appropriate to the actions.

~ PERFORMING

Inquiry & Research

- 1. The Art of Falconry** Find out more about falcons and falconry. How does a falcon go after its prey? How is a falcon trapped and trained for sport?



More Online:
Research Starter

www.mcdougallittell.com

- 2. Long Ago Love Traditions** Prepare an oral report on the traditions of courtly love during the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance. Include information

on what men did to woo their ladies and how the ladies were expected to respond. You might even suggest other things Federigo might have done to win Monna Giovanna's love.

Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE A: SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS Classify the words in each of the following pairs as synonyms or antonyms.

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. legitimate—lawful | 6. presumption—impudence |
| 2. commend—blame | 7. oblige—release |
| 3. compel—force | 8. anguish—sorrow |
| 4. reproach—compliment | 9. meagerly—abundantly |
| 5. discretion—recklessness | 10. deign—refuse |

EXERCISE B: WORD KNOWLEDGE Work with a small group of classmates to devise a game show, using the vocabulary words as either clues or answers. Think about popular game shows you have seen to help you decide on a format. From your group, pick a host, a helper, and judges, and then play your game with the class.

WORDS TO KNOW	anguish	deign	meagerly	presumption
	commend	discretion	oblige	reproach
	compel	legitimate		

Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth lesson on how to expand your vocabulary, see page 1182.