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Authorizing the Reader: Dante and the Ends of the *Decameron*

by

Natalie Ann Cleaver

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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University of California, Berkeley

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Professor Steven Botterill

Professor Timothy Hampton

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Abstract

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We now speak easily of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch as the *tre corone* of Italian literature, the three great foundational authors of the tradition, but there is no question who stands first among them. Not just for his historical primacy of place, or his commanding self-presentation, but also for his truly daunting range of influence, Dante Alighieri is the Italian poet with whom all others must reckon. He influenced the development of virtually every aspect of Italian culture, from literature and the Italian language itself, to theology, political philosophy, historical memory, and even constructions of national identity. Though this influence has been long-lasting, it was every bit as pervasive in his own age.

Few felt Dante's shadow more than Giovanni Boccaccio, one of the first in subsequent generations of writers in the vernacular who had to negotiate his relationship to his illustrious predecessor. Boccaccio was a great *Dantista* in his own right; in addition to giving the first set of public lectures on the *Commedia*, he also composed the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, in which he is the first to apply the epithet *divina* to the *Commedia*. Boccaccio obviously respected and admired Dante as a poet deeply. His minor works in particular demonstrate a profound engagement with the *Commedia*, and this relationship has been the subject of much recent scholarship.

The most puzzling case of Boccaccio's debts to Dante is his own great vernacular masterpiece: the *Decameron*. On the one hand, the *Decameron* signals its relationship to the *Commedia* in some very obvious ways: the structure of the 100 stories, its title, and the appearance of many of the same characters who populate the *Commedia*. On the other, past these obvious signs, the relationship begins to break down, or to seem merely superficial upon further investigation. Any analysis of this relationship is additionally complicated by the seemingly antithetical nature and tone of the two works.

This dissertation examines one of the crucial ways in which the *Decameron* seems to be antithetical to the *Commedia*: Boccaccio's construction of authorship. I argue that Boccaccio creates an authorial persona who intentionally represents his *Decameron* as flawed, contradictory, and full of error. This persona in turn claims a distinctly un-authoritative authorship, disavowing his control over meaning and insisting that readers alone are responsible

for how the *Decameron* is interpreted. This construction of authorship is not merely dissimilar to Dante's; I suggest instead that it is a conscious response to Dante's own masterful self-presentation as author that reflects a deep engagement with the *Commedia*. Where Dante demonstrates anxiety over possible misinterpretation, working to control and constrain modes of reading, Boccaccio's authorial persona emphasizes moments in which the *Decameron* is most open to multiple and conflicting interpretations.

The *Decameron* has long been understood to contain various structural and narrative ambivalences, apparent gaps in its creative and literary coherence. My dissertation reframes these seeming flaws as the "staging of failure" by Boccaccio, arguing that they are part of the same construction of the errant authorial persona. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio creates structures of expectation, makes programmatic declarations of intent, only later to draw attention to the text's failure to live up to those promises. (Thus, the simultaneously obvious and seemingly insubstantial references to the *Commedia* – the first of the great "failures" of the *Decameron*, is its failure to be Dantean.) Boccaccio's true authorial project in staging these failures is to train astute readers capable of understanding how texts produce meaning and generate authority.

Dedicated to the memory of G. Alec Stewart:  
physicist, philosopher, and professor.

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## PREFACE

After years of studying a work of literature, it is often difficult, if not out and out impossible, to recall our first experience with it, to unearth those first instinctive reactions and responses to an unfamiliar and unknown text. It would be well for me if that were the case with the *Decameron*, for, to be perfectly honest, my initial reaction to Boccaccio was something very akin to contempt. This was, I hasten to point out, long before I thought of becoming an Italianist, and long before graduate school even existed for me as a possibility.

It was, however, after I had read the *Commedia*, and most, if not all, of my primitive assessment of the *Decameron* derived from an unfavorable comparison of Boccaccio to Dante. The formal constraints, the meticulous control, the high intellectual, theological, and political concerns of the *Commedia* seemed to me at that time to be replaced in the *Decameron* with a wanton lack of structure, a disregard for philosophical concerns, bawdy sexuality, and foolishly trivial humor. I saw there neither Dante's care nor Dante's craft.

Later, long after my understanding of Boccaccio had deepened and changed, I discovered that I am not the first reader to have had this reaction to the *Decameron* and to the long shadow cast by Dante over Boccaccio's work. The positive version of my initial reaction was typified by De Sanctis, who solidified what was to become a commonplace of *Decameron* criticism for over a century: Boccaccio's "human comedy" was the counterpoint to Dante's divine one. For De Sanctis saw a fundamental change between the two writers, but valued Boccaccio precisely for what he perceived to be his anti-dantismo; for a spirit of congeniality and interest in the "natural" things of this world that represented the positive qualities of the Renaissance, in contradistinction to the dark austerity and superstitious mysticism of the Middle Ages: "Il mondo dello spirito se ne va: viene il mondo della natura. Questo mondo superficiale, appunto perchè vuoto di forze interne e spirituali, non ha serietà di mezzi e di scopo. Ciò che lo move non è Dio, nè la scienza, non l'amore unitivo dell'intelletto e dell'atto, la grande base del medio evo; ma è l'istinto o l'inclinazione naturale: vera e violenta reazione contro il misticismo." (547) De Sanctis's vision of Boccaccio was painfully long-reaching; it influenced a critical tradition that was forced to emphasize Boccaccio's difference from Dante in order to value his work, and which reified his association with the Renaissance based on that distinction. This tradition tacitly acknowledged that Boccaccio might lack Dante's *alto ingegno*, but in exchange glorified his embodiment of the *tranquillo* and *lieto* spirit of a new age, creating disparate and discrete realms of mastery for these two writers to occupy.

The problems with this influential approach to Boccaccio were legion, but it especially had the effect of obscuring and trivializing Boccaccio's debts to Dante. In the past two decades, however, a new interest in the relationship between the two has gained momentum, thanks in particular to Robert Hollander, whose scholarship helped to revitalize this particular arena of Boccaccio studies. New translations have appeared of Boccaccio's writing on Dante, including the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* and of the *Esposizioni sopra la comedia di Dante*. Scholarship on the Dantean overtones and referents of Boccaccio's writing has increased dramatically in recent years, particularly in relation to Boccaccio's "minor" works, like the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, the *Caccia di Diana*, the *Amorosa visione*, and the *Corbaccio*. Yet, unsurprisingly, the most complex and puzzling case of Dantean influence turns out to be Boccaccio's most familiar masterpiece. Much of the scholarship on Dante and the *Decameron* to-date has been involved in an act of recovery – of arguing persuasively that Boccaccio was in reality deeply engaged with Dante theoretically, poetically, and philosophically. Contrary to the previous



tradition, scholars became more willing to investigate the ways in which the *Decameron* interacts seriously with its major vernacular precursor, moving beyond an assessment that Dante's influence was merely accidentally linguistic or superficially commonplace.

With this new critical tradition as its foundation, and a now much more solid sense of the profound degree to which Dante is present in the *Decameron*, my project here continues along this trajectory. It takes as given the proposition that Hollander put forth, that Boccaccio "...is not only Dante's greatest champion but is deeply involved in thinking about Dante's *magnum opus* as he creates his own (*Boccaccio's Dante 2*).” But I wish to move forward, past the similarities, to consider the complexities of the *Decameron's* relationship to the *Commedia*, the ways in which, while being deeply indebted to and influenced by Dante, Boccaccio differs from and responds to him. For we may love something and be influenced by it, we may even imitate and champion it, but this does not mean to accept it uncritically or to become it – no more so for us than for Boccaccio. What follows began as my investigation into the ways in which the *Decameron* is anti-dantean, but consciously and thoughtfully so. In tracing Boccaccio's response to Dante, I have no desire to return to the De Sanctis approach to the *Decameron*; Boccaccio is no less “serious” or erudite than Dante, his concerns do not belong in an ahistorical fashion to a different time; he is not natural where Dante is theological, nor more concerned with the things of this world than the things above than his great precursor (who, after all, had very real, and very human concerns with poetry, politics, reputation, and memory). But there are yet distinct ways in which Boccaccio differs from Dante, ideologically, philosophically, and artistically.

A principle distinction, perhaps even *the* principle distinction, between these two poets is their relationship to writing and to their readers. Two more radically different modes of constructing authorship would be difficult to find. Where Dante works to constrain possible interpretation of his poem, to demonstrate a kind of mastery that would seem to define authority in an essential way, Boccaccio throws all caution to the wind, creating an authorial persona who denies his control over meaning in the text and who attempts instead to make his readers responsible for any interpretive significance they may find. I argue here that this negligent authorial persona is one of many kinds of “failures” that Boccaccio stages within the *Decameron*; failures that are intentionally present. This disavowal of his authorial status and representation of his *Decameron* as flawed, is, however, a carefully constructed posture, not a textual reality. These sites of failure become in fact sites of teaching, in a true authorial project of training readers to understand how texts produce authority and to question ridged assumptions about literary form and interpretation – a mechanism for training readers to deal with complex texts, to force them, not just to interpret, but to realize how and why they are doing so. Boccaccio's creation of an authorial persona that emphasizes the role of readers and the acts of interpretation they perform, is not just unlike Dante, but in response to him, reflecting a thoughtful engagement with him and his *Commedia*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No dissertation could be brought to conclusion without the faculty members who serve as the advisory committee and who must take first place among the many to whom thanks are due. Albert Ascoli has been my adviser during these years of graduate study and has served as the chair of this dissertation. Many people know his extraordinary scholarship; fewer know of his sincere dedication to his many students. I have benefited and will continue to benefit from the force of his critical acumen and insight, which have always been extended to me with tact and good will. He has been tireless in reading drafts and suggesting improvements, and equally tireless in his advocacy as I have navigated the early stages of scholarship and professionalism.

Professors Botterill, Hampton, and Kahn all served as readers and advisors for this dissertation – no student of medieval and renaissance literature could ask for a better committee. Steven Botterill guided me through my first graduate work on Dante in three separate directed studies, sharing his time and knowledge then with the same generosity and grace that he always has since. At those moments that must try a graduate student's soul, his humor and sympathetic encouragement have embodied the *Decameron's* opening line: “umana cosa è aver compassione”. His erudition is matched only by his patience, and I have been the fortunate beneficiary of them both. Timothy Hampton is the kind of professor one could wish multiplied many times over, though indeed, his boundless energy often gives that impression. I have learned so much from him that it would take the length of this dissertation to detail, but I am especially indebted to him for cultivating in me a deeper respect for the breadth and scope of literary production in the Renaissance. There is a vitality of thought in his scholarship and in his teaching that must be a model for intellectual life and work, one that I can only hope to emulate. For his advice, enthusiasm, and the many resources he has expended on my behalf, he has my eternal gratitude. I am particularly grateful to Victoria Kahn for the graduate seminar on dissertation writing that she designed and offered several years ago. Without that guidance on how to formulate, structure, complete, and revise a dissertation, I would have found this one much more difficult, if not impossible. With humility I can only add that the errors and weaknesses here are mine, but any limited good contained in these pages will have its roots in the training and advice I have received from this committee.

Moving from the individual to the institutional, I must also thank the Department of Italian Studies at large. Though a student in the Department of Comparative Literature, I always have been welcomed and encouraged as an Italianist, an interdisciplinary openness vital to any attempt at comparative study. The intellectual community and the conviviality of its faculty and students have challenged and enriched my work and intellectual life. Italian Studies has always been particularly gracious to me in the sharing of resources which are always limited at any university; they have consistently supported me financially and given me the opportunity to teach Italian language and literature. Special thanks are also due to Barbara Spackman, of Italian Studies and Comparative Literature, with whom I had the chance to make a few forays into the twentieth century, and whose work has served as a model for a comparative approach to literature. I also had the great privilege of taking the final graduate seminar offered at Berkeley by Louise George Clubb, emerita professor of Italian Studies and Comparative Literature. She illuminated what seemed to me to be the maze of *cinquecento* comedy, and it is an honor to have studied with her.

The University of California at Berkeley embodies the ideal of what public education can and should be. For the sake of those who come after us, this ideal must not be sacrificed to short-

sighted exigencies or political expedience. Berkeley is the intellectually stimulating and demanding environment I had always hoped to find, and beyond what I had hoped, characterized by an institutional culture that is open, honest, collegial, and collaborative. I am reminded of the famous anecdote of a faculty member at Columbia who told Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Mr. President, we are not employees of the university. We are the university." This is particularly true of an institution like Berkeley, where, though administrative responsibilities add to their workload, the faculty are never too busy for students. It is humbling indeed to be part of a community of such great scholars and researchers, and thanks are due to many other the faculty members here than those mentioned by name.

This final year of dissertation writing has been supported by a fellowship from the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, and I am profoundly grateful for the luxury of the period of focus and concentration for completing the work. I am equally grateful to the other Townsend Fellows of 2011-2012 – our weekly meetings and discussions have been challenging and inspirational. Two grants from the Medieval Academy of America and the Renaissance Society of America supported archival research for this project at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in November and December of 2011, and I would like to thank both of these institutions and the donors who make such grants possible.

The energetic, motivated, and brilliant group of people who come to study at Berkeley as graduate students are another of its great strengths. Among the talented colleagues with whom I have had the privilege of sharing ideas and work are many who have transformed and improved mine, especially Chris Churchill, Kfir Cohen, Seth Kimmel, Nandini Pandey, Jonathan Rowen, Ariel Shannon, and Fabiana Woodfin. Dissertation writing can be an isolating experience; these people are a reminder that scholarship and research work best when shared. Special mention must be made of three people with whom this journey began and ended: Jonathan Combs-Schilling, Tony Martire, and Scott Millsbaugh. The most extraordinary gift of these years has been to discover in these three not only excellent colleagues, but the dearest of friends.

As an undergraduate, I studied at the University of Pittsburgh, where I was first introduced to things Italian by Clare Godt (now emerita), Lina Insana, Dennis Looney, and Francesca Savoia. Lina was the program director during the first trip I ever took to Italy, and Dennis taught the first course I took on Ariosto – my first and greatest love of the Italian Renaissance. They both were ready with great patience and excellent advice as I prepared, first for a Fulbright, and then for a PhD program. Without both of them, I would have had neither the guts nor the brains to get into graduate school in the first place. I was also fortunate to arrive haphazardly at the University of Pittsburgh Honors College, where I had my first real exposure to the ideals of intellectual community and the practice of research. It was my home – the place that taught me to be a student – and my time there will always be remembered fondly; for the friends I made there, including Marina Antic, Jeff Aziz, Chris Chirdon, Neil Chudgar, and Dylan Sabo (all of whom, in what is surely a statistical anomaly, have made their way into the academy), my life and thinking are much richer. Alec Stewart, who was the founder and Dean of the Honors College, passed away two years ago. He is greatly missed by those who knew him, and his absence is a great loss to the university and the students he fought for. Alec will always be a model for me of intellectual curiosity, personal generosity, and rigor without cynicism.

Special thanks are also due to my partner, Allen Justh, who has endured the quotidian ups and downs of the dissertation process with patience and generosity at every stage, and to my sister, Amanda Cleaver, whose faith in me has supplied me with focus when I lacked it and clarity when I had none, in this as in all things.

### *Sempre essere in mutamento: Boccaccio's Equivocal Cornice*

In his final defense of the propriety and quality of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio reminds us that he is merely a scribe after all. This rhetorical stance, now so familiar to us from such renaissance writers as Ariosto, Rabelais, and Cervantes, allows Boccaccio to claim absolution from the responsibility for the content and style of the *novelle*. He is simply reporting ten days worth of stories as they were originally told by the *brigata*. But this claim alone does not suffice. Boccaccio continues by saying that even if the conceit of the *brigata* were a fiction (which it is not), and he alone composed every word (which he did not), the *Decameron* and its imperfections are still defensible. More importantly, he tells us, the work is defensible *because* of its imperfections:

...io non pote' né doveva scrivere se non le raccontate, e per ciò esse che le dissero le dovevan dir belle e io l'avrei scritte belle. Ma se pur prosuppor si volesse che io fossi stato di quelle e lo 'nventore e lo scrittore, che non fui, dico che io non mi vergognerei che tutte belle non fossero, per ciò che maestro alcun non si truova, da Dio in fuori, che ogni cosa faccia bene e compiutamente.<sup>1</sup>  
(*Conclusione dell'autore* 16)

The layered equivocation of this statement comes at the moment in which we are expecting, indeed, craving, clarity and closure. The *brigata* has made its return home; the readers of the *Decameron* might also wish to do so. Instead, we are left with an increasingly recursive distance between ourselves and the author, who takes this concluding moment to remind us that his *Decameron* is not only flawed, imperfect, and unstable, but that the whole world is too: “Confesso nondimeno le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento... (*Conclusione dell'autore* 27).”

Charles Singleton long ago claimed of the *Divina commedia* that “...the fiction is that the fiction is not a fiction (*Dante's Commedia* 62).” At first glance, we might here say the same thing of Boccaccio's defensive posture. Yet Boccaccio's attitude toward authorship could not be more divergent from Dante's. If Dante constructs his role as first-person witness to uphold his status and authority, Boccaccio uses his self-presentation as observer to renounce authorial control over his writing. In the *Commedia*, the perfection of a divine universe is reflected in the truth value of the poem, as the poet's act of writing imitates the creative acts of God.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, for Boccaccio, the imperfections of fundamentally unknowable, unstable world generate an inherently “flawed” *Decameron*. Without being overly flippant, one might say that if Dante is God's scribe, then Boccaccio is the world's reporter. This project reframes the errant *mutamento* of the *Decameron* as a conscious response to Dante's construction of authorship. Where Dante works to constrain interpretations of his writing, the *Decameron* creates an authorial persona who refuses control, emphasizing in its place the reader's interpretive freedom and responsibility. I argue that Boccaccio sees himself in the *Decameron* as engaged in training a new kind of reader – one who is necessitated in no small part by the existence of the *Commedia*.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of Boccaccio's works are taken from Branca's *Tutte le opere* edition, unless otherwise noted. The *Decameron* appears in Volume IV. References are to standard textual divisions.

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent, and comprehensive, treatment of Dante's relationship to medieval concepts of *auctor* and *auctoritas*, and in turn, its bearing on our modern sense of “authorship” see Ascoli 2008.

For reasons that are both synchronic and anachronistic, it is difficult to read Boccaccio without Dante's full weight bearing down upon him. Particularly in the history of Italian criticism, Dante is easily conflated with the standard of what it means to be both medieval and literary: to not be like Dante is either an unsuccessful attempt at being him, or it is not to be medieval.<sup>3</sup> Yet the *Decameron* is neither a poor imitation of the *Commedia*, nor is Boccaccio simply trying to ignore Dante. Instead, I suggest that we have underestimated the degree to which the *Commedia* is a model for the *Decameron*, but that for Boccaccio, Dante is in some ways a negative example of authorship. When Boccaccio reminds us in his *Conclusione*, that the *Decameron* is defensible not for its great style or novelty or creative genius, but because of its flaws and failings, it is the antithesis of the self-authorization in which Dante engages.

### *The Proemio and the Introduction to Day I*

From the very beginning, the *Decameron* explicitly stages itself as anti-Dantean. The very title announces the *Decameron's* inherent contradictions, locating it between two literary traditions with Dantean echoes, for Dante, one very positive and the other strongly negative: "Comincia il libro chiamato Decameron cognominato prencipe Galeotto." Its principle title, *Decameron*, ties it to narratives of divine creation, such as Ambrose's *Hexaameron*, and to the neo-platonic tradition of Christian philosophy and medieval allegory. Its subtitle, *Galeotto*, however, links it to the degraded books at stake in Dante's episode of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* V, and thus to the potentially corrupting effects of the courtly love tradition and erotic literature in general. The intertwining of these two opposed traditions in the title signals that the philosophical digression of the ensuing *Proemio* parodies the path through which Dante's love for Beatrice guided him.

The fundamentally Augustinian trajectory of Dante's own love (an earthly love which inspires him first to the higher goods of philosophy, then ultimately to the highest goods of spiritual love) is radically rewritten in the *Proemio*. The *Proemio* begins by depicting Boccaccio's own struggle with love, a love described not as in itself base or corrupt, but rather "altissimo e nobile". Yet despite its elevated nature (or perhaps because of it) Boccaccio recounts that this love left him in danger of shame and that no attempts to cure him of it were successful:

Ma sí come a Colui piaque il quale, essendo Egli infinito, diede per legge incommutabile a tutte le cose mondane aver fine, il mio amore, oltre a ogn'altro fervente e il quale niuna forza di proponimento o di consiglio o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo che sequir ne potesse, aveva potuto né rompere né piegare, per se medesimo in processo di tempo si diminuì... (*Proemio* 5)

In Dantean terms, this sort of earthly love can have two ends. Either it leads to the place where Paolo and Francesca's love led them, or it can become the redemptive force of Dante's own *nobile amor*, through which earthly things lead to the spiritual. But Boccaccio's love does neither. Instead, we are presented with a love that eventually burns out over time and that comes to an end of its own accord somewhat anticlimactically.

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<sup>3</sup> While this is obviously not the case when stated explicitly, it is an assumption of surprising resilience that has ways of sneaking back into scholarship, in no small part because this assumption is responsible for the origin of two primary yet divergent lines of criticism on Boccaccio from De Sanctis onward.

Unlike Dantean autobiography, the love-sickness of the *Proemio* refuses to be either didactic or generative. Though our experience with the *Commedia* conditions us to expect it, love in the *Decameron* has no utility; it engenders neither writing nor spiritual growth, merely suffering. It also becomes clear that the *Decameron* is not the productive result of this love when Boccaccio describes his writing is an expression of *gratitudine* to those who helped console him during his suffering. The act of writing begins only *after* this love has arbitrarily ended; the love itself does not produce the *Decameron*, for the end of this love is a necessarily anterior step in its production. Boccaccio also cannot be expressing gratitude for a cure (since we have already been told that all the attempted remedies were ineffectual), but rather for the consolation he received from friends while he was still suffering. In the turn of this circle of consolation, he tells us that he wishes to offer his *Decameron* as a gift to those love-sick ladies who suffer in the same way he once did, but who have no diversions from their sorrow.

This parallel between Boccaccio and the love-sick ladies emphasizes the *Decameron's* lack of a didactic function as well. If the situation of these ladies is analogous to his previous one, then there is no cure for them either. Nothing was able to help Boccaccio overcome his love, even those things which we might expect to be effectual: "...forza di proponimento o di consiglio o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo...". He is finally rescued from his romantic plight only by the necessarily finite nature of all earthly things. Similarly, the only hope for the love-sick ladies is the natural, inevitable conclusion of all things that will eventually come in due course with the passing of time. In the terms of the *Proemio*, reading and writing are no cure and the *Decameron* is no guide on how to avoid or recover from a painful love. At best, it is a temporary distraction from suffering. The *Decameron* causes no change to the ladies' state of being, provides no cure for their love, gives no instruction on how to live, but simply offers entertainment, a small amount of pleasure as a means of temporarily evading pain. The consolation of philosophy in the *Decameron* becomes merely the consolation of entertainment.

The entirety of the *Proemio* suggests that the project of the *Decameron* is not didactic (in fact, that it is unable to be so) and that it opposes Dante's appropriation of the courtly love tradition where love functions as a generative force. Yet this is flatly contradicted by the final two sentences at the very end:

Nelle quali novelle piacevoli e aspri casi d'amore e altri fortunati avvenimenti si vederanno così ne' moderni tempi avvenuti come negli antichi; delle quali le già dette donne, che queste leggeranno, parimente diletto delle sollazzevoli cose *in quelle mostrate e utile consiglio potranno pigliare, in quanto potranno conoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare: le quali cose senza passamento di noia non credo che possano intervenire*. Il che se avviene, che voglia Idio che così sia, a Amore ne rendano grazie, il quale liberandomi da' suoi legami m'ha concesso il potere attendere a' lor piaceri. (*Proemio* 14, 15; italics mine)

Here, Boccaccio suddenly claims a didactic function for the *novelle*, the very thing disavowed until this point, simultaneously crediting Love with giving him the ability to write. The perlocutionary force of this concluding statement undermines all of the work of the *Proemio* and artificially realigns the *Decameron* with a Dantean project, one which offers instruction and guidance, and one which finds its origins and fulfillment in the perfection of love.

The internal contradiction of the *Proemio* is the *Decameron*'s first major instance of what I refer to as the "staging of failure". First, the title activates our expectations as to its content, form, and function with respect to our knowledge of a pre-existing literary tradition. Second, the *Proemio* refuses to fulfill those expectations, variously undermining, violating, and even parodying them. Finally, the text concludes with an assertion that it has actually fulfilled (and will fulfill) those expectations – an assertion that provides the semblance of closure, but in a way that is limited to the formal and rhetorical. Do we then accept the gift-wrapped claim of closure offered us, or are we readers who recognize these contradictions in the text and interpret them in some other way? This is more than unintentional contradiction – the *Proemio* is at some pains to illustrate the radical difference between what it says and what it claims to be saying. The *Decameron* will repeatedly engage in this pattern of "failure", emphatically drawing attention to it by claiming to be an authoritative text, only then to make a show of its error, contradiction, and categorical ambiguity. The staging of failure turns out to be the only didactic element of the *Decameron*, for it teaches readers to question the very ability of literary texts to be didactic, authoritative, or singularly meaningful, as well as to understand how and why they attempt to construct meaning.

The same staging of failure and artificial conclusion that structures the *Proemio* is reflected in the *Decameron* as a whole. Boccaccio's statement in the *Proemio* about the end of his love sickness and his comment in the *Conclusione* on the imperfection of human writing are linked by their emphasis on transience and impermanency. His love disappears finally, inevitable, because it must end as do all other earthly things: "Ma sì come a Colui piaque il quale, essendo Egli infinito, diede per legge incommutabile a tutte le cose mondane aver fine... (*Proemio* 5)." The unavoidable end to all things of this earth, willed by God and opposed to the eternal nature of the heavenly, begins to sound like mortality. For in the *Decameron* it is Death – ending, disease, failure, and error – not Love, that is the generative force which produces the written text, precisely because it is human, and not divine, writing: "...per ciò che maestro alcun non si truova, da Dio in fuori, che ogni cosa faccia bene e compiutamente (*Conclusione dell'autore* 17)." In the frame of these two passages, we see the insistence that only divine things are stable, immutable, and unchangeable, and that human texts cannot pretend to the same sort of coherence; they must of necessity be full of error. It is no coincidence that the first failure the *Decameron* stages in the *Proemio* is its failure to be like the *Commedia*, which constructs itself as an imitation of God's way of writing.

The introduction to Day I continues with heavily Dantean overtones as its opening lines echo the beginning of the *Commedia*.<sup>4</sup> But here it is the plague that is inflected with all the horrors of loss and desolation experienced by the *Commedia*'s pilgrim. Boccaccio apologizes for the "dolorosa ricordanza" (a trip through the still painful memory of the plague), but claims it is necessitated by the historical circumstances that bring about the situation of his text: "...ma per ciò che, qual fosse la cagione per che le cose che appresso si leggeranno avvenissero, non si poteva senza questa ramemorazione dimostrare, quasi da necessità costretto a scriverle mi conduco (*I Intro.* 7)." Boccaccio needs to take this path, not *per trattar del bene* hidden underneath this horror, but to explain the origins of the deadly situation that produces the narrative.<sup>5</sup> But it turns out that the cause of the plague is shrouded in ignorance: "...la mortifera

<sup>4</sup> Noted by many scholars previously, beginning with Branca in the *Opere*.

<sup>5</sup> Boccaccio actually begins this quotation by saying: "E nel vero, se io potuto avessi onestamente per altra parte menarvi a quello che io desidero che per così aspro sentiero come fia questo, io l'avrei volentier fatto." His dilemma is echoed by Fiammetta in IX.5, though here Boccaccio wishes to be able to avoid reality in order not to discuss a

pestilenza...per operazion de' corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali, alquanti anni davanti nelle parti orientali incominciata... (I *Intro*.8).” Not only is the cause of the plague unknown, but its cure as well. In fact, none of a long list of things are availing:

E in quella non valendo alcuno senno né umano provvedimento, per lo quale fu da molte immondizie purgata la città da oficali sopra ciò ordinati e vietato l'entrarvi dentro a ciascuno infermo e molti consigli dati a conservazion della sanità, né ancora umili supplicazioni non una volta ma molte e in processioni ordinate, in altre guise a Dio fatte dalle divote persone...A cura delle quali infermità né consiglio di medico né virtù di medicina alcuna pareva che valesse o facesse profitto: anzi, o che natura del malore nol patisse o che la ignoranza de' medicanti...non conoscesse da che si movesse e per conseguente debito argomento non vi prendesse...” (I *Intro*.9, 13)

This list of ineffectual cures makes the parallel between the plague and the love-sickness of the *Proemio* even more clear. From Boccaccio's description here, none of these attempts can thwart the progress of the disease; it must eventually run its course in time, leaving its victims as ignorant of the reasons for its arbitrary end as of its cause. I described above how the end of the *Proemio* makes a claim of didactic purpose not only unsupported by the rest of the text, but actively contradicted by it. The corresponding assertion of the *Decameron* as a whole is the old Horatian trope of literature as both pleasurable and instructive: in addition to being entertained, we should learn something from the *novelle* that will take us beyond the plague and beyond death, or at least, the *brigata* should. Yet given the parallel between the plague and love-sickness, we should already suspect that any “cure” the *Decameron* offers is a distraction of purely rhetorical and structural coherence.

### *The Decameron's Conclusions*

Numerous people have argued that the end of the *Decameron* represents the fulfillment of a genuinely didactic project, that the theme of magnanimity in Day X is an expression of the tutelage the *brigata* has received through storytelling, and that at the end of their stay they are prepared for their reintegration into human society and the return to Florence. Barolini, for example, writes of the *Proemio* and the final Day: “Generosity, like gratitude, is a social virtue, one which palliates and civilizes the experience of living, and in fact the stories of the last Day are the final step in a process which has made the *brigata* fit to re-enter society, to embark once more on the business of life (“Wheel of the *Decameron*” 521).”<sup>6</sup> A general sense of the restoration of Day X, coupled with the *brigata's* literal return to the city, makes this a common enough interpretation.

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painful subject, while Fiammetta considers falsifying “reality” in order to avoid the problems of repetition and boredom.

<sup>6</sup> Barolini is responding to Branca's “...insistence on a linear frame structure, a moral itinerary from vice to virtue” in his *Boccaccio medievale*. She invokes a “circular frame structure” which, while it is useful in some ways, particularly with regard to the role of repetition, seems to me also to necessitate a teleological reading of the *Decameron* that still sees it as progressive, only in a civic and social sense rather than the moral (“Wheel” 521).



I have, however, two major objections to the suggestion that Day X represents return, reintegration, and real closure for the *Decameron*. First, there is the rather arbitrary manner of the *brigata's* departure for Florence, while the plague is still on-going. It is difficult in the extreme to feel Panfilo's explanation persuasive, particularly when it follows a description of the very reasons they left the city in the first place:

Noi, come voi sapete, domane saranno quindici di, per dovere alcun diporto pigliare a sostentamento della nostra santà e della vita, cessando le malinconie e' dolori e l'angosce, le quali per la nostra città continuamente, poi che questo pistolenzioso tempo incominciò, si veggono, uscimmo di Firenze." (X *Con.*3)

If the end of the *Decameron* really represents a positive reintegration, then why does the *brigata* return to the city while the plague is still raging? Though I diverge from his ultimate interpretation of it, I must agree with Fido when he writes:

Ma queste ragioni di Panfilo per riaffrontare la desolazione della città persuadono molto meno di quelle già sostenute da Pampinea per far percorrere alle sue compagne il cammino opposto... Né vale l'obiezione che il *Decameron* doveva pur finire in un modo o nell'altro, perché sarebbe stato agevole all'autore far coincidere il ritorno della brigata con la fine della peste, oppure escogitare una qualsiasi altra scusa per chiudere dopo cento storie il passatempo del novellare." (*Simmetrie imperfette* 12)

The *brigata's* unexpected, easy acceptance of Panfilo's suggestion to return to Florence without much ado contrasts with the dramatic reappearance of death at the beginning of Day IX (*Intro.*4), when the plague is recalled again for the first time since the introduction.

Even more antagonistic to the idea that the *brigata* has learned something and that they are now to be restored in some sense (moral, social, civic, etc.) is the passage that immediately precedes Panfilo's speech. After Dioneo's final tale of Gualtieri and Griselda, the conclusion of the day begins by detailing an interpretive disagreement over X.10: "La novella di Dioneo era finita, e assai le donne, chi d'una parte e chi d'altra tirando, chi biasimando una cosa, un'altra intorno a essa lodandone, n'avevan favellato, quando il re, levato il viso verso il cielo e vedendo che il sole era già basso all'ora di vespro, senza da seder levarsi così cominciò a parlare... (X *Con.*1)." The fact that after ten days of storytelling and two weeks spent in the same company the *brigata* is unable to agree on an interpretation of the final story is a profound argument against their having learned something in the process. Even the *brigata* can come to no unified conclusion as to what is praiseworthy and what is blameworthy, much less the larger audience of the *Decameron*.

It is also specifically *le donne*, rather than the male characters of the *brigata*, who are embroiled in this debate which should especially recall Boccaccio's claim from the *Proemio* that his female audience of love-sick ladies will learn "...quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare." Yet by the last of the one hundred stories, the internal female audience cannot agree on who is worthy of imitation. Rather than Day X and the *brigata's* return to Florence expressing genuine closure of a didactic project, it represents instead an artificial conclusion that gives the appearance of progress and coherence by means of formal structure. The return is purely dependent on the symbolic resonance of the one hundred stories and the

completion of the ten days, one reign for each member of the *brigata*.<sup>7</sup> The *Decameron* ends, not because the *brigata* has learned something or progressed, nor because they have run out of stories, nor even because the plague has ended and safety now awaits them in Florence, but because according to its literary symmetry and symbolic structure, their time has numerically arrived at an end (as all earthly things arbitrarily do).<sup>8</sup>

Thus the end of the *brigata*'s stay in the countryside also corresponds to Boccaccio's gradual recovery over time from his love-sickness. As origins and causes, conclusions and cures are wrapped in obscurity, at least to the extent of our knowledge, there can be no particular meaning to the ending. Endings have significance only in a divinely perfect system, as God is the only one who writes *bene e compiutamente*, and unlike in Dante's world, human writing cannot pretend to have access, even in a reflected way, to that knowledge. So why then give the *Decameron* the semblance of a conclusive, significant ending? The unsatisfactory conclusions of the plot and the *brigata*'s easy acceptance of the return is another example of the staging of failure. By creating the expectation of meaningful, progressive experience, only to end at what is after all, an arbitrary number, the *Decameron* reveals the artifice of symbolic and formal structure that appear to give literary texts transcendent significance.

Boccaccio's staging of failure undermines the authoritativeness of the author that Dante was at such pains to construct. By destabilizing his own authorial position in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio strips away the concealing veil behind which all human authors are ensconced. In turn, this experience does not apply exclusively to the *Decameron*, but becomes for the *Decameron*'s readers a transferable process of individualized, critical interpretation. This is why Boccaccio's focus is always on the interpretative activities of the reader, even when he talks about writing and his own *novelle*:

Le quali, chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono, sì come possono tutte l'altre cose, avendo riguardo all'ascoltatore... Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola: e così come le oneste a quella non giovano, così quelle che tanto oneste non sono la ben disposta non posson contaminare, se non come il loto i solari raggi o le terrene brutture le bellezze del cielo. Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son più sante, più degne, più reverende che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sì sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto. Ciascuna cosa in se medesima è buona a alcuna cosa, e male adoperata può essere nociva di molte; e così dico delle mie novelle. Chi vorrà da quelle malvagio consiglio e malvagia operazion trarre, elle nol vieteranno a alcuno, se forse in sé l'hanno, e torte e tirate fieno a averlo: e chi utilità e frutto ne vorrà, elle nol negheranno, né sarà mai che altro che utile e

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<sup>7</sup> Panfilo explicitly says so in his speech about the return: "...e avendo ciascun di noi la sua giornata avuta la sua parte dell'onore che in me ancora dimora, giudicherei, quando piacer fosse di voi, che convenevole cosa fosse omai il tornarci là onde ci partimmo (X Con.6)."

<sup>8</sup> Marcus notes that Boccaccio locates "... our gullibility in the rigid and somewhat unconscious expectations we have of literary form (*Allegory of Form* 92)." Hollander expresses his own skepticism on the level of ideological similarity between the *Commedia* and the *Decameron*, but he is aware of the extent to which agreement between the two would be contingent upon the *form* of Boccaccio's work: "If the *Commedia* plays a role that frequently furnishes both models and antimodels for the *Decameron*, we are nonetheless more likely to find a radical disjunction between the effects of the two works than even a large similarity. The form of the *Decameron*... may or may not conform to a harmonious, Dantean model (*Boccaccio's Dante* 5)."

oneste sien dette o tenute, se a que' tempi o a quelle persone si leggeranno per cui e pe' quali state son raccontate. (*Conclusione dell'autore* 8-14)

This passage from the *Conclusione dell'autore* has often not been taken very seriously because it has been perceived as just another defense of the obscenity and frivolity of the work as a whole.<sup>9</sup> But the insistence on the connection between reader and interpretive position is more than just a jovial rhetorical defense. It is, in fact, the *only* didactic project of the *Decameron*: to demonstrate that the reader must bear the responsibility for interpretation, taking control of ultimate meaning away from the author.<sup>10</sup>

This is why at the end of Day X the *brigata* is still debating the meaning of Dioneo's final story and why the *Decameron* is so dependent on its plurality of narrative voices. Boccaccio represents the act of writing, not as the explicit conferring of a particular meaning, but rather as a single act of reading among many. The meaning of the author is merely *one* interpretation, not something to be treated as though it represents a divine or singular signification. More important is the critical act of interpretation on the part of the reader, and there are potentially as many interpretations as there are readers. The limited lesson that the *brigata* has learned at the end of the *Decameron* is not to interpret "properly" (as would be reflected in an agreement among them as to the meaning of Dioneo's story) for Boccaccio offers no "correct" meaning for them to discover. Rather, it is their interpretations – their own decisions as to who is praiseworthy and who is blameworthy – that ought to dictate what behaviors they perceive to be models for imitation. Interpretation for Boccaccio is individual at best, for it requires an active engagement with the world of the text, rather than a placid compliance with the author's "reading." The multivocal *Decameron*, in which the storytellers are constantly engaged in the act of writing by rereading previous *novelle*, confirms the validity of individual interpretation. By giving us the semblance of formal closure, rather than attempting to seal itself off from additional interpretation, the *Decameron* demonstrates that legitimate acts of reading and interpretation are, if not precisely endless, the next thing to it.

### *Approaching Boccaccio's "Errors"*

Boccaccio's refusal to give us a unified authorial stance, particularly in the inconclusive *Conclusione*, suggests that for him both the act of interpretation *and* the act of writing are necessarily polysemous, and ought not to represent themselves as being otherwise. But this assessment does not apply to the *cornice* alone. I argue that the *Decameron* as a whole refuses coherence and closure and instead attempts to train readers capable of interpreting multiple and even antagonistic layers of meaning in text. The *Decameron* deliberately stages failures of reading and writing to draw attention to the constructed nature of textual authority and to

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<sup>9</sup> Not that the *Conclusione dell'autore* is devoid of sexual humor. See Watson's fascinating article "The Cement of Fiction: Giovanni Boccaccio and the Painters of Florence" for the obscene interpretive significance Boccaccio suggests there for the religious art he discusses.

<sup>10</sup> Mazzotta writes: "...Boccaccio abdicates responsibility for the effect of the book on the audience, tries to disclaim authorship for the tales and finally releases them into a moral vacuum as neutral and autonomous objects to be interpreted by the reader. The marginality is total...the writer even denies any centrality for himself (*Marginality of Literature* 79)." I do not, however, share Mazzotta's sense of Boccaccio's "reductive impulse" nor his "flagrant contempt for 'useless' literature." Rather than see Boccaccio's work after the *Decameron* as expressive of "the dangers and precariousness of the esthetic imagination," I see Boccaccio's later writing as concerned with the utility and necessity of interpretive tools, for just such categories as the aesthetic or useless.

question the possibility of hermeneutic coherence, in its own text and in any other. In all of these aspects, the *Decameron* is a consciously anti-Dantean project, because it is Dante's construction of the author to which Boccaccio is responding. For this reason, the *Decameron* specifically calls attention to the ways in which it is poetically and philosophically at odds with the *Commedia*.

That the *Decameron* seems to create expectations of coherence only ultimately to disappoint them has been noted by many Boccaccio scholars. There are major differences, however, over what these disappointed expectations mean for the work as a whole – beginning with whether they reflect our failings or Boccaccio's, that is, whether they are present intentionally or not. Kirkham, for example, declines to dismiss these seeming failures as so many "red herrings", and instead searches for an underlying allegorical and formal significance that has otherwise escaped the *Decameron*'s readers.<sup>11</sup> Other critics recognize various kinds of incoherence, but read around them, as Greene suggested in his influential article, "Forms of Accommodation in the Decameron": "For any pattern [the critic] thinks he discerns will generally be marred by the irreducible exceptions, stubbornly violating all symmetries and generalizations. In this state of affairs it behooves one to search out the characteristic, intuit the tendency and capture the drift (while noticing the inconsistent) rather than insist on the paradigm (297). This is one basic dichotomy of the critical attention given to this problem: either the inconsistencies are not really inconsistent, or they are genuinely ruptures in the text's coherence, and we should instead focus on those parts that do fulfill our expectations. Interestingly, given Boccaccio's understanding of the relationship between writing and reading, this paradigm can easily be rephrased as "either we are poor readers *or* Boccaccio is (sometimes at least) a poor writer."

I prefer an approach to the seeming flaws, inconsistencies, and errors of the *Decameron* that would release us from this frustrating dichotomy of interpretation: to evaluate even those aspects of the text that seem to us to be problems, with the assumption that they were, in fact, choices made by its author, to give Boccaccio due credit for the complex system of meaning within the *Decameron*, even when, especially when, it defies our expectations of medieval literature. Boccaccio was a great reader of texts, in addition a sophisticated writer of them. I believe strongly that the *Decameron* is designed to make its readers question the assumptions that they have as to how texts produce meaning, and moreover, to encourage its readers to confront how those assumptions influence and limit their own interpretative abilities. The contradictions and ambiguities of the *Decameron* ought to be neither glossed over nor explained away as though they were genuine failures; instead, we ought to investigate how and why they were carefully cultivated by its author.

### *The "Staging of Failure"*

The *Decameron*'s contradiction and ambiguity extend beyond the formal and structural. Before moving on to discuss some categories of ambiguity that seem to be particularly inherent to the *Decameron*, I want to explain the significance of the phrase I have used to characterize the way that it constructs these seeming errors. In the most basic sense, I intend the ways in which the *Decameron* intentionally sets certain expectations only emphatically not to deliver them. I use the theatrical language of staging to keep in our minds the fact that Boccaccio's authorial persona is not the same as him as historical author. The voice of this persona, as it appears within

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<sup>11</sup> This approach is persistently visible in Kirkham's work, see, for example her collection of essays from 1993, *The Sign of Reason in Boccaccio's Fiction*.

the frame of the *Decameron*, is intensely ambiguous. The insistence that he cannot control ultimately the meaning of the *novelle*, and that readers must ultimately bear all the responsibility for interpretation is a pretense – a carefully constructed persona that characterizes Boccaccio’s position as one of non-authoritative authorship. This posture is more than Boccaccio’s much vaunted humility. The “Boccaccio *autore*”, the persona who appears in the frame, is equally a creation of a much more authoritative master, the one who was in fact “lo ‘nventore e lo scrittore” of the entire work. Clearly this Boccaccio is in control, but he chooses to use that control to represent himself as an *autore* who renounces his status as creator, highlights the failings and flaws of the work, and denies his ability to determine meaning. It is that persona who describes the *Decameron* as errant and flawed – to accept these as true “failures” rather than an elaborate staging, is to conflate that authorial persona with the *Decameron*’s true author, who has carefully constructed the text, and whose project is a very authoritative one – the training of readers to understand the ways in which texts produce meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Generally speaking, I identify three different kinds of failure: structural, creative, and literary. Structural failure is most easily explained and most frequently discussed – in fact, Boccaccio criticism can sometimes look like a catalogue of systems that almost, but not quite structure the work as a whole. These include what Fido refers to as the *Decameron*’s “simmetrie imperfette”. In the very beginning of his book Fido elegantly runs through some examples of which any reader of the *Decameron* is aware:

Di primo acchito, il *Decameron* si presenta come un libro accuratamente “monato”, costruito secondo precise proporzioni e significativi criteri numerici: “cento novelle [...] raccontate in dieci giorni” da dieci novellatori, su argomenti stability, che si susseguono secondo una progressione abbastanza chiara... Ma le cose si complicano subito: la brigata è formata da *sette* donne e *tre* uomini; le giornate trascorse in villa sono quattordici; la scelta preventiva del tema su cui narrare avviene solo otto volte su dieci; uno dei novellatori (Dioneo) non è tenuto a rispettarla, e così via. E poi ci sono le eccezioni alle eccezioni: le giornate a tema libero sono due o una? Di fatto, la decisione di narrare ciascuno secondo il proprio piacere è presa una volta sola, e riguarda la nona giornata... Ancora: il “narratore libero” Dioneo rinuncia qualche volta alla sua prerogativa, e si conforma al tema stabilito dal re o dalla regina la sera prima: e le sue ragioni per reclamare la libertà che si diceva, oppure, in alcuni casi, per non approfittarne sono sempre eccellenti.<sup>13</sup> (*Simmetrie imperfette* 7)

Even in terms of its numerology, the *Decameron* sets us up to expect that structure is intentional and *means* something; ten, seven, and three especially are numbers which in the medieval world

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<sup>12</sup> Another way of explaining this idea in different language would be to say that the *Decameron* is a readerly text – it has a project and an aim that it wishes its readers to take away. But it enacts this project by pretending to be a writerly text, by feigning to be open to interpretation as a mechanism to force readers to understand and question the ways in which they interpret.

<sup>13</sup> Obviously, even the structural ways alone in which the *Decameron* undermines and thwarts our expectations are almost countless. This passage is a concise reminder of some of the most key ones. Though Fido’s book is largely concerned with formal issues in structuralist narrative terms, and he does not suggest a particular reason *why* the *Decameron* should display so many imperfections, his readings were very suggestive and helpful in framing this project. I do think that it is not completely coincidental that his book ends with the chapter “Dante personaggio mancato del libro Galeotto”, but his project does differ from mine, both in scope and conclusions.

ought to carry heavy symbolic weight, yet none of the meanings traditionally given to them seem to work here. More often than not, structural symbolism in particular seems to echo the *Commedia*. As Hollander writes: “The overall similarities between the *Decameron* and its major vernacular precursor are too obvious to have gone undetected. They have come to be understood as commonplaces, requiring little in the way of supporting evidence or ingenious demonstration... [Yet] each of these similarities is intrinsically conjoined with a distancing difference (*Boccaccio’s Dante 2*).” Despite the obviousness of some of the *Decameron’s* references to the *Commedia*, they largely go ignored because at first they seem to be neither sustained, systematic, or meaningful.<sup>14</sup>

But the fact that these structures do not fulfill our expectations does not mean that they are arbitrary or unintentional – far from it. It simply indicates that meaning does not inhere in our preconceived expectations. We must look elsewhere. Above all, we must not forget that the seemingly partial structure of the text is not genuine failure. The *Decameron* could easily have either conformed to our expectations of a medieval text, *or* forgone the semblance of formal structure. Instead, the presence of these partial structures forces the reader to recognize those expectations and to reexamine them, to question how it is that these mechanisms work in literary texts. In the same way, it is the incomplete semblance of structural similarity to the *Commedia* that forces us to notice the incongruous relationship between the two. When the *Decameron* stages the failure of those structural expectations, it requires that we rethink where those expectations originate.

I am also concerned with those moments in which the *Decameron* stages failures in other ways, that have perhaps gone less noticed than its formal *simmetrie imperfette*, though the same textual dynamic is at stake. Above, I described these as creative and literary failures, by which I mean the way the *Decameron* deals with the problems of repetition and boredom on the one hand and the representation of the local and popular on the other. One of the major thematic concerns of the *Decameron*, inside and out, is the evasion of boredom. The idea of the recounting of tales, the establishment of topics from day to day, and rules to structure these procedures (as well as Dioneo’s special privilege and exemption from these rules) are all identified by the *brigata* as methods of avoiding repetition and boredom. As I discuss below in the context of Day IX however, there are moments in which the *Decameron*, after training us to expect novelty and continually varied subject matter, presents us with the absence of a daily theme, *novelle* that seem to be repetitive in their tropes and subject matter, and characters who suddenly begin reappearing.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Though Hollander does not phrase it in these terms, he is concerned with something that seems to be a major frustration in *Decameron* criticism: how it is, exactly, that Boccaccio’s references to the *Commedia* seem simultaneously obvious and meaningless?

<sup>15</sup> All of this is particularly visible in Day IX, but perhaps nowhere more so than in the series of Calandrino stories that appear in Days VIII and IX. In the second half of this chapter, I demonstrate the extent to which our expectations of novelty have led to the neglect of this series of tales on a critical level, and in Chapter 3, I propose two readings of the Calandrino cycle which are dependent upon an awareness of the “creative failure” of these *novelle*. I am not, however, the first person to realize that an absence of creativity is being intentionally staged at this point in the *Decameron*. As Marcus insightfully notes: “...Boccaccio has lead us to expect that each story of the *Decameron* will be unique, employing its own *dramatis personae*, and its own interplay of personalities. Indeed the first seven days of the *Decameron* have admirably confirmed this pattern, setting a trustworthy precedent for subsequent days. But Boccaccio defies our expectations of form by not only violating the law of heterogeneity within the confines of a single day (Day VIII), but also by violating the integrity of the days themselves, for the Calandrino sequence spills over into Day IX (*Allegory* 92).”

The same goes for the literary quality of the *novelle*; in the course of the days, we come to expect a degree of *entrelacement* and a level of sophisticated intertextuality among them. We look for external source material, textual referents and precursors, and to some extent, an elevated level of subject matter, either in temporal or geographical distance, or in their creativity or wit. This is disappointed, deliberately, by those stories which seem to be trivial in content, or which are especially local and municipal in setting or quality. Yet at no point is the *Decameron* at pains to hide these “problematic” qualities. On the contrary, I argue that it makes efforts to exaggerate them and to attract our attention.

### *The Role of Ambiguity*

In the following chapters, I discuss a number of textual moments in which ambiguity is the structuring principle that allows problems of interpretation to come to the forefront. These ambiguities are again, a kind of subset of staging failure, and far from being accidental, attention is generally drawn explicitly to the difficulties these ambiguities create. There are three categories of problem that arise that may be useful to indicate now; though the issues treated subsequently often have a broader scope, these categories help to delineate just how pervasive this ambiguity is throughout the *Decameron*. I am, however, particularly concerned with the multiplicity of narrative voices, non-authoritative interpretive acts, and the ambivalent voice of the authorial persona.

The proliferation of voices within the *Decameron* needs the least explanation, as I have touched on it above, and much critical attention has been devoted to it, especially of late. I need only add that in addition to the more obvious ideological conflicts the various narrators sometimes express with respect to each other, the multivocal nature of the text is additionally complicated by the fact that sometimes the narrators seem distinct from each other, and sometimes they do not, sometimes they argue with each other and sometimes, when we most expect them to, they do not, and that ultimately it seems that none of the members of the *brigata* align satisfactorily or consistently with any particular ideological or allegorical position.<sup>16</sup> And none of them, not even Dioneo, is ever given the final word, or possesses a hermeneutic stance that cannot be challenged.<sup>17</sup>

By non-authoritative interpretive acts, I mean those moments in the *Decameron* where interpretation is identified as taking place, but the interpretation itself is not actually specified. Perhaps the most famous example of this comes at the conclusion of Dioneo’s story at the end of Day IX, when the author’s voice tells us: “Quanto di questa novella si ridesse, meglio dalle

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<sup>16</sup> Migiel refers to this as the “polemicism of the narrators’ voices (*A Rhetoric of the Decameron* 12).” This excellent book is concerned primarily the *Decameron*’s rhetorical ambiguity with respect to issues of gender; however, while there are differences to our approach, I am greatly indebted to her scholarship, particularly with respect to the conflicting narrative structures and voices of the different members of the *brigata*. She notes: “Since Fiammetta, like all the female narrators of the *Decameron*, proves an advocate both of fidelity and infidelity, of chastity and fulfillment of desire, what [Wayne] Booth finds is that he, like Erich Auerbach before him, can find no basic moral attitude and no consistent approach to reality in the tales of the *Decameron*. The complexity of voices and moral views is too great (62).”

<sup>17</sup> It is typical that even though Dioneo occupies a rhetorically convenient concluding position as the last storyteller of each day, it is his final story that is followed by an interpretive disagreement, even before we arrive at the equivocal *Conclusione dell’autore*: “La novella di Dioneo era finita, e assai le donne, chi d’una parte e chi d’altra tirando, chi biasimando una cosa, un’altra intorno a essa lodandone, n’avevan favellato, quando il re, levato il viso verso il cielo e vedendo che il sole era già basso all’ora di vespro, senza da seder levarsi così cominciò a parlare (X *Con.1*).”

donne intesa che Dioneo non voleva, colei sel pensi che ancora ne riderà (IX *Con.* 1).”<sup>18</sup> This statement, however, leaves to the reader to decide what interpretation the women have given to Dioneo’s story, as well as how he had wished them to understand it, and indeed, even how Boccaccio’s still laughing reader has interpreted the entire affair. As I demonstrate in the case of the advice of Solomon in Chapter 4, at our own peril do we assume that the interpretation of the *Decameron* is at any point obvious.

Finally, there is Boccaccio’s own voice when it appears in the *Decameron* at large, and particularly in the *cornice*. I described above how the work done by the *Proemio* is undermined by the concluding statement which completely contradicts the rest of its content. This pushes the reader to make interpretative decisions about which side of the *Proemio* to believe, or at least, how to make sense of a project of contradictory internal claims. This kind of conflict and ambiguity is visible on a purely linguistic level as well when Boccaccio’s narrative voice is present. I want to offer a few examples from the *Proemio* here as to the way in which Boccaccio’s voice is constantly marked by rhetorical qualification and recursion, syntactical and logical ambiguity, linguistic markers of equivocation, and aporetic correlative statements.

Virtually the only categorical statement of the *Proemio* is its opening one: “Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti.” The ensuing line is extremely recursive, and also contains the first of an amazing series of hypothetical statements in the *Proemio*: “...e come che a ciascuna persona stea bene, a coloro è massimamente richesto li quali già hanno di conforto avuto mestiere e hannol trovato in alcuni; fra’ quali, se alcuno mai n’ebbe bisogno o gli fu caro o già ne ricevette piacere, io sono uno di quegli (*Proemio* 2).” Technically speaking, this phrase says nothing, or at least, it says nothing non-contingent. The first part literally says “to the extent that it is a positive quality for everyone, it is even more required of others”, but what we are missing is the first logical element: the definition of *compassione* as a positive quality and exactly to what extent it is such. But Boccaccio in his first sentence only says compassion is a *umana cosa*, rather than any particular valuation. This potentially leaves the entire phrase open to inversion; if compassion is not actually a positive quality, then the value of the two following clauses is negative and their substance meaningless.

The same is true of the hypothetical statement that follows. The first clause – *if anyone ever did* – can be either true or false. If it is true (and someone, somewhere has experienced compassion) then Boccaccio affirms that he also has also, and the statement has the sense that we expect it to have. If on the other hand, the first half, the *if*-clause, is false, then the statement as a whole is still logically true, regardless of the truth or falsity of the second part of the affirmation. Technically the sentence gives us no information as to whether or not Boccaccio was the recipient of compassion or not, unless we know (or supply) the truth value of the first clause.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously I am not suggesting that Boccaccio intended this opening to redefine *compassione* as a negative quality, or that he here denies the compassion and sympathy of his friends. I simply want to show that linguistically and syntactically, the sentence is ambiguous, even if the meaning is not. These kind of expressions repeatedly reoccur in Boccaccio’s voice throughout the *Decameron* – and sometimes at moments when the meaning is not as clear.

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<sup>18</sup> This example also emphasizes the way in which how the author *wishes* us to understand something is only one interpretation among many.

<sup>19</sup> Lest I seem to be “over-reading”, remember for a moment everyone’s favorite example of the simpleton and poor reader of the *Decameron*: Calandrino. It is precisely this sort of linguistic ambiguity that Maso exploits to dupe him. When Calandrino asks if he has ever been to the country of Bengodi, he replies, “Di tu se io vi fu’ mai? Sí vi sono stato così una volta come mille.” (VIII.3.13) If we needed proof that Boccaccio understood these subtleties, Maso and his compatriots, Bruno and Buffalmacco, in addition to Frate Cipolla, provide easy examples.



Certainly Boccaccio was an accomplished Latinist and trained in Rhetoric, yet this is more than merely rhetorical. It demonstrates a preference for the equivocal over the categorical, even at the level of language. But perhaps most importantly, the meaning of this sentence remains obvious despite its linguistic equivocation because the truth value as it were of the first two clauses is, and must be, supplied by the reader. To make sense of that statement, we must *already* understand that compassion is a positive value and we must *already* assume that someone, somewhere has experienced it as such. Though this is a small example, it functions as an excellent metaphor for Boccaccio's relationship to and expectations of his reader.

Beyond this, and beyond the forms of qualification in which Boccaccio engages, such as the proliferation of equivocating or restrictive vocabulary like *forse*, *quasi*, etc., there is the repeated appearance of what I called aporetic correlative statements, which are particularly evident in the *Proemio*. This refers to the way in which Boccaccio repeats a series of either/or, neither/nor statements, in which he declines to put his authorial weight behind any of the options, or even to clarify whether they are inclusive or exclusive. Again, this is representative of the way in which the *Decameron* foists hermeneutic responsibility upon the reader. Sometimes, this seems to be simply emphatic, as in the case above, or when Boccaccio lists those things which were useless as a defense against his love-sickness: "...niuna forza di proponimento o di consiglio o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo che seguir ne potesse..." (*Proemio* 5)." At other moments, however, these correlatives express opposing or exclusive options, and indicate an epistemological lack of clarity. For example, when Boccaccio remembers those who had compassion on him, he says that they themselves may not need his compassion in turn, by virtue of "...lo lor senno o per la loro buona ventura (*Proemio* 7)." The opposition of *senno* and *ventura* is unquestionably a choice between the two, but one that Boccaccio declines to settle.

Still other examples seem to construct slight differences between words, but specifically invoke a larger audience by use of the third person. With reference to what he *can* offer, Boccaccio says he can give "...il mio sostentamento, o conforto che vogliam dire..." (*Proemio* 8) This same pattern appears as Boccaccio describes the writing he presents to entertain his audience of love-sick women. It consists of "...cento novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie che dire le vogliamo..." (*Proemio* 13)."<sup>20</sup> These phrases work in the same way that the logic of the if-then statements above do. Presented with proliferating and sometimes conflicting alternatives, the reader is not only held responsible for making interpretive decisions, but is also forced to be conscious of the fact that he must choose. These aporetic correlatives are easy enough to overlook when they occur once or twice, but these are examples only from the *Proemio*. This same structure is often repeated when Boccaccio's voice appears in the *cornice* and throughout the *Decameron*, and especially in one particularly famous example from the beginning of Day IX.

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<sup>20</sup> This may seem at first like a less than meaningful profusion of synonyms; however, allow me to quote at length from Branca's footnote to this passage: "Questa serie di sostantivi sta a indicare che la materia sarà mista, e i racconti di varie specie: novelle sono genericamente narrazioni di ogni argomento; favole rammenta l'uso francese di 'fabliaux'; parabole accenna a esempi e probabilmente alla volontà didascalico-allegorica che non di rado è presente nei prologhi e negli epiloghi delle singole novelle, e qualche volta in racconti moralizzati per via di paragoni; storie indica infine specialmente le narrazioni a sfondo storico, di personaggi illustri. Salimbene dice di Guido Bonatti (*Inf.*, XX 118) 'erat totus plenus proverbiis, fabulis et exemplis' (*Cronica*, p. 239)." What I take as a sign of the *Decameron's* ambiguity that leaves the matter of interpretive choice amongst a series of potential options to the reader, Branca reads as an actual description of the content, despite the fact that in no way other than a loosely applied, open-ended label do these categories map well onto the *Decameron*. Note as well the importance of *form* glossed in a historical context to make this passage meaningful, and the completely gratuitous reference to Dante.

## *The Ninth Day of the Decameron*

The day opens in a scene of natural tranquility, with the *brigata* decking themselves with flowers and frolicking in the fields amongst seemingly tame wild animals. As they turn back, Boccaccio writes: “Essi eran tutti di frondi di quercia inghirlandati, con le man piene o d’erbe odorifere o di fiori; e chi scontrati gli avesse, niuna altra cosa avrebbe potuto dire se non: ‘O costor non saranno dalla morte vinti o ella gli ucciderà lieti’ (IX *Intro.4*).” Not only is this another aporetic correlative (which depends upon the readers ability to supply the assumption that all things die), but it is bounded by an if-then statement as well: “. . .no one who encountered them could say anything if not. . .”. This particular correlative is even more distanced from authorial speech than usual, for it is not even Boccaccio’s narrative voice, but rather, him reporting the speech of an imaginary observer. This distancing becomes even stranger though, when we remember that in the *cornice*, Boccaccio positions himself as just such an observer. His claim not to have written the *novelle*, instead merely recording what he heard from the *brigata*, puts him precisely in the position of this observer who could not say anything but “O costor non saranno dalla morte vinti o ella gli ucciderà lieti.” That disavowal of authorship in the conclusion here strangely makes these words his, though still distanced by this bizarre reporting of speech. This ambiguous structure coupled with the distancing frame, as well as the surprising reintroduction of death in the midst of this idyllic scene, indicate a return to the prefatory matter of the *Decameron* and to Boccaccio’s description of the nature and purpose of his project. This return to the very beginning at the start of the ninth Day supports my assessment that the *Decameron* is not a didactic or teleological project. Despite the fact that the last line of the *Proemio* makes an explicit claim to be so, that claim is an artificial one opposed by the actual substance of the work, and it exists precisely to stage the “failure” of that project.

The circularity reflected in the introduction to Day IX returns us to the very place we started from, a place where, even shrouded in elegant rhetoric, death is inescapable. In the same way that the *Proemio* stages its own failure to be didactic, I believe that like the intensely ambivalent *Conclusione*, Day X stages its own failure to be conclusive. As I mentioned previously, there has been a great deal of debate over how to understand the meaning of the last day. The *Decameron* was once understood to have a moralizing trajectory within a Christian frame, but the view has largely been abandoned. In its place, we now more commonly find a view that suggests it leads instead to a project of civilization, that the stories in the final day represent particularly civic virtues that lead the *brigata*, literally and figuratively, back into the life of Florence.<sup>21</sup> I hope I have already managed to convey a strong sense of the problems with such an assessment of the *Decameron*’s project, and that it grows stronger still in these chapters, but I want to emphasize the very real possibility that Day X functions exactly like the last two sentences of the *Proemio*: it claims to have done something (restored the *brigata* and its readers to virtue), precisely in order to draw our attention to the ways in which that project has been unsuccessful (the interpretive disagreement over X.10, or Boccaccio’s renunciation in the *Conclusione*). That is, the “closure” represented by Day X is equally staged and artificial, and

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<sup>21</sup> “These sorts of readings have often been carried out under the general rubric of ‘unified reading’ that helps us to understand the *Decameron*, not as a series of largely unrelated narratives, but as a cultural project of impressive scope and enduring value. Although there are variations among these readings, they tend to reaffirm the basic lineaments as offered by Franco Fido: from the confusion of *Decameron* 1. . .concluding with the generosity and magnificence that crowns the storytelling on Day 10 (Migiel, *Rhetoric* 161).”

does not represent the success of a real didactic project that will reintegrate the *brigata* into society.

Though my argument applies to the *Decameron* as a whole, this project focuses for the most part on Day IX for two reasons. First, because the ninth Day seems to be staging a particularly dramatic failure in what we might call a crisis of creativity, and second, because as the penultimate day, it is the last moment outside of the formal and artificial closure of Day X. I describe Day IX as staging a failure in creativity, because in the pacing of the *Decameron*, it feels virtually redundant.<sup>22</sup> The absence of a theme for the ninth Day seems regressive, drawing us back to the first day, rather than forward to the impending conclusion. At this late point in the retreat, the stories begin to lack a certain originality; it feels not conclusive, but merely concluding, as though the narrative drive of the *Decameron* is dwindling, or trying to save its energy for the arrival of Day X.<sup>23</sup> Not only does it seem possible that the *brigata* has exhausted its store of tales, but perhaps even that Boccaccio himself is running out of creativity. Why otherwise leave us and the narrators adrift without a theme in these final moments? The comparative paucity of scholarship on Day IX suggests that many critics suspect this to be the case.<sup>24</sup>

If the critical neglect of the day does in fact indicate a general sense that the tales are become stale and unoriginal, then we are not alone, for Boccaccio's own characters fear just that possibility. It is the impetus for Dioneo's "privilege" in the first place:

Ma di spezial grazia vi cheggio un dono... il quale è questo: che io a questa legge non sia costretto di dover dire novella secondo la proposta data, se io non verrò, ma qual piú di dire mi piacerà. E acciò che alcun non creda che io questa grazia voglia sí come uomo che delle novelle non abbia alle mani, infino da ora son contento d'esser sempre l'ultimo che ragioni.

La reina, la quale lui e sollazzevole uomo e festevole conosceva e ottimamente s'avisò questo lui non chieder se non per dovere la brigata, se stanca fosse del ragionare, rallegrare con alcuna novella da ridere, col consentimento degli altri lietamente la grazia gli fece. (I *Con.*12-14)

On the very first day, Dioneo and Filomena at least acknowledge the possibility that telling ten stories on the same theme might grow tiresome, the antithesis of the pleasure that is repeatedly emphasized here: *piacerà, contento, sollazzevole, festevole, rallegrare, ridere, and lietamente*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In "The Wheel of the *Decameron*," even Barolini's very detailed description of the circular narrative progression of the *Decameron* largely does not distinguish between Days VII, VIII, and IX. An amusingly symbolic reflection of the general critical attitude is the description "More of same" under Day IX in her final diagram of the structure of the *Decameron* (539).

<sup>23</sup> "La IX giornata appare, nel suo complesso, caratterizzata da due importanti elementi: ...e il fatto che questa particolarità si riveli, in effetti, un efficace pretesto narrativo ideato dal Boccaccio per replicare temi, motivi, ambienti già precedentemente affrontati... Si ha cioè l'impressione che l'autore, prima di dedicare le sue energie al racconto delle nobili imprese e figure della X giornata, senta l'esigenza di esaurire, replicandolo e dando vita a una serie di rimandi interni all'opera e alla stessa IX giornata, lo spazio del comico... (Peirone 149)."

<sup>24</sup> On the note of "more of the same," the website Casa del Boccaccio includes a bibliography searchable by subject through a drop-down menu. All the Days of the *Decameron* are searchable, except Day IX, which here and elsewhere, seems to be easily forgotten: [www.casaboccaccio.it](http://www.casaboccaccio.it) (as of 2 May 2012).

<sup>25</sup> In Day IX, when Fiammetta recounts the *fourth* of the Calandrino stories told in the space of just two days, she returns to this theme of pleasure right at the moment in which our expectations of originality seem most sorely tried:

But Dioneo also recognizes that the burden of creativity grows progressively heavier as more stories are told each day, and he offers to prove himself by being the ultimate speaker. Since Dioneo has the ability to change topic if boredom threatens, the most difficult position of the day in which to be original and entertaining becomes that of the king or queen – the penultimate story and the last thematic tale of the day.

Indeed, right before Dioneo's request, Filomena describes the rules previously established by Pampinea as "laudevole e dilettevole," continuing "...e per ciò infino a tanto che elle o per troppa continuanza o per altra cagione non ci divenisser noiose, quelle non giudico da mutare." (I *Con.*7,8) The queen here raises the possibility that the entire project could grow dull, but decides against changing them *until* such a contingency should occur. Her reasoning immediately precedes the establishment of the prescribed theme. Given that the first moment in which the *brigata* alters the rules is Emilia's deviation from the established practice of the diurnal theme at the conclusion of Day VIII, it seems that this is the moment in the *Decameron* where the storytellers themselves recognize that they have grown "stanca del ragionare". This recognition means that the text itself is drawing our attention to the problem of boredom and repetition – staging its creative failure, rather than attempting to conceal it.

The "slump" of Day IX and the struggle for creativity and originality parallels the ninth slot reserved for the king or queen of the day. As Dioneo recognizes above, after eight stories on the same theme (or here, after eight days of storytelling), it becomes increasingly more challenging to tell an original tale that does not seem dull or repetitive. Offsetting the weakness of the last-but-one position of the day is of course the regal prerogative of establishing the theme. Theoretically at least, this gives the king or queen the ability to suit the theme to a specific story, rather than selecting a story to fit the theme as the rest of the *brigata* must. This should enable them, even at such a disadvantage, to have prepared in advance an exceptionally appropriate and original story that might combat the tedium of tales of too great similarity. In Day IX, Emilia sacrifices this advantage by leaving the subject open, or alternately, extends this same advantage to all the storytellers. Despite this, we still seem to suffer from the *noia* Pampinea feared. There may, however, be another reason for the open-ended topic. Rather than relating back to a single theme, the stories of the day draw their material or inspiration from earlier stories in the *Decameron*, or from other stories in the day, glossing other *novelle* in ways that sometimes seem to contradict and sometimes to support them. This is the essentially cohesive element of Day IX: storytelling as itself an act of interpretation, or writing as a form of reading.

Having just said that the remaining chapters are centered around Day IX, I shall now be very Boccaccian indeed, and point out that the next one is an exception. Chapter 2 returns to the issue of Boccaccio's authorial persona and the *cornice* of the *Decameron*, this time in the light of two authorial surrogates as they are represented in the minor works: Prometheus and Phaethon. I suggest that Boccaccio transforms them into acceptable author-figures by first endowing them with christological affiliations and representing them as figures of sacrifice, then ultimately uses them to justify the quality of *oltremisura* as positive in itself, in contradistinction to Dante. This chapter is particularly concerned with the use made of these two in the *Genealogy*, (underexplored as yet in its relationship to the *Decameron*) but finally returns to the way in which Prometheus and Phaethon are unnamed presences in the *cornice*, and an integral part of Boccaccio's disavowal of interpretative control.

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"E per ciò, se io riguardo quello per che noi siam qui, ché per aver festa e buon tempo e non per altro ci siamo, stimo che ogni cosa che festa e piacer possa porgere qui abbia e luogo e tempo debito (IX.5.4)."

Chapter 3 offers two versions of an interpretation of the *novelle* in which Calandrino appears as the victim of Bruno and Buffalmacco (VIII.3 and 5, IX.3 and 6), both of which address questions that repeatedly appear in the criticism. My primary goal in this chapter is to read these *novelle* as a unit, as stories that do in fact bear a meaningful relationship to each other, rather than an arbitrary or merely comic repetition. The first reading investigates Calandrino's seemingly inexplicable christological associations and the thematics of martyrdom and the second tackles the perplexing associations of this cycle of *novelle* with art and the artist. That these categories should be invested with special meaning and value for Boccaccio as a writer seems obvious and has often been noted, yet puzzlingly the only artists other than Giotto who appear in the *Decameron* seem to be little more than comic relief. This has been particularly perplexing since Calandrino has often been understood as the model of the naïve and hermeneutically simplistic reader. I suggest that instead of presenting Calandrino as a poor reader these stories emphasize the potential malice of ideologically confining writing that limits interpretative possibilities, and that Calandrino himself may be another authorial surrogate within the confines of the *Decameron*.

Chapter 4 tackles the ninth story of Day IX, in which Giosefo and Melisso travel to consult Solomon, each in search of an answer to a problem. This story synthesizes many of the concerns of Day IX, but above all the complexities of interpretation move to center stage in this *novella*, which problematizes passive interpretation, not just within the realm of the *Decameron*, but for all kinds of reading. Particularly at stake in this story are two non-specific interpretative acts, where we are left to wonder, as readers, if the interpretation is valid or not, since Boccaccio's authorial persona declines to step in. The intertexts of this story identifies it as a challenge to medieval, allegorical modes of reading and specifically to Dantean writing. Taking into account Emilia's unusual introduction to the story, I argue that the concerns of IX.9 reflect back upon allegorical reading as excessively dependant on form and textually internal glosses, one of the things that links IX.9 with the story of Guido Cavalcanti in VI.9. The previously uninvestigated relationship between these *novelle* illuminates two internal representations of interpretation and demonstrates with surprising clarity the extent to which this interpretive anxiety is produced by Dantean control over cultural memory and historical reputation in the *Commedia*.

## Unlikely Heroes: Prometheus and Phaethon as Authorial Surrogates

Throughout his minor works, Boccaccio demonstrates an affinity for mythological and historical figures of creation, innovation, and instruction – figures Tobias Foster Gittes calls “culture-heroes.”<sup>1</sup> The clearest token of this affinity comes from the autobiographical use Boccaccio makes of them, aligning himself with these figures (and vice-versa), and participating in their typological resonance as poets, philosophers, and pedagogues. The most prominent of these are Prometheus and Phaethon. As is immediately suggested by Prometheus’s role as light-bearer, however, this association is not an uncomplicated one in the Christian world. For either of these two to become acceptable surrogates for himself as author, Boccaccio must first rewrite them in a redemptive process that is largely contrary to the traditional understanding of these two figures in the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

The limited medieval precedent makes Boccaccio’s transformation of Prometheus and Phaethon all the more striking. Prometheus, of course, has positive classical associations for his role as the self-sacrificing benefactor of humanity, but for medieval Christian exegetes, his transgressive rebellion against the gods, coupled with the theft of a properly divine spark, makes a positive allegorical reading difficult. Phaethon seems an even less likely candidate, given his largely negative (if tragic) valence in both the classical and medieval world. His puerile quest to prove his lofty paternity, followed by the refusal to heed parental advice, leads to his own death, and the consumption of the world by fire. In Ovid’s moving account, humanity is only spared complete destruction when the Earth herself cries out to the gods for mercy. Boccaccio, however, redeems both Prometheus and Phaethon by converting them into figures of martyrdom and endowing them with a christological significance.<sup>3</sup>

The account of Prometheus in the *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* begins by emphasizing the role of creation attributed to him by Ovid, in whose *Metamorphoses* he first appears as progenitor, forming men from mud. Boccaccio identifies two versions of Prometheus at stake in the mythology. The first is allegorically representative of God *verus et omnipotens*, who created man from the mud of the earth, as the poets imagined Prometheus to have done. The second is the *doctus homo* who teaches these men of dirt the habits of knowledge and virtue, civilizing them, an act Boccaccio describes as *almost* equivalent to that of creation (“quasi de novo creet”

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<sup>1</sup> He includes, among others, Numenius, Cadmus, and Achaemenides, in addition to Prometheus and Phaethon. Gittes’s recent book, *Boccaccio’s Naked Muse: Eros, Culture, and the Mythopoeic Imagination* (2008), is an excellent, meticulous analysis of Boccaccio’s myths of making and making of myth. He is concerned on a much larger scale with Boccaccio’s surrogates and his autobiographical use of figures of martyrdom; his insights have proved critical for me in understanding the trope of martyrdom in the Calandrino cycle discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> A process comparable to Boccaccio’s defense of Ulysses and Alcibiades in *De casibus virorum illustrium*, and equally at odds with Dante. See Gittes, “St. Boccaccio: The Poet as Panderer and Martyr” (esp. 127, 8) which appears in revised form as part of Chapter 3 of *Boccaccio’s Naked Muse* (see 52-56). The first extended treatment of Boccaccio’s autobiographical use of Prometheus, to my knowledge, is Marino (1980), who focuses exclusively on the *Genealogia*. For medieval precursors on whom Boccaccio may have drawn for his positive portrait of Prometheus, she suggests the *Mitologiae*, but sees it as limitedly positive: “[Fulgentius] neutralizes him into an allegory for the Divine Providence Who imparted the spark of life to man (267).”

<sup>3</sup> “...Boccaccio’s careful reworking of the Ovidian figures of Prometheus and Phaethon in the *Allegoria* does not, I would argue, suggest a ‘confusa contaminazione’ of myth and history, paganism and Christianity, so much as a programmatic attempt to redeem the figure of the transgressive culture-hero; the former, a prototypical transgressor, is sanctified through a typological affiliation with Christ... (Gittes *Naked Muse*, 253, n.35)” To a lesser extent, this “typological affiliation” holds true for Phaethon as well.

*Gen.* 4 XLIV.12). This vision of Prometheus as pedagogue underscores a key change in Boccaccio's writing of the myth. He dismisses the conventional understanding in which the gods are angered by the theft of the fire and punish Prometheus with continual evisceration in the Caucasus. Boccaccio finds the episode unsatisfactory, altering the time-line and thereby the significance of Prometheus's stay in the Caucasus:

Circa quod quantum ad primum, advertendum est hic poetas more vulgi et improprie fuisse locutos. Existimat quidem vulgus iners, iratum deum adversus quemcunque laborantem videt, quantumcunque circa laudabile opus fatigetur, quasi nil preter ocium detur a pacato deo, et ideo iratum putavere deum Prometheo, eo quod assiduo studio noscendarum rerum laboraret... Quod autem duci et alligari Caucaso Prometheum a Mercurio fecerint, pervertitur ordo, nam prius in Caucaso fuit Prometheus, quam hominem rapto igne animaret.<sup>4</sup> (*Gen.* 4 XLIV.17, 18)

Far from punishment for theft, Boccaccio's Prometheus suffers instead only the trials of self-discipline and the isolation of the solitary pursuit of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> By making Prometheus's stay in the Caucasus precede the gift of fire to humanity, Boccaccio converts a punishment for outraging the gods into an allegory of voluntary self-sacrifice in the form of commitment to study and the onerous pursuit of knowledge, to be shared freely in turn for the education and civilization of humanity.

Even more interesting than the change itself is Boccaccio's justification for it. Despite citing some limited sources who recognize Prometheus as a figure of learning, at least in part,<sup>6</sup> Boccaccio is almost completely contradicting the tradition. He is clearly adverse to the interpretation of Prometheus as a figure of ambition that has moved beyond the bounds of the human and overstepped the divine. Unlike what we might expect, however, Boccaccio does not attribute the difference between his Promethean time-line and the traditional mythography to an act of misreading. The repeated reference to the *vulgus* in the passage above seems to anticipate a criticism of readers who have missed the truth hidden under the poetic fictions. Instead, we discover, it is the poets who have *miswritten* the "bella menzogna", by incorrectly placing Prometheus in the Caucasus after bringing the fire to humanity, not before, mistaking the pains of study for the pangs of punishment, and converting a gift into theft.<sup>7</sup> Even more bizarre than

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<sup>4</sup> "Sul primo punto è di osservare che i poeti hanno parlato come il volgo, e impropriamente. È il volgo ignorante che stima che il dio irato operi contro chiunque vede operoso, sebbene si affatichi in qualche lavoro lodevole; come se il dio pacifico nulla concedesse all'infuori dell'ozio; e il volgo credette che Dio fosse adirato con Prometeo perché si affaticava con assiduo impegno a conoscere le cose... L'aver poi fatto condurre e legare sul Caucaso Prometeo da Mercurio, inverte l'ordine delle cose; poichè Prometeo fu nel Caucaso prima di animare l'uomo col fuoco rapito."

<sup>5</sup> Osgood seems to be the first to note this alteration of the Prometheus story, and partially its significance: "...Prometheus visited Caucasus *before* he gave fire to men. Mercury, the gods' interpreter, led him thither and bound him, as the inspiring teacher lures one into solitary study and contemplation. The fetters are but self-imposed devotion to study, and the lacerations of the eagle but the pains of high meditation, healed at length by the joy of discovery (xxv).

<sup>6</sup> Including Fulgentius, and in a more limited fashion, St. Augustine.

<sup>7</sup> "Non enim in theatris vel plateis et in propatulo veritatis claritatem adipiscimur, quin imo in solitudinibus semoti, et exquisita taciturnitate speculamur et crebra meditatione rerum naturas exquirimus; et quia ista talia clam fiunt, quasi *furari videmur*..." ("Infatti, non nei teatri o nelle piazze e in pubblico raggiungiamo la luce della verità, anzi,

this assertion that the poets themselves have gone wrong is Boccaccio's evidence for it: the impropriety of the allegorical meaning behind the fiction shows that the "literal" poetic fiction is incorrect. Neither God, nor the gods, writes Boccaccio, can be angered by the genuine search for knowledge or the labor of study, nor could they instead be propitiated by laziness. By attacking the allegorical significance of the Prometheus story, Boccaccio demonstrates that the literal text – the veil of fiction – must itself be wrong, a move that reveals a consciousness of and a concern with the potential for error in both reading (on the part of the *vulgus*) and writing (on the part of the poets).

Through this reordering of the literal details of the myth of Prometheus, Boccaccio is able to endow him allegorically with christological significance, turning him into a redemptive figure of self-sacrifice. It is an act, not of theft, but of sacrifice generously and freely given for the salvation of humanity. This new Prometheus, in turn, can now safely stand in as an authorial surrogate, a figure of the writer, scholar, and teacher. The transformation of Phaethon in the *Allegoria mitologica* is slightly less complete, though accomplished in much the same way. As with Prometheus, Boccaccio rewrites a few of the details of Phaethon's career; this time, however, he does not offer a justification for the change. Though he is still operating largely outside of traditional interpretation,<sup>8</sup> Boccaccio cannot, or does not, alter the disastrous consequences of the young man's chariot ride. What he does change is the reason for the journey. No longer motivated by irresponsible vagaries of his reputation, in Boccaccio's youthful account Phaethon takes the chariot of the sun in response to pleas from his people:

Si miseris est licitum aliquid suaderi, te per superos adiuramus, o Pheton, quod  
pias aures nostris vocibus non extollas. Tu enim filius stellarum principis  
porrektorisque lucis amene, nutritus inter montis Elicone Musas, in operationibus  
validis roboratus, a patre non devians, nobis digneris ostendere florum generis  
novi virtutes, circa quas noster animus ansiatur.<sup>9</sup> (*AM* 16)

Though it is not a complete redemption, this recasting fundamentally changes Phaethon, here appealed to both as an instructor and artist particularly through the unorthodox reference to the Muses. Nor is it simply a childish whim that begins a frivolous jaunt to the heavens. The impassioned requests of the people move him to undertake the *work* of appealing to his father: "ad tanti laboris fastigium me disponam" ("mi disporrò ad affrontare così alta impresa" 17).

Despite his ultimate failure, the christological associations of Phaethon as the son of the Sun are in some ways even more evident than those of Prometheus. The people never question his paternity, and their joyful exclamations make the resonance explicitly Judeo-Christian: "Misi dominus de monte suo sancto Syon aiutorium plebi sue!" ("Il Signore ha mandato dal sacro monte di Sion un aiuto per il suo popolo!" 18). Upon his Phaethon's arrival in the realm of the Sun, he is immediately recognized by his father, who attempts to dissuade him from taking the

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ritiratici in solitudine, ricercato il silenzio, speculiamo e con frequente meditazione cerchiamo la natura delle cose; e poiché queste cose avvengono di nascosto, sembra *quasi che le rubiamo...*" *Gen.* 4 XLIV.14; emphasis mine)

<sup>8</sup> Cazalé Bérard uses Giovanni del Virgilio's commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a point of comparison to illustrate how unorthodox Boccaccio's use of Phaethon is, and "...la distanza che separa Boccaccio dai commentatori tradizionali del poeta latino (448)."

<sup>9</sup> "Se agli infelici è permesso esortare ad alcunché, in nome degli dei ti scongiuriamo, o Fetone, di non distogliere le tue orecchie pietose dalle nostre voci. Tu infatti, figlio del principe degli astri e datore della ridente luce, allevato fra le Muse del monte Elicona, fortificato in opere di valore, non degenerare dal padre, degnati di mostrare a noi le virtù dei fiori di nuovo genere, circa le quali il nostro animo è in angoscia."



chariot in terms rather less severe than Ovid's.<sup>10</sup> After Phaethon declines to heed these warnings and takes the reins of the chariot, he is referred to as *magnanimus* (26) but then, immediately after, *imprudens* (28). The final vision of Phaethon with which we are left is equally bifurcated. On the one hand, he has succeeded in bringing the life and the fruit of these *nuovi fiori* to a people desperately in need of them, but this gift comes at the cost of his own life. Yet Boccaccio reiterates that if Phaethon could go back and make the same choice again, "...iam mallet equos nunquam tetigisse paternos." ("...ormai preferirebbe non aver mai toccato i cavalli paterni.") He later continues: "Nam si viveret Pheton, nedum curra paterna, sed radios timoris causa quis dubitat quod fugisset?" ("Infatti se Fetonte vivesse, chi dubita che per timore fuggirebbe non solo il carro del padre, ma persino i raggi?" 38)

The ambiguity of Phaethon's character remains unresolved at the end of the *Allegoria mitologica*. He has actually achieved his goal and helped the people on whose behalf he has interceded. The cost is primarily to himself, and he is clearly represented as a sacrificial figure. The treatment is much more sympathetic, showing Phaethon to be both well-intentioned and ultimately productive. It also avoids the extended discussion of the harm done to the world by his chariot ride that features so prominently in the *Metamorphoses*. Though Jove still responds to the cries of the Earth by striking down Phaethon's "fire with fire", the most telling departure from Ovid in the entire *Allegoria mitologica* is the omission of the long and moving description of the cataclysmic effects of the veering chariot. Boccaccio instead limits this global disaster to a line or two (36), then returns to lamenting the fate of Phaethon ("Miserrime Pheton!").<sup>11</sup> And though the *Allegoria* ends with a series of moralizing glosses, compared to Boccaccio's writing of the rest of the myth, they feel almost tacked on.

Discant a simili omnes sibi tales labores assummere, quod fines rei cuique peroptandos possint attingere sine dampno...Leo enim arte superatur a pardo: sed si contra vires porrigit superatur. Maneat igitur unusquisque in sua vocatione tanquam Aaron, nec sibi magistri formam assummat qui non novit esse discipulus, si Phetontis ruinam cupit miserabilem evitare.<sup>12</sup> (*AM* 38, 39)

Adding to the sense that these morals are but an artificial conclusion that is somewhat at odds with the rest of the *Allegoria mitologica* is their proliferation. Read quickly, they almost appear to be the same, but they are in fact, at least three separate moral interpretations. All are consonant with Boccaccio's sympathetic treatment of Phaethon, since they lay no real charge of deliberate misconduct, indicating youthful error rather than a grave sin.

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<sup>10</sup> "...magna enim petis que tuis viribus non conveniunt: sors tua mortalis est, nec est mortale quod optas." ("...poiché chiedi grandi cose non appropriate alle tue forze; la tua sorte è mortale, mentre non è mortale ciò che chiedi." 23). This warning about the scope and limitations of mortality remains the same, but Boccaccio's version focuses on the physically arduous journey, unsuited to humans, omitting the Ovidian assertion that even the other gods could not control the chariot. The warnings are less violent too and not as explicit about Phaethon's demise should he take the journey – only that he is asking for a gift unknown (*ignotum*) and potentially deadly (*funesti*).

<sup>11</sup> Usher has already noted this omission in the *Allegoria mitologica* of the cataclysmic results of Phaethon's journey (2005, 50).

<sup>12</sup> "Da questo esempio imparino tutti ad assumersi fatiche tali che possano conseguire senza danno le mete desiderabili di ogni cosa...Il leone infatti è superato nell'artificio dalla pantera, ma questa al contrario è superata se ostenta la forza. Rimanga dunque ognuno nella sua vocazione, come Aronne, né assuma sembianze di maestro chi non sa essere discepolo, se desidera evitare la miseranda rovina di Fetonte."

Given the damage (de-emphasized though it is in Boccaccio's version) caused by the chariot ride, the first of these morals makes sense. The final two correspond less directly to the story itself, however. It is not exactly clear what Phaethon's true sphere or vocation is. (Where, indeed, would he be lion or panther in this tale?<sup>13</sup>) Nor, despite the potential allegorical significance of taking the reins of the sun, does he try to be a teacher without first being a pupil. His father's warnings do not include instructions; unlike Icarus, the issue is not that Phaethon is inadequately schooled in driving the chariot, or that he disregards instruction, but that as a mortal, he is *constitutionally* incapable of doing so. As his father reminds him: "Sors tua mortalis est."

Both Gittes and Usher have suggested that Boccaccio's use of Phaethon is autobiographical in the *Allegoria mitologica* and at other moments in the minor works,<sup>14</sup> and it seems to be within these moralizing interpretations that we move most clearly into the sphere of the autobiographical. Gittes especially suggests that the figure of Phaethon reappears in one of Boccaccio's later letters, where he compares the price paid by Phaethon for giving in to the pleas of his people, and the unflattering reception of Boccaccio's attempt to illuminate the *Commedia* through his lectures.<sup>15</sup> Usher, on the other hand, concentrates on the more traditional construction of Phaethon as a figure of youthful ambition, suggesting that he represents Boccaccio's perceived educational deficiencies and his fears of having risen too young to prominence. In both cases, it is primarily the moral significance of Phaethon's story, as emphasized by Boccaccio in this somewhat artificial concluding moment, from which this autobiographical meaning is most directly drawn.

But what if Phaethon's function as an autobiographical surrogate in the *Allegoria* is merely expressive of a youthful anxiety (as opposed to the development of Prometheus in the *Genealogia*, which Boccaccio continued to expand and revise until his death)? After all, Usher's analysis of Phaethon understands him as autobiographical insofar as he represents a crisis early in the poet's career: "...Boccaccio's Phaethon very likely represents the youthful poet, who has made good progress, has even acquired something of a reputation, but who has then overreached himself, and now needs reparatory instruction."<sup>16</sup> Though neither Gittes nor Usher treat Phaethon in the *Genealogia* extensively in their analyses, there is evidence of a different sort there as well. I am particularly interested in the *Genealogia* because like the *Decameron* it is a work to which Boccaccio repeatedly returned in his old age. Not only do the treatments of these two figures in this late-life work run parallel in their demonstration of Boccaccio's ability to reread and rewrite myth, but they also, I think, show consciousness of a connection between them as authorial surrogates.

At first glance, the *Genealogia* does present us with a more limited treatment of Phaethon that would seem to evade his autobiographical resonance. Here, Boccaccio's account of

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<sup>13</sup> Part of the peculiarity of this line ("Leo enim arte superatur a pardo: sed si contra vires porrigit superatur.") is its reciprocity, again implying that Phaethon has a different strength that he should be using, not just that he has attempted something to which he was unsuited.

<sup>14</sup> Primarily in the *Allegoria mitologica*, but also in the *Comedia delle ninfe* and *De casibus*. See Usher, 2000 and 2005 and Gittes, 2002 and 2008. Neither discusses the *Genealogia* in detail, though Gittes includes a small section on Boccaccio's assessment of Paul of Perugia's account of Eridanus at the end of Book 7, XLI (*Naked Muse* 172, 173).

<sup>15</sup> *Naked Muse* 174.

<sup>16</sup> "Autobiographical Phaethon" 77. Usher also notes the possibility that Ovid used Phaethon as a "cipher" for himself and his poetic project (see in particular 84, 85) and that Boccaccio may be in turn imitating that autobiographical appropriation.

Phaethon begins with a brief and straightforward summary of Ovid's version of the story, within which the traditional reason given for Phaethon's journey to the Sun is restored: "...contigisse scilicet quod, non cedente Phetonte Epapho, Iovis et Ysidis filio, ab illo illi dictum sit eum Solis non esse filium..." ("Non volendo Fetonte cedere ai vanti di Epafo, figlio di Giove e di Iside, gli fu detto da quello che egli non era figlio del Sole" 7 XLI.2). Gone are the pleas of the desperate population, and with them, any motivation other than Phaethon's vanity and a youthful desire to prove his social status. In the case of Prometheus, as we saw above, the *Genealogia* rewrites the literal sense of the myth by focusing on its allegorical significance and then demonstrating that it is impossibly incorrect. Boccaccio's interpretation of Phaethon in the *Genealogia*, however, utterly avoids an allegorical or moral interpretation. Instead we are offered an unexpectedly prosaic "hystoriam et naturalem rationem" ("una storia e una ragione naturale") for the myth.

The historical event at stake is a great fire that the ancients believed took place under the reign of Cecrops, the mythical first king of Athens. In the accounts Boccaccio cites, this catastrophic fire was so severe that it dried up rivers, destroyed crops, and left the city abandoned. It continued to rage for several months until the autumn, when the seasonal rains finally extinguished it. The second explanation of the Phaethon story, the "naturalem rationem" is equally grounded in physical reality. (Usher elegantly refers to the entire account as "deliberately meteorological".)<sup>17</sup> Here, Phaethon corresponds to the annual dry season, and as Cecrops's fire was extinguished by the rain in the fall, so is that season ended every year by the advent of the rains: "Est enim in Zodiaco spatium XX graduum, a XX° scilicet gradu libre usque ad X° Scorpionis, quod phylosophi viam vocavere combustam, eo quod singulis annis, gradiente sole per spatium illud, omnia in terris videantur exuri..."<sup>18</sup> (7, XLI, 8).

Contrary to the treatment of Phaethon in the *Allegoria mitologica*, there seems at first glance to be no particular redemption of the figure, or autobiographical use of him here. Indeed, like some of those moments in his commentary on the *Commedia*, this passage seems like a rather mundane retreat on the part of Boccaccio from potentially interesting interpretive problems. Yet far from a meaningless treatment, the intervention here of a seemingly insubstantial reading of the historical and natural senses of the Phaethon myth, is in fact a radical alteration of the traditionally understood significance of the story. Much like that of Prometheus, the story of Phaethon is traditionally a story about overstepping bounds. These two are quintessentially transgressors; their cautionary tales usually represent a deserved punishment meted out to those who attempt to exceed the limits of the human and to step improperly into the sphere of the divine. Like Dante's Ulysses, Prometheus and Phaethon represent the problem of *oltremisura*. Previously, Boccaccio has redeemed these two by rewriting the literal stories themselves, altering Prometheus's timeline and changing Phaethon's motivations. Now, something very different happens.

In the *Genealogia*'s account of Phaethon, the problem of *oltremisura* is not mitigated by changing his motivation to more generous ones, nor is the error softened so much by glossing over the destructive consequences of his chariot ride. Instead, the quality of *oltremisura* itself is redeemed. The exegetical difficulties of the overstepping of bounds so clearly represented in the myth of Phaethon (as well as Prometheus) disappear as the *Genealogia* rehabilitates *oltremisura* as a natural and innate quality. This process of naturalization is most apparent in the parallel

<sup>17</sup> "Autobiographical Phaethon" 49.

<sup>18</sup> "C'è infatti nello Zodiaco uno spazio di 20 gradi, cioè dal XX° della Bilancia al X° dello Scorpione, che i filosofi han chiamato *via bruciata*, perché ogni anno, quando il sole percorre quello spazio, tutto sulla terra sembra bruciare..."

Boccaccio draws with the cyclical progression of the seasons; a progression that, though it seems extreme and excessive in human understanding, is nonetheless part of a divinely ordered, perfect universe. Though Athens under Cecrops is completely destroyed by the raging fire, the fire itself is merely a part of the seasonal weather, finally extinguished in turn by the arrival of the rainy autumn. The extremes of the natural world are complementary part of a functional whole, balanced by their reciprocal opposites: summer and winter, water and fire.

This reciprocity is evidenced even at a linguistic level. Tracing the origins of Phaethon's mythology, Boccaccio briefly illuminates the meaning behind the etymology: "*Pheton ante alia, ut ait Leontius thessalus, latine sonat incendium... Clymenes autem grece, latine sonat humiditas, que ideo Phetontis mater dicta est, quia non posit perseverare calor, nisi congrua subsistat humiditas, et sic ab humiditate, tanquam a matre filius, ali videtur, et in esse perseverare.*"<sup>19</sup> (7 XLI.5, 6) This linguistic signification, trivial though it may seem, is indicative of the natural correspondence being constructed in this section of the *Genealogia*, in opposition to a disproportionate *oltremisura* – the embodiment of the unnatural. Here, even at the level of language, two opposites result in a balance that is fully intelligible; one cannot exist without the other, and both, though seemingly disproportionate, are naturally occurring goods.

The logic that reforms *oltremisura* from an unnatural excess on the part of man encompasses both the Creator's realm of the physical world and the human realm of language as the hallmark of man's intelligence. Yet lest we assume this extended "meteorological" digression not to be applicable to the figure of Phaethon himself, Boccaccio continues:

Quod autem Pheton petat a patre ut lucis curram ducat, nil aliud sentire debemus quam innatum quoddam etiam insensibilibus creaturis permanendi et augendi desiderium, ut de insensibilibus tanquam de rationalibus loquar; quod etiam de Terra orante dicere possumus. Quod autem inseritur eum viso Scorpione timuisse atque habenas equorum liquisse, et in eos ultra solitum ascendisse, et celi partem illam exussisse, et terram equo modo descendentes incendisse, ab ordine nature continuo sumptum est.<sup>20</sup> (7 XLI.7)

Again, rather than attribute Phaethon's motivations to something rather less selfish and juvenile as he did before in the *Allegoria*, Boccaccio leaves them unchanged from Ovid's version. Yet he defends them all the same as part of the natural order of living things – a normal desire to grow and learn, a desire shared even by insensate things.<sup>21</sup> The parallelism of this desire, even between

<sup>19</sup> "*Fetonte*, anzitutto, come dice Leonzio tessalo, in latino significa *incendio*; ed è detto figlio del Sole perché il sole è fonte e origine di calore; e così, poiché tutto il calore sembra causato dal sole, non impropriamente fu immaginato padre dell'incendio. *Climene* poi è parola greca che in latino significa *umidità*; e fu detta madre di Fetonte, perché il calore non può durare, se non gli stia sotto una congrua umidità; e così dall'umidità, come da madre, il figlio sembra essere alimentato e perseverare nel suo essere."

<sup>20</sup> "Nel fatto poi che Fetonte chieda al padre di guidare il carro della luce, dobbiamo intendere un certo innato desiderio di conservarsi e di crescere, anche nelle creature insensibili (per dire di esse come di creature razionali); e ciò possiamo anche dire della Terra che prega. Ciò che poi si aggiunge (che Fetonte, visto lo Scorpione, abbia avuto paura e abbia lasciato andare le briglie dei cavalli e che su di essi sia salito oltre il limite e abbia bruciato quella parte del cielo; e che i cavalli, scendendo in ugual modo verso la terra, la abbiano incendiata), è preso dall'ordine continuo della natura."

<sup>21</sup> This same language appears in Pampinea's proposal to the ladies of the brigata that they leave the plague-ridden city of Florence in the Introduction to the *Decameron's* first day: "Natural ragione è di ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere: e concedesi questo tanto, che alcuna volta è già addivenuto che, per guardar quella, senza colpa alcuna si sono uccisi degli uomini. E se questo concedono le leggi, nelle sollecitudini

insensate things and rational man, makes clear the connection to the physical world: the desire to go “beyond the limits” is itself natural and *innatum*, a part of all of God’s creations, and therefore, not one produced by the errant or fallen qualities of man. Even the Earth’s distraught prayers, which in Ovid’s poetry demand our sympathy, are the result of the same, blameless motivation.

This is moreover the moment in Boccaccio’s account of Phaethon in the *Genealogia* where *oltremisura* explicitly appears as *ultra solitum*. But who or what exactly is exceeding the bounds is part of the confused structure of the passage, that seems to move between Phaethon and the horses with equal ease. The agent of ignition, both of the heavens and the earth, is not precisely clear, leaving it perhaps with the sense the Italian translation above gives: that Phaethon ignites the heavens, while the crash of the chariot’s horses sets fire to the earth. The ambiguity of this passage only serves to emphasize the inherent quality of this desire, shared even in this death spiral by sensate man and irrational animal. The parity of the conjunction reflects the same move away from condemnation of *oltremisura* as does Boccaccio’s exegesis of the myth in historical and meteorological terms above. The conflation of Phaethon and the horses allows for no separation between rational soul and irrational appetites, no place to locate *oltremisura* as excess, error, or sin. Naturalizing the ambitious desire to exceed bounds mitigates the possibilities of judgment for a quality that Dante certainly condemned. Moreover, not only is *oltremisura* not a transgression in itself, but our very sense that it is a sin is framed as the result of our lack of perspective. The failure to understand it as natural is a failure to understand nature. Boccaccio concludes this passage by saying that these interpretations of the Phaethon myth are taken “ab ordine nature continuo”. In this section of the *Genealogia*, Nature, as perfectly created by God, is a continuous unity, but this is not to be equated with being moderate, static, or unchanging.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it is the combination and balance of extremes, that makes them each part of a complete whole. Like the dry season that may be a burden to a farmer, those natural events which seem wrong from a limited, human perspective (as with the fire that destroyed Athens, or the plague that decimated Florence), are merely a moment, and for all their seeming disproportion are part of the divinely ordained circle of the universe. The human desire to transcend or exceed established boundaries is exonerated because it is shared by all created things, and *oltremisura* becomes as natural as the cyclical growth of the springtime, balanced by its opposite in the continually changing but eternally stable seasons.

A final change to the Phaethon myth in the *Genealogia* is particular indicative of the change in judgment with respect to the quality of *oltremisura*. Ovid’s account, which Boccaccio has followed scrupulously until now, includes the famous line “saevis compescuit ignibus ignes.” (*Met.* II.313) It describes, of course, the moment where Jupiter uses his lightning bolt to destroy the burning chariot, and with it Phaethon, in order to save the Earth from destruction. Despite his other Ovidian departures in the youthful *Allegoria*, Boccaccio follows the *Metamorphoses* in this scene: “Dedit igitur Iovi mater Gigantium preces, quas ille rector Olympi suscepit aure pia, et summam petiit arcem, unde fulmina solitus est iactare, et ira furoreque commotus fulmen misit in aurigam, cuius animam expulit atque rotas; et sic ignes compescuit igne” (“Allora la madre dei Giganti rivolse a Giove preghiere, che il signore dell’Olimpo occolse con orecchio pietoso: sali alla rocca superna donde è solito vibrare il fumine e commosso d’ira e di furore mandò un

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delle quali è il ben vivere d’ogni mortale, quanto maggiormente, senza offesa d’alcuno, è a noi e a qualunque altro onesto alla conservazione della nostra vita prendere quegli rimedii che noi possiamo? (53–54).”

<sup>22</sup> As indeed Boccaccio has already reminded us at the very end of the *Decameron*: “Confesso nondimeno le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento (*Conclusione dell’autore* 27).”

fulmine all'auriga e ne distrusse la vita e il carro, e così il fuoco domò col fuoco." AM 37; emphasis mine). Yet at the very end of his analysis of the classical myth in the *Genealogia*, Boccaccio manages by some tricky calisthenics to invert the famous fighting of fire with fire completely:

Quod autem a Iove fulminatus sit, sic intelligendum reor. Intelligunt enim poete non nunquam pro Iove ignem et aliquando aerem, qui hic pro aere accipiendus est, in quo ascendentes vapores humidi conglomerantur in nubes; que, si impulsu alicuius venti extollantur usque ad frigidam aeris regionem, confestim vertuntur in aquas, quas cadentes pluvias dicimus; et sic fulminatus est, id est extinctus a Iove, id est ab aere causante pluvias.<sup>23</sup> (7 XLI.11)

As it turns out, fire should not be understood in this case as fire, but as water. Jupiter certainly was associated with the skies as well as with thunder and lightning, but the process that Boccaccio must use to arrive at this interpretation is palpably onerous. It returns in detail to a step-by-step meteorological analysis: once we understand that "lightning" should mean "air", then we can follow the process of humidity rising, forming clouds, being pushed by the wind to colder altitudes, then finally becoming water and in turn, raindrops.

So why insist in this moment only on departing from the Ovidian account and transforming lightning into rain? The key reason for this change is still that extinguishing fire with water maintains the natural order of things that finds balance in opposites, a moral for which *saevis compescuit ignibus ignes* is not particularly well-suited. But even beyond this, Jupiter's destruction of Phaethon with the lightning bolt is clearly a scene of divine judgment; lightning cannot but represent the punishment of a transgressor. This is made particularly clear in the passage from the *Allegoria* quoted above, where Boccaccio describes Jove as "enraged" as he goes searching for his weapon. Death by lightning is deserved punishment for one who has committed the sin of attempting to exceed his proper sphere; the extinguishing of fire by its logical opposite on the other hand is in keeping with the natural order, producing a reading of Phaethon that sees his characteristic *oltremisura* not as a sin, but as a natural and even positive quality. Just as Prometheus is not punished in the Caucasus, here Phaethon is not judged or punished either. He is not executed, merely extinguished, and even his death is a part of the order of the natural world.

In the *Genealogia*, Boccaccio changes the order of events in the literal fiction of the myth of Prometheus, eliminating the traditional reading of judgment and punishment for outraging the gods by overstepping bounds, and endowing him with a Christological resonance as a figure of self-sacrifice for the benefit of humanity. This non-punitive revision not only clears Prometheus of accusations of transgression as a hero of the classical world, but also makes him acceptable as a redemptive figure for Christian allegorizing. This in turn allows Boccaccio to align himself with Prometheus, using him as an autobiographical surrogate, emphasizing his own suffering and self-sacrifice. In the form of a disavowal similar to Dante's "Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono," the self-identification with Prometheus appears at the very beginning of the *Genealogia*:

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<sup>23</sup> "Che poi Fetonte sia stato fulminato da Giove, credo debba interpretarsi così. I poeti talora intendono per Giove il fuoco e talora l'aria, e qui deve essere preso per l'aria, nella quale i vapori umidi, salendo, si agglomerano in nubi; le quali, se per la spinta di qualche vento siano sollevate fino alla regione fredda dell'aria, subito sono convertite in acque, che, quando cadono, noi chiamiamo piogge; e così Fetonte fu fulminato, cioè estinto da Giove, ossia dall'aria che provoca le piogge."

“Horresco tamen tam grande opus assumere, et vix credam, si resurgat et veniat Prometheus alter seu is idem, qui poetarum assertione prisco tempore consueverat homines ex luto componere, nedum ego, huius operis sit arista sufficiens (I.41).”<sup>24</sup> Converting Prometheus’s stay in the Caucasus from punishment to solitary study adds to this identification in Book I, which clearly presents the image of writing as real labor and studying as suffering. Right before he proposes Petrarch as a superior candidate to himself to undertake the project of the *Genealogia*, Boccaccio writes:

Et ob id, miles elegantissime, pensande sunt hominum vires et examinanda ingenia, et sic illis convenientia onera imponenda. Potuit Athlas sustinere capite celum, eique fesso sub onore Alcides potuit prestare vicem, divini homines ambo, et invictum fere robur fuit ambobus. Ast ego quid? Brevis sum homuncio, nulle michi vires, ingenium tardum et fluxa memoria; et tu meis humeris, non dicam celum, quod illi tulere, quin imo et terram super addere cupis et maria, ac etiam celicolas ipsos, et cum eis sustentatores egregios. Nil aliud hoc est nisi velle ut pondere premar et peream.<sup>25</sup> (I.19-21)

Like Prometheus, Boccaccio’s lifetime of study is the price paid to disseminate knowledge and to educate a populace – part of the project of this capstone of his old age.

But though the *Genealogia* reconstructs *oltremisura* as a positive quality, how is its revision of Phaethon autobiographical? Above I have examined the ways in which Boccaccio mitigates Phaethon’s culpability for the crash of the chariot in the *Allegoria*, how he rewrites the cost of the disaster as primarily to Phaethon himself, allowing him still to be a benefactor to the people he saves. Usher has argued persuasively that he is a powerful surrogate for Boccaccio’s youthful anxieties as a poet, particularly his fears of being inadequately educated and unequal to the praise heaped upon him at a young age. Unlike Prometheus, there is no explicit reference to Phaethon in the first book of the *Genealogia*, and his treatment in Book XLI seems rather mundane, a retreat from the interesting revisions of the *Allegoria*. How then does the autobiographical use of Phaethon as a surrogate continue even at this late stage in Boccaccio’s career?

The lack of allegoresis of the mythology of Phaethon in the *Genealogia* is itself evidence of the extent to which Boccaccio identified with him even later in his life – it is autobiographical in its resistance to allegorical interpretation. As a figure who can only succeed in helping others through his own failure (death), the parallels with Phaethon are not ones to which Boccaccio wishes to draw explicit attention in a project about which he expressed strong reservations. Whether these ambivalences are rhetorical or genuine, the beginning of the *Genealogia* emphasizes the poet’s concern that his strengths are unequal to or improperly matched with the project. Even though undertaking such an *oltremisura* task is laudable in itself, it still may well

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<sup>24</sup> “Tremo tuttavia al pensiero di intraprendere un’opera così grande; e appena crederei essere sufficiente a tale operazione, non dico me, ma neppure un altro Prometeo, o quello stesso – se risorgesse e si presentasse – che, per l’attestazione dei poeti, era solito nei primi tempi mettere insieme gli uomini dal fango.”

<sup>25</sup> “E perciò, cavaliere gentilissimo, occorre soppesare le forze degli uomini ed esaminarne gli ingegni e ad essi sono da imporre carichi adeguati. Atlante poté sostenere il cielo col capo; e a lui, spossato sotto il peso, Alcide poté offrire di sostituirlo: divini uomini entrambi, e di forza quasi invincibile. Ma io, che posso? Sono un omiciattolo, non ho forze adeguate, tardo è il mio ingegno e vacillante la memoria; e tu desideri imporre alle mie spalle, non dirò il cielo, che essi sopportarono, ma anche la terra e i mari e perfino gli stessi abitanti del cielo e con essi quegli egregi che lo sorreggono. Ciò altro non è che volere che io sia schiacciato dal peso e perisca.”

result, not in a Promethean success, but in Phaethon's demise. The figure of Phaethon represents the real possibility that he may not be able to complete the *Genealogia* successfully, and a consciousness of the comparison emerges secondarily in the passage above. Boccaccio compares himself unfavorably to Atlas, whom he describes as divine and invincible, but who was also the brother of Prometheus, who Boccaccio will shortly after explicitly identify with the project. It is the myth of Phaethon's that structures Boccaccio's expression of anxiety here; Phaethon who through no real fault of his own but that of birth and nature, was unequal to the task which he was begged to undertake. The trajectory Boccaccio describes – the heavens, the earth, the seas, and the gods – is that of Phaethon's journey as he travels to the Sun, outrages the Earth, and is finally at her behest thrown into the Eridanus by Jupiter.

The first book of the *Genealogia* returns us to Phaethon's story in other subtle ways. Boccaccio's repeated references to writing as work, as labor with very real costs should also remind us of Phaethon's acquiescence to undertake the journey, not as a pleasure-filled jaunt to see his father, but "ad tanti laboris fastigium." A similar reference exists in Boccaccio's ultimate acquisition to his interlocutor's insistence that he compose the *Genealogia*. He finally responds: "Vincor, inquam, magis fere lepiditate verborum quam viribus rationum; urges etenim, me inpellis, trahis, et ut paream, si nolim velim, necesse est (I.38)."<sup>26</sup> Phaethon is ultimately persuaded by the desperate entreaties of his people, Boccaccio is similarly overwhelmed by pleas for help and guidance. The success of emotional, rather than rational, appeals raises the possibility that like Phaethon, Boccaccio too is magnanimous, but imprudent.<sup>27</sup>

As these references to Phaethon at the outset of the *Genealogia* are veiled, so is the allegorical interpretation of Phaethon's attempt that ends in failure in Book XLI obscured. Boccaccio offers us only the "hystoriam et naturalem rationem" for the myth, instead of the elaborate changes of the *Allegoria*. Given his anxieties over the project of the *Genealogia*, it is not particularly surprising that he should avoid raising again the gloss that warns that no one should start projects which exceed the scope of their strengths and abilities. This explains as well interpretive shift between the Phaethon of the *Allegoria* and the Phaethon of the *Genealogia*. In the youthful account, Boccaccio changes the literal details of the actual myth, making Phaethon's motivations and actions more sympathetic, revealing an autobiographical alignment with the young man, and as Usher has argued, his own anxieties about his future performance as a poet. In the *Genealogia* on the other hand, the Phaethon myth is restored to its Ovidian shape, and the previous autobiographical resonance of the figure for Boccaccio is almost completely erased. At the same time, however, the *Genealogia's* account of Phaethon, by naturalizing an inclination to act in a way that is *oltremisura*, by redeeming and even ennobling the innate human desire to exceed boundaries, to transcend limits, to undertake ambitious projects. That is, the attempt itself is justified, regardless of the success or failure of the individual or the consequences of the action.<sup>28</sup> Most importantly, the scene of Phaethon's death is changed from one of punishment to

<sup>26</sup> "Sono vinto quasi più dalla dolcezza delle tue parole che dalla forza degli argomenti; tu mi incalzi, mi trascini; ed è necessario che, voglia o non voglia, io obbedisca."

<sup>27</sup> Though he glosses over the *Genealogia*, Usher does cite one of Boccaccio's final references to Phaethon from a letter to Mainardo Cavalcanti in 1372 ("Autobiographical Phaethon" 86, 87) that also makes the underlying danger of an identification with Phaethon felt. In poor health and suffering from an extreme fever, Boccaccio wrote: "Sed cum in cassum cedere expectatum adverti, Phetontis memor incendii cepi michi ipsi timere ne fulmine illo in cinerem iturus essem, et quam ante optaveram mortem expavescere (*Ep.* XXI)."

<sup>28</sup> Usher's "An Autobiographical Phaethon" traces this same pattern in much greater detail throughout Boccaccio's other minor works. He writes: "But the generic idea of seeking the heights, and precipitating disaster, is one which will inform the whole of the *De Casibus*... It contains a detailed and eloquent plea for the wholehearted pursuit of



one of death as a part of the order of the natural world. Overall, it reflects the evading of judgment, and autobiographically, revealing Boccaccio's desire to justify the *Genealogia* as an idea in itself, regardless of its completion or success, particularly since the ambition of the project could no longer be excused as the hubris of a young poet.

My purpose in this extended treatment of the figures of Prometheus and Phaethon in Boccaccio's minor works is to analyze the method by which Boccaccio uses them as authorial surrogates, and how that autobiographical relationship changes interpretation of them. These two in particular also share a number of qualities that will resonate with the primary focus of the next chapter. Most obviously, even before they are transformed into authorial surrogates, both are figures of creation: Prometheus as the progenitor of man and Phaethon as the artist and seeker of poetic glory. They equally have resonance as scholars, who do not merely work in isolation, but once having done so, share the knowledge acquired with a larger community for their benefit.<sup>29</sup> They are artists and educators, creators and poets. Not coincidentally, they are also two of the most famous figures from the classical world generally condemned for their ambition or hubris, for the overstepping of bounds and the subsequent punishment brought upon them for outraging the gods through the *oltremisura* of their actions.

Prometheus and Phaethon are also both strongly associated with the sun, both as the symbol of rationality, and as the cause of their downfall, the instrument of their suffering.<sup>30</sup> The

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ambitions, even if they often lead to downfall." He then cites III.13: "Vitium igitur ingentium spirituum est altera via quam permittat ratio velle celsiora conscendere: delabi autem consuetum est, ad quod totiens quis deducitur, etsi non calle unico, hoc saltem, quotiens posse maiora viribus arbitratur."

<sup>29</sup>The most important aspect to the changes Boccaccio made to Prometheus's story; remember as well that though Phaethon's chariot ride in the *Allegoria* is disastrous for him, it still brings the needed growth to the people who petition him. For the autobiographical significance, I refer again to Gittes, who emphasizes the injury Boccaccio felt at the poor reception of his lectures on the *Commedia*; his own attempt to make poetry accessible and to educate the populace.

<sup>30</sup>Phaethon's association is obvious, as the son of the Sun and in the form of his fiery demise. Prometheus is of course associated with fire, but the connection between the sun and fire is not generally explicit in the tradition. Boccaccio does emphasize it, however, and designates the sun as the source of the stolen fire: "Deinde a rota solis furatur hic ignem, et defert in terris, et pectori infert luteo homini, et vivus efficitur. "Poi, questi ruba dalla ruota del sole il fuoco e lo porta sulla terra e lo infonde nel petto dell'uomo di fango, che diventa vivo." (4 XLIV.14)

Prometheus first appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*. The theft of fire is detailed at lines 565-570; he bears it with him in a fennel stock, but the source of the fire is not identified as the sun. Aeschylus creates in *Prometheus Bound* a fuller, more positive portrait of Prometheus as the champion of man, but the source of the fire is still not specified, though the fennel stock appears again (5-10). The sun appears there as a force which tortures the bound Prometheus: "...scorched by the sun's bright beams, you shall lose the fair bloom of your flesh. And glad you shall be when spangled-robed night shall veil his brightness and when the sun shall scatter again the frost of morning (24-25)." Yet it is also to the sun that Prometheus later appeals for mercy: "O you bright sky of heaven, you swift-winged breezes, you river-waters, and infinite laughter of the waves of ocean, O universal mother Earth, and you, all-seeing orb of the sun, to you I call! See what I, a god, endure from the gods (89-90)."

More to the point perhaps, Pliny the Elder includes Prometheus in his chapter on inventors in the *Natural History* (VII, 57), identifying him neither as a thief, nor the inventor of fire, but as the one who taught man how to preserve it. (Pliny's *Natural History* is one of Boccaccio's sources of information on the heliotrope that appears in *Dec.* VIII.3 and a subtext of the events of that *novella*.) The sun appears most directly as rationality (particularly as related to the sharing of knowledge through instruction) in Lucian's *Prometheus on the Caucasus*, when Prometheus defends himself against the charge of theft:

And now, with your permission, I will approach the subject of that stolen fire, of which we hear so much. I have a question to ask, which I beg you will answer frankly. Has there been one spark less fire in Heaven, since men shared it with us? Of course not. It is the nature of fire, that it does not become less by being imparted to others. A fire is not put out by kindling another from it. No, this

sun's connection with both the positive and negative sides of their stories is part of the problem of *oltremisura* – the pursuit of higher things as a good in itself, regardless of its success (Prometheus) or its failure (Phaethon). In this way, it is the symbol of their redemption *and* their sacrifice, and the origin of the underlying theme of martyrdom present in Boccaccio's accounts. More even than martyrdom, it is the christological significance with which each is endowed that allows both classical figures to be used as authorial surrogates: their redemptive acts redeem them in turn. Like Prometheus's life-saving fire, the sun is the origin of all life and good, a power that, like knowledge and learning, cannot be diminished by sharing. Yet the benefits that Prometheus and Phaethon confer upon humanity come at sacrificial cost: both the suffering of isolated study and the cost of life itself.

Finally, we may again emphasize the extent to which Boccaccio transforms the struggles of Prometheus and Phaethon into attempts laudable in themselves, regardless of the outcome. This fact is indeed part of the importance of linking these two figures together, as the positive

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is sheer envy: you cannot bear that men should have a share of this necessary, though you have suffered no harm thereby. For shame! Gods should be beneficent, 'givers of good'; they should be above all envy. Had I taken away fire altogether, and left not a spark behind, it would have been no great loss. You have no use for it. You are never cold; you need no artificial light; nor is ambrosia improved by boiling. To man, on the other hand, fire is indispensable for many purposes, particularly for those of sacrifice; how else are they to fill their streets with the savour of burnt-offerings, and the fumes of frankincense I how else to burn fat thigh-pieces upon your altars? I observe that you take a particular pleasure in the steam arising there from, and think no feast more delicious than the smell of roast meat, as it mounts heavenwards in eddying clouds of smoke. Your present complaint, you see, is sadly at variance with this taste. I wonder you do not forbid the Sun to shine on mankind. He too is of fire, and fire of a purer and diviner quality. Has anything been said to him about his lavish expenditure of your property? (17-20)

This is the first text that specifically connects fire with the sun, although it does not identify it as the source from which Prometheus himself retrieved it. Though he likely did not have access to the works of Lucian, for Boccaccio's purposes, the description here of fire as an inexhaustible resource not diminished by sharing stands in perfect relation to the civilizing dissemination of knowledge by the pedagogue who has won it through hard study. The divinity of fire also parallels the divine spark given by Boccaccio's "second Prometheus" to man in what he describes as *almost* a second act of creation. Also striking in Lucian is the explicit connection between Prometheus's gift and the act of sacrifice, which is echoed in Boccaccio's disdain for an allegorical reading that condemned virtuous labor and approved of idleness.

Of the medieval sources Boccaccio cites, Claudian does not mention the sun in *Panegyricus de Quarto Consulatu Honorii Augusti*, but does describe the mixing of earthly and heavenly elements in the creation of man by Prometheus (225-254). The *Mythographies* seem to be the first place in which the theft of fire is described explicitly as from the sun; Fulgentius describes Prometheus as secretly touching a fennel stick to the wheels of Phoebus's chariot when Minerva carries him to the heavens (a detail also provided by Boccaccio). Fulgentius does take a more positive view of Prometheus, and correctly glosses his name as divine foresight. It seems likely to me that it is also from Fulgentius that Boccaccio departed for his insistence that Prometheus's suffering in the Caucasus does not represent the anger of the gods, for Fulgentius contradicts several of his own sources which claim his exposed liver represents spite or anger. Instead, he writes, "The liver which Prometheus exposes to the vulture is what we call the heart, because no small number of philosophers have declared that wisdom dwells in the heart... (II, 6)." These are two importance debts to Fulgentius I think Marino overlooks in her assessment.

The natural connection between heat and fire and the sun is also made explicit in the *Genealogia's* treatment of Phaethon, perhaps one more indication of a conscious link between the two figures: "Pheton ante alia, ut ait Leontius thessalus, latine sonat incendium; hic ideo Solis dicitur filius, quia sol calor fons et origo sit, et sic cum a sole causari videatur calor omnis, non incongrue incendii pater fictus est" ("Fetonte, anzitutto, come dice Leonzio tessalo, in latino significa incendio; ed è detto figlio del Sole perché il sole è fonte e origine di calore; e così, poiché tutto il calore sembra causato dal sole, non impropriamente fu immaginato padre dell'incendio" 7 XLI.5)."

treatment and revision of both occurs independently of their fate, hinging instead on the nobility of the attempt. The inherent admiration for ambition that these revisions reflect also marks a major departure from Dante, who certainly took a less kindly view of Prometheus and Phaethon, or of similar figures like Ulysses and Daedalus.<sup>31</sup> Returning for a moment to the first book of the *Genealogia*, and to Boccaccio's apology for the enormity of the project, he writes: "...litora et montuosa etiam nemora, scrobes et antra, si opus sit, peragravero pedibus, ad inferos usque descendero, et, Dedalus alter factus, ad ethera transvolavero (I.40)."<sup>32</sup> The reference to an infernal descent, followed immediately by one to Daedalus, cannot but highlight the distinction between these two poets. Where Dante takes care to distinguish himself and his own project in the *Commedia* from the outrageous attempts at transcendence on the part of a Ulysses or a Phaethon, Boccaccio embraces these figures, their successes and their failures, and explicitly identifies his own poetic project with their underlying pursuit of that which is *oltremisura*. The out-of-proportion ambition of undertaking the *Genealogia* and even the possibility that his own strengths may be inadequate for the task becomes for Boccaccio, not an error, but a virtue in itself.

Boccaccio's construction of Prometheus and Phaethon highlights another distinction between the two poets – the difference, not just in their attitudes toward writing and poetic projection, but toward the act of reading itself. If there is one thing that this extended analysis of his use of Prometheus and Phaethon has illustrated, it is that Boccaccio is very aware of the fundamental connection between writing and reading in the process of generating meaning and manipulating interpretive outcomes. Boccaccio's use of the framework of allegory is an extremely flexible one; rather than see allegory as a consistent guarantor of meaning, he consistently uses these senses against themselves – not to reveal the "true" meaning of a fiction, but to change its potential interpretations. In the case of Prometheus in the *Genealogia*, Boccaccio uses its unpalatable allegorical significance to demonstrate that the literal fiction of the myth is incorrect, and must be rewritten. That is, the gods cannot be offended by learning or the pursuit of knowledge, nor can God himself be satisfied with sloth over industry; therefore, the fundamentals of the literal story are incorrect, and must be rewritten, and thus, reinterpreted. The same holds true of the work he does with Phaethon, both in the *Allegoria* and the *Genealogia*. In the *Allegoria*, Boccaccio first rewrites the details of the myth to mitigate Phaethon's responsibility for the disaster; that is, to change the allegorical significance of the tale. Yet in the *Genealogia*, he alters the significance of Phaethon without rewriting the story itself. The very premise of allegory itself is the connection between the physical world and meaning (the universe as God's book), and here, Boccaccio uses that very relationship to naturalize and therefore justify Phaethon's behavior – to change the moral interpretation of the

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<sup>31</sup> In Dante's writing, Prometheus receives the least harsh treatment, appearing only momentarily in the *Convivio* (4.15.8). Phaethon, of course, appears in the *Commedia* as a distinctly negative double for the poet (*Inf.* XVII.107, *Par.* XVII.3), or in an astronomical context (*Purg.* IV.72, *Purg.* XXIX.118-20; *Par.* XXXI.125), as he also does in *Conv.* 2.14.5. He is also used as a negative figure in *Epist.* 11.5, in comparison with corrupt clergy members. The infernal reference to Phaethon while Dante is on Geryon is coupled with one to Icarus, another inverted image of the poet, though along with Daedalus, also a favorite of Boccaccio's. Daedalus might well be coupled with Ulysses, in both fraud (Pasiphae, *Inf.* 12.13 and *Purg.* 26.41, 86, 87) and in attempting to transcend divinely-established bounds. Gittes writes "...Boccaccio's Phaethon is so perfect an inversion of that portrayed by Dante, that it is hard not to view the former as a 'response' to the latter. Dante's applications of the tale of Phaethon consistently use the story for the more traditional, moralizing end of illustrating the limitations of human *ingegno* and the consequences of human arrogance (301, n.56)."

<sup>32</sup> "Costeggerò i lidi ed andrò lungo i boschi montani; ma, se occorra, percorrerò fosse ed antri e discenderò fino agli inferi, e divenuto un secondo Dedalo, trasvolerò fino al cielo."

myth. Both his natural and historical readings of the allegory serve to reinterpret its meaning completely, without touching the literal sense of the story.

How different is this relationship to reading, writing, and autobiography from Dante, who worked so hard to constrain interpretation of his own work. Whether we consider this in light of the “lock” that *terza rima* produces for the *Commedia*, or his continual self-exegesis in the *Vita nova* or the *Convivio*, or even the careful reworking of his autobiography and authorship within all his writing, it contrasts so strongly with Boccaccio’s own sense of his writing and poetic persona. Not only in his selection of unlikely surrogates, but also in his approach to interpretation in general, Boccaccio makes explicit the difficulties, or rather, the impossibilities of the singular, coherent prescription of meaning, the impossibility of creating a text with only one interpretation. As he explains in the first book of the *Genealogia*,

...sic sensus absconditos sub duro cortice enucleando procedam, non tamen ad unguem iuxta intentionem fingentiu fecisse promictam. Quis enim tempestate nostra antiquorum queat terebrare pectora et mentes excutere, in vitam aliam iam diu a mortali segregatas, et, quos habuere, sensus elicere? Esset edepol divinum potius quam humanum! Veteres quippe, relictis licteris suis nominibus insignitis, in viam universe carnis abiere, sensusque *ex eis iuxta iudicium* post se liquere nascentium, quorum quor sunt capita, fere tot inveniuntur iudicia. Nec mirabile. Videmus enim divini voluminis verba ab ipsa lucida, certa ac immobili veritate prolata, etiam si aliquando tecta sint tenui figurationis velo, in tot interpretationes distrahi, quot ad illa devenere lectores. Et ob id in hoc minus pavescens accedam; nam, etsi minus bene dixerò, saltem ad melius dicendum prudentiorem alterum excitabo.<sup>33</sup> (I.42-44; emphasis mine)

The recognition at the outset of the *Genealogia* that a singular, authorial intention is impossible to recover conversely indicates the inability of the author to control the meaning of his own work. Meaning is, and must be, individual – as the quality of judgment is. If there is a solution to the “problem” of this multiplicity of meaning, even the Scripture has not yet found it, and certainly in the context of Boccaccio’s work, this same fact is apparent nowhere more so than in the interpretative disagreement that concludes the tenth story of the tenth day of the *Decameron*. Indeed, the *Decameron*’s existence is predicated upon what Migiel calls the “polemicism of the narrators’ voices”; what enables it to exist as a text is the interpretative disagreements of its narrators. Their “dialogue” with each other is predicated fundamentally upon the idea that reading is itself a kind of writing, and vice-versa.

The passage above also echoes the *Conclusion*e of the *Decameron* in its insistence that even the divine Scripture is open to a multiplicity of interpretation. If God alone can write

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<sup>33</sup> “Così procederò, enucleando i significati nascosti sotto la dura scorza; ma non prometterei di farlo in modo impeccabile, secondo l’intenzione dei poeti che li hanno pensati. Chi infatti al nostro tempo potrebbe penetrare negli animi e esplorare le menti degli antichi, ormai allontante, verso un’altra, dalla vita mortale, e trarre dalle loro opere i sensi che ebbero? Impresa piuttosto divina che umana! Gli antichi, lasciando le opere insignite dei loro nomi, sono andati sulla via della comune umanità, e il senso da trarne lo lasciarono al giudizio di coloro che sarebbero nati dopo di sé; e di questi, quante sono le teste, quasi altrettanti si trovano i giudizi. E non è da meravigliarsi. Vediamo infatti che le parole del libro divino, rivelate dalla stessa luminosa, certa ed immobile Verità, anche se talora siano coperte sotto il fragile velo della Allegoria, sono tratte a tante interpretazioni quanti i lettori che ad esse si accostarono. E perciò meno timoroso mi avvicinerò all’argomento; poiché, anche se mi esprimerò con minor chiarezza, almeno altri più saggi provocherà a meglio esprimersi.”

perfectly, and even his words are unable to attain a unity meaning, how much less so can Boccaccio, or anyone, write or interpret singularly? The relationship between the *Genealogia* and the *Decameron* begs more investigation, not the least of which reason is that they are both projects to which he returned and revised late in his life.<sup>34</sup> Beyond this, much like the lectures Boccaccio gave on the *Commedia*, they represent the popular dissemination of knowledge from an elite scholarly and artistic class to a wider audience.<sup>35</sup> Prometheus and Phaethon appear, not just as subjects of mythography in Books IV and VII, respectively, but as authorial surrogates in Boccaccio's apology in Book I. Given that the *Genealogia* opens with this passage on the difficulties of interpretation that is taken directly from the conclusion of the *Decameron*, it is not unreasonable to ask if either Prometheus or Phaethon serve a poetic function there as well, though neither is named.

In a recent article, Barsella explores the myth of Prometheus in the *Decameron*, arguing that he is an underlying presence that reminds us of Boccaccio's project of dissemination of knowledge – the civilizing role of the poet-philosopher who successfully brings high learning to a larger population in need of education.<sup>36</sup> Her analysis is, I think, fair and insightful, but in keeping with the comparison that I have investigated here, Prometheus is but one half of the story. The myth of Phaethon also structures Boccaccio's authorial voice in the introduction and the conclusion of the *Decameron*, and in contradistinction to the positives of Prometheus, he reflects the darker side of knowledge that is potentially inaccessible and the destructive dangers inherent in such a pedagogical project. As in the *Genealogia* we are offered a “hystoriam et naturalem rationem” for the myth of Phaethon, in the *Decameron's* frame we are given similar treatments of the plague which is, after all, the generative force of the stories. These underlying significances of the destructive force of the plague are explicitly tied to the experience of reading the *Decameron*.

The explicit treatment of the historical events of the plague comes in the *Introduzione*, which Boccaccio acknowledges must have a “grave e noioso principio.” The great fire under Cecrops seemed nothing but ill and destruction, causing great devastation and grief to the inhabitants of Athens. But even that cataclysmic event turns out to be *ab ordine nature*; ultimately, even those things which seem to us in our limited perspective, to be out of proportion, are merely part of the balance of nature. As such, they are ultimately productive, as Boccaccio shows, the rainy season eventually follows the dry, and the combination of these two extremes is what maintains the order of the natural world, just as Phaethon's chariot was not struck down by fire (lightning), but extinguished instead, by the rain. The similarities between Boccaccio's

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<sup>34</sup> At least, we know that he continued to revise and rework the *Decameron* much later in his life than was initially thought. For a minute examination of the late changes and additions to the *Decameron* in the autograph Hamilton 90, dating to the early 1370s, see Vitale and Branca, *Il capolavoro del Boccaccio e due diverse redazioni*.

<sup>35</sup> “Both Prometheus and Phaethon represent aspects of Boccaccio: the former both as a compiler/creator (one whose creation is not *ex nihilo* but consists in the constitution or re-constitution of a given entity through the task of compilation) and as a purveyor of intellectual knowledge (the stolen fire), and the latter – according to the peculiarly Boccaccian interpretation presented in the *Allegoria mitologica* – as a mediator figure who aims to redeem humanity. Augustine writes ‘The reason why they say that he moulded men out of mud is that he is supposed to have been the best teacher of wisdom.’ (*City of God*, XVIII, viii).” (*Naked Muse* 294,5, n.28)

<sup>36</sup> “In Boccaccio, the poets' educative function consisted in encasing the worldly commitment to the construction of a just society within a Christian superstructure. His innovative views eminently emerge in his conception of the poet-philosopher, which appears in all his challenging originality in Boccaccio's reinterpretation of the myth of Prometheus as a myth of civilization... This version of the myth, centered on the humanizing power of knowledge, permeates the *Decameron*.” (120)

description of Cecrops's fire and the plague that ravaged Florence are many. Just as the plague began in the Orient and swept toward Italy, Boccaccio tells us that the great fire during the reign of Cecrops was "in partibus Grecie et orientis", and that the cities of Greece were abandoned like the desolate city of Florence: "relinquerentur ab incolis urbes et a populis regiones" ("e tutte le città fossero abbandonate dagli abitanti e le regioni dai popoli" 7 XLI.3).<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the ancients believed the origins of the fire not to be natural, but shrouded in astrological mystery: "nec hoc humano opere factum, sed corporum supercelestium infusione emissum" ("che ciò non accadde per opera dell'uomo, ma fu mandato per influsso di corpi sovracelesti"). The influence of celestial bodies echoes another of Boccaccio's aporetic correlatives that describes the uncertain origins of the plague: "la mortifera pestilenza: la quale, per operazion de' corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali" (I *Intro*.8). The linguistic either-or of the beginning of the plague recalls equally the uncertainty of its cure or end: "A cura delle quali infermità né consiglio di medico né virtù di medicina alcuna pareva che valesse o facesse profitto: anzi, o che natura del malore nol patisse o che la ignoranza de' medicanti... non conoscesse da che si movesse e per conseguente debito argomento non vi prendesse" (13). Just as the ancient fire, however, turns out to be natural in origin and natural in end,<sup>38</sup> the plague equally cannot be cured or addressed by human or astrological influences, it merely ends naturally, burning out finally with time.<sup>39</sup>

The evils of the plague are also explicitly compared to a fire in the preceding line: "E fu questa pestilenza di maggior forza per ciò che essa dagli infermi di quella per lo comunicare insieme s'avventava a' sani, non altramenti che faccia il fuoco alle cose secche o unte quando molto gli sono avvicinate." (11) So why this connection between the "historical" reason for the myth of Phaethon, and the disastrous plague that decimated Florence? It becomes clear that the link between the two is part of Boccaccio's elaborate framing of the *Decameron* – in the introduction to Day I, he uses the comparison between the plague and the fire as part of his defense for writing it, and in the *Conclusione*, as we shall see momentarily, he returns to the "natural" meaning of Phaethon's story as a defense against those who might misread it. Just as the dry and rainy seasons, disproportionate though they may be, are necessary to the growth of all living things, so the grievous beginning of the *Decameron* is necessary to arrive at the Promethean good of civilization and knowledge. The process of education may begin in grief and suffering, but it ultimately it will end, and be replaced with its natural, balancing opposite:

...sí come è la dolorosa ricordazione della pestifera mortalità trapassata, universalmente a ciascuno che quella vide o altramenti conobbe dannosa, la quale essa porta nella sua fronte. Ma non voglio per ciò che questo di piú avanti leggere vi spaventi, quasi sempre tra' sospiri e tralle lagrime leggendo dobbiate trapassare. Questo orrido cominciamento vi fia non altramenti che a' camminanti una montagna aspra e erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia

<sup>37</sup> "Alcuni erano di piú crudel sentimento, come che per avventura piú fosse sicuro, dicendo niuna altra medicina essere contro alle pestilenze migliore né cosí buona come il fuggir loro davanti: e da questo argomento mossi, non curando d'alcuna cosa se non di sé, assai e uomini e donne abbandonarono la propia città, le proprie case, i lor luoghi e i lor parenti e le lor cose... (*Dec. I Intro*.25)."

<sup>38</sup> This is concomitant with the natural advent of the rainy season in autumn: "...et cum mensibus perseverasset pluribus, contigit ut circa medium autumni, cadentibus immensis ymbribus, extingueretur." ("Ciò durò per molti mesi; poi, a metà circa dell'autunno, mentre cadevano piogge copiosissime, l'incendio fu spento." 7 XLI.4)

<sup>39</sup> For the connection between the end of Boccaccio's love-sickness and the end of the plague, see Chapter 1, p. 14.

reposto, il quale tanto più viene lor piacevole quanto maggiore è stata del salire e dello smontare la gravezza. E sí come la estremità della allegrezza il dolore occupa, così le miserie da sopravveniente letizia sono terminate. A questa breve noia (dico breve in quanto in poche lettere si contiene) seguita prestamente la dolcezza e il piacere quale io v'ho davanti promesso e che forse non sarebbe da così fatto inizio, se non si dicesse, aspettato. (I *Intro.* 2-7)

Earlier, I suggested that Boccaccio's emphasis on the historical and natural sense of the Phaethon myth is a way of justifying the quality of *oltremisura* in itself by showing that nature also seems at times to be disproportionate, but that the problem is with our limited perspective, not with the quality of action. Here, in this introduction, Boccaccio uses the same technique, transforming his *Decameron* into Phaethon's story, and making the connection to reading explicit. The process of education and dissemination may begin in sorrow, but the "natural" end is one of reward. The metaphor of a climb up a difficult mountain should be likewise naturalizing, but those pains of study find their reward in rest and delight. Like the extremes of weather and the seasons, trials and suffering are inescapable, but they are balanced by their opposites. Extremes of pleasure find their end in pain, but Boccaccio's dark beginning promises its end ultimately in joy.

Yet, as Phaethon's journey finally ends in failure, there is always the risk that Boccaccio's educative, Promethean program in the *Decameron* will be unsuccessful. For while Prometheus is the stable example of the labor that leads to civilization, Phaethon always carries with him the possibility of failure – the reason that the attempt to disseminate knowledge must be justifiable in itself. Regardless of how readers interpret it, Boccaccio claims the value of the *Decameron*, just as the quality of *oltremisura* is redeemed in itself in the *Genealogia*: "Ciascuna cosa in se medesima è buona a alcuna cosa, e male adoperata può essere nociva di molte; e così dico delle mie novelle." (*Conclusione dell'autore* 13) Whether we speak of the fire that destroyed Athens, or the *novelle* of the *Decameron*, the problem is not with the thing itself, or the appearance of extremes – the problem is always one of our limited perspective – of our inability to read correctly: "Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola (*Conclusione dell'autore* 11)."

These passages from the *Conclusione* appear at the same moment as the section that is so clearly recalled by the opening of the *Genealogia*, where Boccaccio points out the possibility that even Scripture itself may be misinterpreted. It is in the presence of this doubt of success, the suggestion that his pedagogical project may in fact fail, that the echoes of Phaethon reappear.

Le quali, chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono, sí come possono tutte l'altre cose, avendo riguardo allo ascoltatore. Chi non sa ch'è il vino ottima cosa a' viventi, secondo Cinciglione e Scolaio e assai altri, e a colui che ha la febbre è nocivo? direm noi, per ciò che nuoce a' febricitanti, che sia malvagio? Chi non sa che il fuoco è utilissimo, anzi necessario a' mortali? direm noi, per ciò che egli arde le case e le ville e le città, che sia malvagio? L'arme similmente la salute difendon di coloro che pacificamente di viver desiderano, e anche uccidon gli uomini molte volte, non per malizia di loro, ma di coloro che malvagiamente l'adoperano. (*Conclusione dell'autore* 8-10)

After its painful beginning, the plague rarely is mentioned in the *Decameron*. Despite the jokes over schools of drunkards, there is a seriousness here to the reappearance of fever, after the

return of the *brigata* to Florence. A patient may be harmed by wine though at other times it is salutary; just so, fire is not only useful to mankind, but utterly necessary, for its survival. Its appearance here should remind us of the youthful Phaethon of the *Allegoria*, the one who sacrificed himself in response to the desperate pleas of men who were dying without the aid of the sun and its fruits. But the potential failure represented by the Phaethon of the *Genealogia*, the attempt, without its success, the situation under which fire causes great destruction upon the earth as evoked in this passage, does not mean that fire in itself is a destructive substance – it remains a positive necessity. In the same way, the *Decameron* is a positive opportunity for an education in how to read, at least it can be. It is the readers alone who are capable of turning it into a destructive or corrupting force. The staging of the authorial persona in the *Conclusione* who disavows the ability of the writer to determine meaning is less about a lack of authorial control as it is about the power of readership. It is a way of making readers understand just how great a responsibility they bear to make good use of things of this world, and of its texts. They, at the end, are the ones who will make of the *Decameron*'s author either a Prometheus or a Phaethon.



## Boccaccio's Calandrino and the Limits of Interpretation

*Sed quae stulta sunt mundi elegit Deus ut confundat sapientes et infirma mundi elegit Deus ut confundat fortia et ignobilia mundi et contemptibilia elegit Deus et quae non sunt ut ea quae sunt destrueret.*<sup>1</sup> (1 Corinthians 1.27)

Though he is often referred to in passing as the most famous of the comic characters of the *Decameron*, surprisingly little scholarship exists on Calandrino. This neglect is in keeping with the general scarcity of criticism on Day IX, but Calandrino is unique in being the only reoccurring protagonist of the *Decameron*, appearing along with his friends and tormentors, Bruno and Buffalmacco, four times over the course of Days VIII and IX.<sup>2</sup> This uncharacteristic proliferation of *novelle* gives us ample material for a study of his character, as well as a singular chance to compare the narrative voices of the *brigata*, since the stories are told by four different narrators: Elissa (VIII.3), Filomena (VIII.6), Filostrato (IX.3), and Fiammetta (IX.5).<sup>3</sup> Particularly given a renewed interest in the “polemicism of the narrators’ voices,” it seems like a strange opportunity to miss.

What little writing there is on the Calandrino cycle focuses predominantly on the search for the heliotrope in VIII.3, to the almost complete neglect of the other three stories.<sup>4</sup> There is some limited interest in Calandrino’s love affair in IX.5, including one article comparing it to V.1,<sup>5</sup> and two others dealing with a small linguistic or historical aspect of this *novella*.<sup>6</sup> Those myriad articles and chapters which touch all four *novelle* to some extent, but still analyze

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<sup>1</sup> “But the foolish things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the wise: and the weak things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the strong. And the base things of the world and things that are contemptible, hath God chosen: and things that are not, that he might bring to nought things that are.”

<sup>2</sup> Strangely, when the repetition of the Calandrino stories is mentioned in the criticism, Bruno and Buffalmacco are tossed aside as if of no special interest, even though they technically appear in the most stories, since they show up without Calandrino in VIII.9. I will focus primarily on the four stories where Calandrino is present, returning to VIII.9 and VIII.5 (in which Maso del Saggio appears by himself) upon occasion. All together we might think of these six stories as the “larger Calandrino cycle”. The fact that we, as well as the members of the *brigata*, think of Calandrino as the protagonist of these *novelle* is indicative of the fact that he has more than a comic role to play.

<sup>3</sup> A fifth voice is present in Lauretta, who, as the queen of the day tells VIII.9, in which Bruno and Buffalmacco appear, this time with Maestro Simone in their sights, instead of Calandrino. Maestro Simone reappears as their accomplice in IX.3. Maso del Saggio, complicit in the heliotrope deception of VIII.3, also appears alone in Filostrato’s story as the antagonist of a judge (VIII.5), and he is mentioned by Frate Cipolla in Dioneo’s story (VI.10). As is frequently mentioned in the criticism (Marchesi 2004, Martinez 2003, Russo 1986), Maso and Frate Cipolla are also linked by their apparent love of double-edged and deceptive linguistic play. Thus, the only narrators *not* to be involved in the larger Calandrino cycle are Pampinea, Emilia, Neifile, and Panfilo, though there are certainly good reasons to associate the escapades of Bruno and Buffalmacco with the story of Giotto, VI.5, told by Panfilo (see especially Watson 1984).

<sup>4</sup> For scholarship dealing more or less exclusively with the story of the heliotrope: Betti 1977, Czin 1978, Marcus 1979, Martinez 2003. In her treatment of Calandrino as a “natural fool”, Passaro (1997) discusses VIII.3, then restricts herself to a brief plot summary of the rest. Peirone (1989) stands out in treating the stories with a more or less even hand in a suggestive short article.

<sup>5</sup> Cozzarelli (2004) focuses primarily on the role of imagination in the story; the article seems to be strongly influenced by Mazzotta’s chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Hillers (1998) offers a minor note on Boccaccio’s use of unusual form *cateratte* in VIII.7 and IX.5; Del Popolo 1999 is a fascinating look at the historical context for the position of the church on the position of *star sopra* in IX.3 and IX.5.

primarily or exclusively through the lens of the heliotrope,<sup>7</sup> often take Bruno and Buffalmacco at their word (much like Calandrino) and dismiss IX.5 as a simple tale of uxorial revenge. Virtually no scholarship interacts seriously with VIII.6 or IX.3.

Most striking is that none of these works of criticism ask those larger questions which seem most obvious:<sup>8</sup> Why does Calandrino appear in four separate stories in such close proximity to each other? What significance does he have, and why should he play so unique a role in the *Decameron*? Why, after cultivating our expectations of continually various stories on varied themes, does the *Decameron* violate them so obtrusively with the repetition of these stories in Day VIII and Day IX,<sup>9</sup> while still so prominently playing up the *nuovo* associated from the beginning with Calandrino?<sup>10</sup> The goal of this chapter is to contemplate these stories as a unit, and as the narrators follow each other, recapitulating the same subject matter, if not the same theme, to consider the telling of these tales as acts of rereading and rewriting, interpreting them in the light of each other, as well as in their larger context in the *Decameron* as a whole.

### *The Limits of Criticism*

I suspect that the general lack of interest in the Calandrino stories has to do with their comedic aspect, the repetitiveness of the *beffe* (both in this cycle and throughout the *Decameron*), and the local and “municipal” character of these *novelle*. The quintessentially vulgar humor of the Calandrino tales in particular, which degenerate into slapstick in VIII.3 and from there move on to greed, gluttony, and theft, childish sexual innuendo, and finally back to slapstick, with a little prostitution thrown in on the side, makes these stories difficult to take “seriously” – to make them mean something.<sup>11</sup> Lo these many centuries after Aristotle, comedy

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<sup>7</sup> Including Getto 1958, Cottino-Jones 1982, Baratto 1984 (Baratto’s only synthetic contribution is his sense of these stories as containing elements of the theatrical, an idea echoed by Mazzotta among others, and as precursors to *cinquecento* comedy), Mazzotta 1986 (his chapter “Games of Laughter” includes but one scant paragraph on IX.3 otherwise focusing on the heliotrope, though it does turn briefly to VIII.9 as well), and Russo 1986 (who does also devote attention to VIII.6, but mostly only in the context of later developments of the Italian literary tradition). Even in its sweeping scope, Sapegno’s *Il Trecento* devotes a paragraph to the story of the heliotrope, while only casually referencing the others. Two exceptions are Migiel’s *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, which does look at the relationship of Calandrino and his wife Tessa over the arc of the four stories, and Marchesi’s excellent chapter in *Stratigrafie decameroniane* (2004) on the classical and biblical referents of the Calandrino cycle. Marchesi does still rely most heavily on VIII.3 as the gloss for the rest however.

<sup>8</sup> Actually, the most complete answer to these questions to-date is probably Watson 1984. Though the article focuses more on VI.5 and VIII.9 than on the figure of Calandrino himself, Watson makes a convincing argument for the importance of Boccaccio’s construction of the trope of the painter, which Watson suggests he then uses in turn to defend the freedoms of written expression.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus does realize the unique position of the Calandrino cycle, and the disruption it causes in Day VIII. She primarily sees the multiplicity of the Calandrino *novelle* as threatening and undermining in a purely formal way however: “Boccaccio has lead us to expect that each story of the *Decameron* will be unique, employing its own *dramatis personae*, and its own interplay of personalities. Indeed the first seven days of the *Decameron* have admirably confirmed this pattern, setting a trustworthy precedent for subsequent days. But Boccaccio defies our expectations of form by not only violating the law of heterogeneity within the confines of a single day (Day VIII), but also by violating the integrity of the days themselves, for the Calandrino sequence spills over into Day IX (*Allegory* 91, 92).”

<sup>10</sup> The proliferation of novelty has been noted by many critics, see especially Marcus, *Allegory of Form* (82, 83), and Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* (105, 106). Marchesi calls it Calandrino’s *novellabilità*. They are the two critics who seem to recognize most clearly the anomalous relationship of this cycle to the *Decameron* as a whole.

<sup>11</sup> Speaking of the *Decameron*’s more priapic stories, and in the context of the equally relevant Calandrino cycle, Greene writes: “The pleasure for us in these stories and so many others lies in our admiration for the artistic finish,

is still a low sort of genre, and the unexpected reappearance of Calandrino and his friends in these two days has often been explained by a reductive approach that restricts any significance of the cycle to the purely comic.<sup>12</sup> Though there is certainly a comic element to the Calandrino's invariable buffoonery and the repetitive nature of the stories, to brush them off as mere comedy does not do justice to the uniqueness of this moment in the *Decameron*, nor does it take into account the voices of the different narrators, nor consider the function of repetition in Day IX as a whole.

Bridging Days VIII and IX of the *Decameron* as the Calandrino stories do, they also flout our now well-developed expectations of variety and range in the subject matter of the *novelle*, as well as the text's own established practice of creating integral days through thematic coherence.<sup>13</sup> As I pointed out in Chapter 1, Day IX is precisely the place in the *Decameron* where anxieties over repetition and the attendant threat of boredom explicitly surface for the narrators.<sup>14</sup> When we are suddenly presented with four stories featuring the same characters, is difficult not to wonder if Boccaccio's, or at least, the *brigata*'s, creative energy is burning out. Compounding this fear that the Calandrino cycle represents a true creative failure within the *Decameron* is the general absence of narrative precursors.<sup>15</sup> After all, there is something unsettlingly popular and populist about the Calandrino cycle, and for long after the *Decameron*, tales featuring Calandrino's foolishness proliferate to the point where his stupidity is literally proverbial. Though as far as we know Calandrino as a literary character first comes to life in VIII.3, there tends to be the impression that there were already *trecento* stories already in circulation in some fashion about the buffoonery of the historical Calandrino.<sup>16</sup> Generally these tales are, if not relegated to, then tainted by, the world of popular folklore, rather than the literary landscape, diminishing, one might say a bit cynically, their "serious" significance, or possibly, their scholarly interest. Branca writes, "Nessun preciso antecedente esiste per questa novella, che

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for the style of the execution enhancing the felicity of the invention. This delight in the rendering of style, one may say in passing, is precisely the attribute which binds Boccaccio most tightly to the culture of the Renaissance (304)." There is a valuation manifested here which is quite common in criticism of the *Decameron*, where the insistence on the delight of style or wit, is necessary to make up for or to redeem the vulgar (in both senses) nature of some of the *novelle*. Of note here as well is the extent to which anxiety over the less than elevated nature (either in form or content) of the stories produces or at least reveals one of the major themes of *Decameron* criticism in the past century; *videlicet*, that Boccaccio is aligned with the Renaissance, in contradistinction to the Middle Ages.

<sup>12</sup> Russo, for example, understands the repetitiveness as a comic device, restricted solely or primarily to the confines of the Calandrino stories: "Questa periodicità di ritorno di un personaggio, di un motivo, nel mondo della commedia, è esso stesso espediente di arte e fonte di comico... Quella ripetizione meccanica di alcuni gesti, di alcune battute, di alcune uscite, del medesimo atteggiamento mentale, fatalmente esprime da sé riso e commedia (278)." Nor is Russo alone. Several people suggest that the repetition of these stories is primarily (and sometimes exclusively) comic. Mazzotta: "...Bruno and Buffalmacco's repeated *beffe* at his expense bespeak the pleasure inherent in the impulse to repeat... (1986, 193)."

<sup>13</sup> "Thus, our response to the Calandrino sequence will be different from our response to the rest of the text whose very heterogeneity has dramatized the difference, contradiction, and irreducibility of human experience." (Marcus, *Allegory* 80)

<sup>14</sup> One approach to this problem has been to suggest that the "return" to the same subject matter reflects the pending return of the *brigata* to Florence. For example, Martinez, who claims that Calandrino's "...concatenated adventures herald the return of the *brigata* itself to the complex social order of the city after the recreative excursus of storytelling (2003, np)."

<sup>15</sup> A number of scholars from Branca on point out the absence of narrative precursors to these stories, including most recently Gittes, who notes the Calandrino cycle to be among the few *novelle* that have no discernable source (including I.1, V.1, VI.7, and VII.10). (12)

<sup>16</sup> Giannozzo di Pierino. Bruno is Bruno di Giovanni d'Olivieri and Buffalmacco is Bonamico di Cristofano. See Branca 906, 907, n. 2 and n.4.

ha tutti i caratteri e gli elementi degli aneddoti municipali fiorentini... (905, n.4)” and he is certainly not alone in noting the local and popular feeling and quality of these stories.

If we prefer stories with traceable literary antecedents or cultural referents rife with resonance for the *trecento*, it is perhaps not terribly surprising, but it can lead us to overlook (as I think is the case here) things that do not fit into what is, after all, a rather Dantean mold. This preference is precisely the reason that most of the existing scholarship on Calandrino has focuses on the story of the heliotrope, which has the most Dantean subtext. The irony here, however, is that the absence of literary antecedents, particularly serious, intellectual ones, rather than popular or folk tales, is actually what calls into question the creativity and originality of the author. That is, the potentially or seemingly popular origins of these *novelle* raise the possibility that they are not really Boccaccio’s own – the fear that the creativity of the *Decameron* is burning itself out, and resorting to appropriating contemporary, popular tales of Florence, rather than fabricating new material or revising an illustrious literary or intellectual tradition. We effectively doubt Boccaccio’s imaginative power *and* his authorial control by assuming that they have their antecedents in what we imagine to have been a currently circulating series of popular, comedic stories about this simpleton of a painter.<sup>17</sup> This assumption of failure would in fact make of Boccaccio more raconteur than creator – a position suspiciously in keeping with the obviously false claims of the authorial persona in the *Conclusione*.

### *A Staged Failure of Originality*

I suggest that these anxieties over the creative crisis represented by the Calandrino *novelle* are once again an example of Boccaccio staging a failure within the *Decameron*. The *only* evidence we have of this imagined popular cycle of tales is the *Decameron* itself, which never attempts to obscure the repetition occurring here. Indeed, it is at pains to emphasize it – by the placement of the stories in close proximity, by the prefatory comments by the narrators (who each note, in turn, the repetition), and especially by the fact that each of the Calandrino tales are all told by a different member of the *brigata* – as though they already share the knowledge of the stories. That is, Boccaccio himself creates the impression that these tales are already in circulation and well-known to at least half of our seven men and three women by assigning these repeating tales each to distinct narrators. This explains the why at the moment in which the *Decameron* first allows the subject of the stories to become repetitive it also insists upon diversity in the tellers: the repetition is not a “real” failure of the text, but one painstakingly staged which intentionally creates the impression of a creative failure through representing its material as popular.

The problem of repetition and creative failure represented by these *novelle* is emphasized by the prefaces of the members of the *brigata*, each of whom in turn makes a prominent show of these very issues. Elissa tells the initial Calandrino story, introducing her tale in diminutive terms and aligning the Calandrino cycle for the first time with the thematics of pleasure that will resurface later: “Io non so, piacevoli donne, se egli mi si verrà fatto di farvi con una mia

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<sup>17</sup> After a summary of the little historical information we have about Giovannozzo di Perino, Branca adds, “Ma dovette essere soprattutto noto nella Firenze trecentesca per la sua semplicità e goffaggine, che lo rendvano naturale bersaglio delle beffe e delle burle dei colleghi”, citing as evidence of this the proliferation of Calandrino stories *after* “...l’alta consacrazione letteraria nel *D[ecameron]* (906, n.2).” At the final Calandrino story of IX.5, he adds: “La storiella...non ha antecedenti: probabilmente era una di quelle che correvano nella Firenze del Trecento (1061, n.2).” Passaro describes Calandrino as a “typology” without citing any particular basis for this statement (148).

novelletta non men vera che piacevole tanto ridere quanto ha fatto Panfilo con la sua: ma io me ne ingegnerò (VIII.3.3).” From the outset, the Calandrino stories are framed in terms that seem to reduce their status; Elissa’s story is not even a proper *novella*, but a *novelletta*, and she also represents it as at a potential disadvantage in comparison to Panfilo’s. Her speech also affirms the primacy of comedy in the cycle, staging the tale as purely for the purpose of entertainment. This is the story of the heliotrope, in which Bruno and Buffalmacco, with the help of Maso del Saggio, trick Calandrino into believing he is invisible. Elissa introduces her story by first making reference to Florence, then describing our painter: “Nella nostra città, la qual sempre di varie maniere e di nuove genti è stata abondevole, fu, ancora non è gran tempo, un dipintore chiamato Calandrino, uom semplice e di nuovi costumi (VIII.3.4).” The use of the word *nuovo* to describe both the inhabitants of the city and Calandrino is quite marked, and it will be repeated twice later in the story as well. When Maso first proposes a prank on Calandrino, he suggests that they “...fargli alcuna beffa o fargli credere alcuna nuova cosa (VIII.3.5),” and the play on newness and news is taken up again at the very end of the story. When Bruno and Buffalmacco arrive at Calandrino’s house to find him beating his wife in a fury, they exclaim “...che novelle son queste? (VIII.3.55).”

A few people have noted the repetition of *nuovo* in this story, usually attributing its association with Calandrino to the effects of his irrepressible naiveté, one of the characteristics that makes him a “naturally” humorous figure.<sup>18</sup> Yet this newness also conflicts with another characteristic of Calandrino’s frequently mentioned in the criticism: his inability to learn from the *beffe* perpetrated upon him or to change his fundamental nature.<sup>19</sup> I see this opening emphasis on novelty as ironic, metanarrative gesture that showcases the difference between the text’s verbal claim of newness and its actual recycling of content. This is once again a disparity between what the *Decameron* says it does and what it then proceeds in fact to do. Our expectations of novelty are violated at the same moment in which they are invoked linguistically. This is also the moment in which the “varie maniere” of the *Decameron* seem to have been abandoned, both because of the reappearing protagonists and the absence of a theme for Day IX. Elissa begins by insisting on the newness of her tale, but at a metanarrative level, the repetition of the word *nuovo* itself foregrounds the problem of repetition and makes the threat of boredom even more explicit, rather than striving to conceal it.

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<sup>18</sup> Marcus suggests instead that this resurfacing *nuovo* marks a difference between Boccaccio and Dante: “Boccaccio thus rejects the moral judgments implicit in Dante’s theme of novelty, and replaces them with a new, unorthodox ethical code which rewards wit and punishes gullibility, regardless of the moral ends so served. Distributive justice is meted out with exactitude, but the categories of good and bad which predominate in the surrounding social order are replaced by those of cunning and naiveté in this community of tricksters con artists, and their dupes (*Allegory* 82, 83).” Though I also see a critique of Dantean attitudes at stake in these stories, I believe that it is an interpretive, rather than moral, disagreement, and that the simple glorification of the trickster is an inadequate explanation of the importance of this cycle of stories. Marchesi on the other hand describes this characteristic as Calandrino’s “novellabilità”, a helpful term that recognizes both his unusual comic naiveté and his apparent ability to generate stories indefinitely. He refers to Calandrino’s appearance and reappearance in the eighth and ninth days as “...indice dell’importanza che il personaggio e le sue vicende assumono a livello metanarrativo... (105).” In his analysis of VIII.3 and IX.3, Marchesi describes the reappearance of the Calandrino stories as the location of debate that is both ethical and hermenutic, but he sees this as reflecting a single ideological struggle between two members of the *brigata*, and he does not fully make the association between Calandrino’s “novellabilità” and this metanarrative significance.

<sup>19</sup> See, among others Mazzotta: “The primary trait of Calandrino is to be forever the same, unchanged by his experiences and, like the masks of the *commedia dell’arte*, eminently predictable (72).” Betti compares *Calandrino malinconoso* at the end of VIII.3 to “una maschera...degli sconsolati pagliacci della pittura del primo Novecento.” (520)

It is not only the ironic repetition of the word *nuovo* however that forces us to confront the repetitiveness of these stories as a potential creative failure. The introductions of the rest of the larger Calandrino cycle make an extensive show of the fact that they are returning to the same subject, even lingering over the issue of repetition. Though the various members of the *brigata* offering different reasons and excuses for doing so, they never try to conceal it. All of the introductions to these stories in Days VIII and IX are closely interlaced by their narrators, who carefully refer to previous stories, only emphasizing the reappearance of these characters. Many of the introductions seem to share the same elements as well, particularly citing another story as a source of inspiration, referencing the creation of communal knowledge through storytelling, and emphasizing the pleasure or entertainment value of these related *novelle*.

Thus, in the next of the stories, Filostrato begins by claiming that the recollection of Maso del Saggio has called to his mind a forgotten story: "...il giovane che Elissa poco avanti nominò, cioè Maso del Saggio, mi farà lasciare stare una novella la quale io di dire intendeva, per dirne una di lui e d'alcuni suoi compagni... (VIII.5.3)." Prompted by the brief mention of a rather minor figure in the story of the heliotrope, Filostrato abandons the story he had in mind (though he will return to it in Day IX, as it turns out). He also cites Elissa's story, not just as the inspiration for his, but as adequately inspiring enough to have supplanted his previous intention to tell a different story. It is worth emphasizing that Filostrato explicitly cites the earlier story thereby drawing attention to the interdependent relationship between the two. He also links them linguistically in his introduction. Introducing the judge who will be the target of Maso del Saggio's ire in this story, Filostrato continues: "Come voi tutte potete avere udito, nella nostra città vegnono molto spesso rettori marchigiani... (VIII.5.4)." Filostrato's language here doesn't merely remind the *brigata* of Florence – it refers to their common origin and shared knowledge; more importantly, it echoes Elissa's exact words in VIII.3: "nella nostra città".<sup>20</sup> Filostrato's language also looks forward to Filomena's introduction to the next Calandrino story. Where Filostrato says "tutte potete avere udito" referring to VIII.3, Filomena speaks of "la novella la quale da lui udita avete" and again "...l'avete sopra udito." This may seem again a tenuous connection, but these are the only two stories in this cycle to use the verb *udire*; the others instead use *ragionare*, *dire*, or *novellare*. Both of these signals in Filostrato's words are, however, an additional linguistic hint or reminder of the extensive mutual dependency of the *novelle* in the cycle.

Filomena, in turn, starts her story of Calandrino and the stolen pig: "Graziose donne, come Filostrato fu dal nome di Maso tirato a dover dire la novella la quale da lui udita avete, così né piú né men son tirata io da quello di Calandrino e de' compagni suoi a dirne un'altra di loro, la qual, sí come io credo, vi piacerà. Chi Calandrino, Bruno e Buffalmacco fossero non bisogna che io vi mostri, ché assai l'avete di sopra udito (VIII.6.3,4)." Here Filomena does not only say that her story occurred to her because of the mention of Calandrino in VIII.3; instead, draws a parallel between the way in which she was inspired and the way in which Filostrato was inspired. This ties her story to both the preceding ones (VIII.3 for the mention of Calandrino and VIII.5 as a model of inspiration), just as Filostrato's is linked to those preceding and following his. Besides following this pattern of citing previous stories, Filomena returns to the theme of pleasure introduced by Elissa. She also makes the first explicit reference to the constructed communal knowledge being created by their storytelling by saying that there is no reason to introduce the figures of her story, because the *brigata* has already heard about them. Both

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<sup>20</sup> Though the phrase seems common, it occurs only a half-dozen times in the *Decameron*.

Filostrato in IX.3 and Fiammetta in IX.5 will repeat more or less the same statement of the obvious: these characters need no introduction.

In VIII.9, Bruno and Buffalmacco set to work embarrassing Maestro Simone (who will also resurface briefly in IX.3). Lauretta introduces this story simply by stating the fact that they have heard not one but two stories regarding these characters that day already: "...furono due dipintori de' quali s'è oggi qui due volte ragionato, Bruno e Buffalmacco, la compagnia de' quali era continua... (VIII.9.7)" This is perhaps the least emphatic introduction to these stories, offering neither excuse nor justification for the repetition, merely gesturing towards it (unnecessarily of course, for neither the *brigata* nor the reader is likely to have forgotten that four of the ten stories of Day VIII have featured either Maso, Calandrino, or Bruno and Buffalmacco, in some combination). But what we see here is a repetition of Filomena's introduction – an acknowledgement that the *brigata* now shares a collective "memory" of these characters, one constructed not by a shared past, but by the sharing of narrative. All of these gestures should remind us as readers of the *Decameron* that it is in fact Boccaccio who is constructing this sense of repetition and popular circulation.

The two final Calandrino stories appear in Day IX, where themes of comedy, entertainment, and pleasure are taken up in force in the introductions. In IX.3, Filostrato resumes:

Bellissime donne, lo scostumato giudice marchigiano, di cui ieri vi novellai, mi trasse di bocca una novella di Calandrino la quale io era per dirvi; e per ciò che ciò che di lui si ragiona non può altro che multiplicar la festa, benché di lui e de' suoi compagni assai ragionato si sia, ancor pur quella che ieri aveva in animo vi dirò. Mostrato è di sopra assai chiaro chi Calandrin fosse e gli altri de' quali in questa novella ragionar debbo; e per ciò, senza più dirne, dico che egli avvenne che una zia di Calandrin si morì e lasciogli dugento lire... (IX.3.3,4)

As the others have done, Filostrato again dismisses the necessity of introducing his characters, then refers to his story from the previous day. He also reasserts his change of mind produced by the reference to Maso in VIII.3, informing the *brigata* that he will now tell us the story that he had originally intended to tell on Day VIII. Filostrato's rather peculiar declaration of his changing narrative strategies here has received less attention than one might expect. This is the only moment in the *Decameron* in which a member of the *brigata* gives voice to the process of selection at play in the choice of a story, though in some ways it is of primary concern to the text as a whole.<sup>21</sup> In the *cornice* and in the first moments of the *brigata*'s escape from Florence, an astonishing amount of attention is devoted to choices made in storytelling: what kind of stories ought to be told (in terms of either moral or social order), how the process of storytelling ought to be ordered (and why that order is necessary), and why a certain level of variety is necessary

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<sup>21</sup> With the possible exception of Emilia's story in Day VI. When the queen invites her to tell her story, she seems as if roused from sleep, and begins: "Vaghe giovani, per ciò che un lungo pensiero molto di qui m'ha tenuta gran pezza lontana, per ubidire alla nostra reina, forse con molto minor novella che fatto non avrei, se qui l'animo avessi avuto, mi passerò, lo sciocco error d'una giovane raccontandovi con un piacevol motto corretto da un suo zio, se ella da tanto stata fosse che inteso l'avesse (VI.8.4)." In this case however, it seems less like Emilia is making evaluative narrative choices, and more like she picks the first thing that comes to mind after her attention wonders. So, while these two narrative choices are similar on the level of the *Decameron*-as-written-text, in that Boccaccio represents both stories as activated choice in a very explicit way, on the level of the conceit of the *brigata* the narrative thought process of these two characters is rather different.

(and how to orchestrate it). Though occasionally the narrators will gesture toward another story as inspirational to theirs, this is the only time in which one particular narrator gives us a window into the selection process of an individual story. The relationship between one story and the theme of the day in the fictionalized context of multiple storytellers is activated as individual choice.

So why does Filostrato bring to our attention the fact that yesterday he abandoned his original intention to tell this story, but that he is now returning to it? Again, it highlights how repetitive this series of tales is (and Filostrato is the only one to tell two of the tales of the larger Calandrino cycle),<sup>22</sup> as does the assonance of “...e per ciò che ciò che di lui si ragiona non può altro che...”<sup>23</sup> and the striking use of *moltiplicar*. Yet in this moment of repetition, Filostrato’s “choice” also simultaneously lays claim to the imaginative and fluid nature of active storytelling by the *brigata*. This works in much the same way as the *nuovo* from Elissa’s first story – a internal insistence on novelty and creativity and the moment in which externally, or as a whole, the *Decameron* seems to be struggling with those things.

As Filostrato explicitly talks about his narrative choices as though they have significance, it plays into our uneasy feeling that all of the stories are interchangeable and gradually becoming less imaginative – though there are hints that should warn us that this is not the case.<sup>24</sup> At the other level, it relates to what I think is the primary significance of Filostrato’s digression on his narrative choices: it demonstrates the conflict between the fictional constructs of the *Decameron* and its status as a textual object. That is to say, on the one hand, we have the fiction of the ten independent narrators who are supposed to be generating the material of the *Decameron*, and on the other, the authorial choice that has created the construct in the first place. One of those has the *appearance* of being oral, popular, and temporally progressive, rather than a static, written text.<sup>25</sup> Within the confines of the text, having abandoned the story of Calandrino’s pregnancy for Maso and the uncouth judge, Filostrato would not have known that he would be able to return to his Calandrino story, since Day IX has not yet been assigned its freedom. The insertion of Filostrato’s “choice” within the Calandrino cycle forefronts the fictionality of this frame, exactly when anxieties over the local, popular, repetitive, and therefore “less creative” nature of these stories are appearing. We should take this abandoning of one narrative line and returning to it later, attributed within the text to a kind of *caso*, as instead a reminder of the authorial calculation and *ingegno* that placed this cycle, rather than an indication that the *Decameron*’s creativity or generative ability has begun to wear itself out.

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<sup>22</sup> It is difficult not to connect the “scostumato giudice marchigiano” of VIII.5, referred to here in IX.3 by Elissa’s description of the “varie maniere” and the “nuove genti” in and arriving in Florence, and more particularly, with Calandrino’s “nuovi costumi,” that introduced the entire cycle in VIII.3.

<sup>23</sup> I am indebted to Albert Russell Ascoli for pointing out the “doubling” inherent in the assonance of this line, which had escaped me.

<sup>24</sup> This sense is increased by the proliferation of *beffe* (as well as the *motti* of Day VI) in Day IX, the open day immediately following the day of the *beffe*, but also, and more importantly, by the fact that the story that Filostrato cites (VIII.3) as inspiring him to tell the one of Maso del Saggio in VIII.5 mentions both Maso del Saggio and Calandrino. This would apparently mean that he had already been thinking about this Calandrino tale of IX.3 at the beginning of Day VIII, but abandons it for a character who appears alongside him, as though all of this material has become endlessly generative but also virtually indiscriminate.

<sup>25</sup> The *Decameron* continually slips between the language of speech and storytelling and the language of text, between the connotations of *novellare* and *dire*, or from *avanti* and *ieri* to *di sopra*. Here, this happens even within Filostrato’s introduction, even to the very verbal phrase “mi trasse di bocca” followed by the doubly inflected “una novella.”



So much for the seemingly *casual* reappearance of Calandrino and his companions. But Filostrato also elaborates on the theme of the pleasure that they seem to generate, first introduced briefly by Filomena, adding that no matter how much these characters have already been discussed, they cannot help but “multiplicar la festa” of the *brigata*. This assertion that Calandrino and his attendants are essentially or paradigmatically comic is one we should view with suspicion equal to the idea that these stories appear arbitrarily. It suggests their lack of serious import, their irrelevance, and above all, their status as pure or simple comedy. This theme is taken up in Fiammetta’s long introduction to the final story in which Calandrino appears:

Gentilissime donne, sí come io credo che voi sappiate, niuna cosa è di cui tanto si parli, che sempre piú non piaccia, dove il tempo e il luogo che quella cotal cosa richiede si sappi per colui che parlar ne vuole debitamente eleggere. E per ciò, se io riguardo quello per che noi siam qui, che per aver festa e buon tempo e non per altro ci siamo, stimo che ogni cosa che festa e piacer possa porgere qui abbia e luogo e tempo debito; e benché mille volte ragionato ne fosse, altro che dilettar non debbia altrettanto parlandone. Per la qual cosa, posto che assai volte de’ fatti di Calandrino detto si sia tra noi, riguardando, sí come poco avanti disse Filostrato, che essi son tutti piacevoli, ardirò oltre alle dette dirvene una novella: la quale, se io dalla verità del fatto mi fossi scostare voluta o volessi, avrei ben saputo e saprei sotto altri nomi comporla e raccontarla; ma per ciò che il partirsi dalla verità delle cose state nel novellare è gran diminuire di diletto negl’intendenti, in propria forma, dalla ragion di sopra detta aiutata, la vi dirò.  
(IX.5.3-5)

This is the most extensive treatment we have seen of the idea that the Calandrino stories must necessarily generate comedy and delight. It is also the most extensive justification for dwelling on the same material. Fiammetta’s emphasis on all things being justified in the correct time and place, requires as well her assertion that the only reason they are gathered together is to divert themselves. Should we need reason to regard her claim that these *novelle* are purely for the purposes of entertainment with suspicion, this reference back to the beginning of the *Decameron* attempts to reframe the text in its entirety in terms of the purely comic. She also refers to Filostrato’s statement that the deeds of Calandrino must *always* be amusing in even more emphatic terms. Yet taking her introduction here seriously is the reason that so much of the criticism on the Calandrino cycle has focused exclusively on how and why these stories are comic, rather than thinking about their significance to the work as a whole.

But the more fascinating part of this introduction and the part that most clearly indicates the irony operating here, is Fiammetta’s admission that she had been thinking about the possibility of reframing this tale, telling of Calandrino’s infatuation with Niccolosa as though it had happened to different characters. First and foremost, we see here the text itself acknowledging its own anxieties over the proliferation of these stories and the threat of boredom. This admission not only recognizes the temptation to recreate narrative with more seeming originality, but also appears to concede the fundamentally interchangeable qualities of these *novelle* within the *Decameron*. Whereas all the other narrators have made quite the show of the repetition in which they engage, Fiammetta admits that she considered attempting to conceal it. There are only two reasons that she decides not to. First, because stories of Calandrino are necessarily humorous and the sole purpose of the *brigata* is entertainment, and second, because

“...il partirsi dalla verità delle cose state nel novellare è gran diminuire di diletto negl'intendenti.”

Once again stepping back from the fictional construct of the *brigata*, this is an extraordinary statement; indeed, in the absence of irony, an impossible statement. If departing from the truth diminishes delight, and the only reason for which the *brigata* is gathered (or the only purpose for which the *Decameron* was written) is pleasure, then the fictionality of the *Decameron* itself mars its project of entertainment. We must either accept Fiammetta's preamble, which begs the question of the value of literature as a whole, or we must seek meaning above mere comedy to the *tempo* and *luogo* in which the Calandrino stories are located.

Despite the fact that the stories revolving around Calandrino contrive to create the impression of being popular, municipal, and derived from the shared social knowledge of the *brigata* as members of Florentine life, closer attention to these introductory speeches reveals that the “common knowledge” upon which these stories are predicated is dependent, not on their pre-treat Florentineness, but by the process of narration within the *Decameron* itself. Not one of them says, “As you all well know from living in Florence, as everybody knows,” but simply “as you know from an earlier story”. The knowledge to which the narrators refer is not extended to an earlier, larger community, but is restricted to the fiction of the *brigata*. That fiction is itself a construct of Boccaccio's, and when we view these stories as a true crisis of originality and creativity, rather than an elaborate construction, we “buy into” the errant authorial persona, eliding him with the *Decameron*'s true author. Rather than pass over these *novelle* as popular, repetitive, or merely comic, we need to investigate why Boccaccio would stage this elaborate creative failure in the text, why the *Decameron* would create structural expectations of novelty, only to violate them unexpectedly in Day VIII and Day IX.

“*Calandrino, eroe sfortunato*”<sup>26</sup>

So what is the significance of Calandrino's reappearance within these two days? Contrary to the portrait of the poor reader he is often considered to be, I think that Calandrino is another version of an authorial surrogate within the *Decameron*. He is an odd one, admittedly, but then, so are Prometheus and Phaethon. Like them, he is flawed, and like Phaethon in particular, not necessarily successful. Part of the reason that the text itself devalues this cycle of stories as merely comic and repetitive is because this version of Boccaccio's authorial surrogate contains within it a critique of a Dantean mode of writing, represented by Bruno and Buffalmacco. These stories represent a particularly complex and open-ended attempt to train readers to deal with multiple and even with contradictory interpretive possibilities, frustrating attempts at totalizing readings. This is particularly evident in the contrast between the comedic nature of these stories and the thread of tragedy that runs underneath them, and in our sneaking admiration for Calandrino, despite his role as the dupe of these *novelle*.

Calandrino's thematic connections with Prometheus and Phaethon will already be clear. He is associated immediately with the sun; as an artist he is another creator figure (though his status as an artist is routinely ignored); he is repeatedly figured as a martyr, and even endowed with the same, redemptive, christological associations; and in his comic heroicism, he is often accused of excessive ambition and hubris – of trying to attain that which is by nature out of his reach. Many of these connections are also those things about the Calandrino *novelle* that have

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<sup>26</sup> I take my subtitle from Betti's 1977 article. Though approaching the problem as an inherently Renaissance one, Betti has the right idea about the spirit that Calandrino reflects.

seemed heretofore inexplicable, including both his continued reappearance and the simple fact that he is, despite everything, a rather likeable character. He has a comic-heroicness, but heroicness nonetheless, about him. Beyond his centrality, there is something about his character that invokes our affections. Indeed, some have seen in Calandrino an ancestor of Don Quixote,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that his charm comes partially from his unwavering faith in those around him and his dedication to his “quests.”<sup>28</sup>

The first of those quests is his search for the heliotrope in VIII.3, the clearest identification of Calandrino with the sun. The search is of course futile. As the rationality with which the sun is identified eludes him, so does the stone itself. Yet, this overreaching, this *oltremisura* desire to exceed or transcend limits, is not an inherently negative quality for Boccaccio, quite the opposite. As we have seen, Boccaccio has reconstructed the pursuit itself as laudable, independent of its success or failure. Like the sun in the case of Prometheus and Phaethon, the heliotrope that Calandrino seeks becomes doubly his goal and the instrument of his suffering, as Bruno and Buffalmacco pummel him with stones. These two “friends” are similarly the ones who equate Calandrino’s suffering with divine punishment: “il quale avvedimento Idio gli aveva tolto o per ciò che la ventura non doveva esser sua, o perché egli aveva in animo d’ingannare i suoi compagni, a’ quali, come s’avedeva averla trovata, il dovea palesare (VIII.3.64).” It is important however, that the notion of punishment (which Boccaccio was at pains to rewrite in the cases of Prometheus and Phaethon) must be introduced by the very two who have orchestrated the trick in the first place.

This story also takes place on what is doubly a *dies solis*: the trio set out to find the heliotrope on a Sunday, and the *Decameron*’s eighth day is also a Sunday. Martinez notes that Sunday is the only day ever named in the diurnal introductions, and that Sundays and summers proliferate in Day VIII especially, also observing the relationship between the sun and the marking of the time of year: “...thus the first Calandrino story takes place when the sun is high

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<sup>27</sup> Or perhaps even Sancho Panza.

<sup>28</sup> Though Mazzotta takes a much more negative view of Calandrino (“[his] foolishness is banal and his banality is profoundly disturbing” 193), he does recognize a certain level of optimism, and of authorial co-involvement: “In a way, even Boccaccio himself can be said to be contained within Calandrino’s imaginative powers, in the same manner in which, say, Cervantes is contained within Don Quixote. In both cases, the writer is confined to elaborate parables about characters who are not bounded by any laws of logic or reality: in contrast to the freedom of their own characters, these writers will at best take refuge in the safety of ironic distance or what could be called a mixture of fascination and skepticism toward the dreams of the characters. In this sense, Calandrino is something of a threat to the ironies of the artists who give up, a priori as it were, the possibility of finding utopia and accept its irrevocable absence within the world.” (*World at Play* 199)

In a different context, Barolsky connects Calandrino’s nature to the essence of art itself, something that should give us pause when Calandrino’s ambition is categorized either as a sin, or as the merely comic: “Later, in the period of Romanticism, which contributed so much to what we call Modernism, the mythic models of classical antiquity remain alive as in Balzac’s historical fiction of Frenhofer, where Orpheus, Pygmalion, Prometheus, and Proteus are all invoked. But the history of art and fiction about artists is also informed by, or at least brings to mind, myths of the modern world, those of Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Faust. In his obsession with perspective, for example, the simple Calandrino-like painter Paolo Uccello is quixotic; in his obsessive quest for scientific knowledge Leonardo is Faustian; and in his obsessive pursuit of women so important to both his art and his biography Picasso is a type of Don Juan. All three of these mythic beings, Don Juan, Faust, and Quixote, who took form in the early modern period within a century of Vasari, are the epitome of obsession—whether the obsessions of sexual desire, the obsessive desire for knowledge, or the obsession with chivalric romance or pastoral poetry; in other words, art (2010, xiv, xv).”

in the sky at noon (thus, in summer).<sup>29</sup> The eighth day begins with this same connection between the sun and revelation: “Già nella sommità de’ piú alti monti apparivano, la domenica mattina, i raggi della sorgente luce e, ogni ombra partitasi, manifestamente le cose si conosceano... (VIII *Intro*.1).” The day is hardly unique, however, in introducing the narratives with the rising of the sun; indeed, in the *Decameron*, the sun is the marker of narrative space, the thing with initiates and generates seemingly endless fiction until its conclusion.<sup>30</sup> This link between the sun and the proliferation of narrative suggests to me yet another connection between Calandrino and the sun of the *Decameron*: Calandrino’s “novellabilità”. Not only does the novelty associated with Calandrino tie him generically to the entirety of the *Decameron*, the fact that he, like the sun, inherently generates narrative is repeated in the storytellers’ introductions. As Filostrato says: “...ciò che di lui si ragiona non può altro che moltiplicare la festa (IX.3.3).” Should we need more, Fiammetta continues in the final Calandrino story to make explicit the connection between his *novellabilità* and the *Decameron* as a whole: “E per ciò, se io riguardo quello per che noi siam qui, ché per aver festa e buon tempo e non per altro ci siamo, stimo che ogni cosa che festa e piacer possa porgere qui abbia e luogo e tempo debito; e benché mille volte ragionato ne fosse, altro che dilettar non debbia altrettanto parlandone (IX.5.4).”

Calandrino’s ability to generate narrative is commensurate with his unbounded ambition and optimism. His *oltremisura* pursuits are not limited to the story of the heliotrope, though they begin there. Hearing of this magical gem from Maso, Calandrino immediately sees its transcendent potential to change the material circumstances of their lives. He addresses Bruno and Buffalmacco:

Compagni, quando voi vogliate credermi, noi possiamo divenire i piú ricchi uomini di Firenze: per ciò che io ho inteso da uomo degno di fede che in Mugnone si truova una pietra, la qual chi la porta sopra non è veduto da niun’altra persona; per che a me parrebbe che noi senza alcuno indugio, prima che altra persona v’andasse, v’andassimo a cercar. Noi la troverem per certo, per ciò che io la conosco; e trovata che noi l’avremo, che avrem noi a fare altro se non mettercela nella scarsella e andare alle tavole de’ cambiatori, le quali sapete che stanno sempre cariche di grossi e di fiorini, e torcene quanti noi ne vorremo? Niuno ci vedrà; e cosí potremo arricchire subitamente, senza avere tutto dí a schiccherare le mura a modo che fa la lumaca. (VIII.3.28, 29)

Say what you will about the baseness of his financial motives, Calandrino’s first impulse is to share with his friends the profit of this quest. His implicit faith and optimism in the positive

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<sup>29</sup> (2003, np) Nor is the association with the sun purely linguistic. Martinez continues: “From the more scientific of the lapidaries, we saw that the invisibility effect of the heliotrope was sometimes explained as a local eclipse of the sun; if the light that makes all things visible is blocked, a limited area of invisibility is a plausible result. In any case the heliotrope is itself strictly attached to the sun by its name (by its *vertù*): and not only to the sun, but to the actions and motions of the sun in the sky.” He also insightfully notes the extent to which the plot of the *beffa* itself is dependent upon the day of the week being Sunday, since the day of rest largely removes the public from the streets, so that Calandrino can easily pass by “invisible”.

<sup>30</sup> Beyond the fact that the individual days begin with the rising of the sun, its heat provides the impetus for the storytelling in the first place: “Come voi vedete, il sole è alto e il caldo è grande... Voi non avrete compiuta ciascuno di dire una sua novelletta, che il sole fia declinato e il caldo mancato... (I *Intro*.110, 112).” Its disappearance also marks the end of the narrative. The final appearance of the sun in the *Decameron* is the sunset that immediately precedes Panfilo’s suggestion that they all return to Florence: “...quando il re, levato il viso verso il cielo, e vedendo che il sole era già basso all’ora di vespro, senza da seder levarsi, cosí cominciò a parlare... (X *Con*.1).

results from this search only adds to its construction as one that is characteristically *oltremisura*, but which he sees as of benefit to a larger community.

This same disproportionate sense of possibility appears in IX.3, where the impetus for the pregnancy prank played upon Calandrino by Bruno and Buffalmacco is his aggrandized impression of importance based on a recent inheritance: "...egli avvenne che una zia di Calandrino si morì e lasciogli dugento lire di piccioli con tanti: per la qual cosa Calandrino cominciò a dire che egli voleva comperare un podere, e con quanti sensali aveva in Firenze, come se da spendere avesse avuti diecimila fiorin d'oro (IX.3.4)." Equally out of reach is the object of his desire in IX.5, Niccolosa, who Calandrino believes to be the wife of their employer's son, Filippo, but who is in fact, a prostitute; in either case, she is out of his reach. This desire for things which exceed his position or capabilities is one of the most commonly mentioned of his "flaws" in the criticism: his gullibility or naiveté, coupled with a rather grandiose imagination. Condemned in Calandrino again and again is the quality of acting *oltremisura*; the sense that his ambitions exceed his natural abilities. Betti refers to him as an unsuccessful "aspirante furbo" (1977, 514), and Baratto writes: "Calandrino...è ricco come gli altri di desideri e di aspirazioni, ma gli manca l'intelligenza per soddisfarli. Ed è la presunzione di possederla a trasformarlo ogni volta in oggetto di beffa (315)." These criticisms center on his desire to be *ingegnoso* also, to outwit his crafty friends, to succeed at a game for which he is by nature unsuited. Calandrino, it seems, does not know his place. Knowing how Boccaccio deals with this problem elsewhere with Prometheus and Phaethon, however, we can now resituate Calandrino's many ambitions as admirable in themselves, and a quality typical of Boccaccio's authorial surrogates.<sup>31</sup>

In an astute reading over half a century ago, Russo recognized this ambitious quality as part of Calandrino's comedic charm, seeing something redemptive in the desire *per se* to be clever, and even noting the quixotic relationship to Boccaccio: "Uno sciocco semplice avrebbe finito con l'essere insulso; la sua scioccaggine invece è una scioccaggine ambiziosa, e appunto per questo il difetto finisce con l'essere un omaggio a quella musa dell'intelligenza, che è la musa più cara del Boccaccio (283)." While the nature that inclines him to behavior that is *oltremisura*, has been so often condemned as the thing that makes him a fool, his charm is as equally obvious as his credulousness. Calandrino is simply not a purely negative character. Notwithstanding his foolishness or greed or outright stupidity, at times there is something likeable about him, and at other times, he seems to deserve our pity. We recognize him as the protagonist,<sup>32</sup> even though Bruno and Buffalmacco appear even more frequently than he does (in VIII.9, where Calandrino is absent), and it is after this tragic-comic hero that scholarship labels the tales. This same sense of his importance holds for the *brigata* as well. In the four stories

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<sup>31</sup> Without the same background analysis of the minor works, Cozzarelli makes the same connection: "Calandrino, like Icarus and Phaethon, is over-confident in his own wisdom and abilities, and his arrogant delusions lead his quest for passion and knowledge – for ultimately all he wants is to be a clever man, like his friends – to fail." (2004, 354) The affiliation with Phaethon is not, however, the negative one that she assumes.

<sup>32</sup> "...qui, invece, le malizie dei due compagni non sono mai rappresentate in primo piano, vogliono soltanto dar rilievo all'ambiziosa intelligenza dell'eroe principale (Russo 287)." "For their [Bruno and Buffalmacco's] trick is dwarfed by Calandrino. Ostensibly, they occupy a world of sense, of orderly and meaningful patterns. They are makers of images who can tell fiction from reality and reason from unreason, and who know that the heliotrope is an arbitrary sign without any reference outside itself. Calandrino, by contrast, is involved in a quest over the trails of imagination. This imagination is not to be understood as the esthetic faculty that duplicates the world or funnels its experiences into a stable picture. It marks, rather, a purely visionary venture which blurs the lines of separation between illusion and reality (Mazzotta, *World* 197)."

where he appears, Calandrino is mentioned by name when the various storytellers preface their tales, usually Bruno and Buffalmacco appear secondarily as “compagni suoi.”

### *The Trap of Judgment: Contrapasso*

Yet despite his underlying sympathetic heroicness, scholarship has been heavily disparaging of Calandrino; his status as hero or protagonist is so hard to recognize precisely because interpretations of these *novelle* have generally insisted upon projecting them into a Dantean moral universe – a universe of justice and judgment that *must* see Calandrino as guilty of some particular sin or failure that brings about his punishment. In this, we have ourselves fallen victim to a *beffa* through poor reading, for the same mechanism of rereading and rewriting that altered the narratives of Prometheus and Phaethon is at play here. Just as with these two mythological figures, the glorious attempt to reach something beyond grasp is laudable in itself, and similarly what seems to be a punishment is revised to allow for suffering and failure, not as judgment, but as a natural, and indeed, inevitable part of life. Let me demonstrate a few ways in which the morality tale reading of the Calandrino *novelle* does not work.

In this version, Calandrino’s sufferings are the result of his own vices or weaknesses. Bruno and Buffalmacco swoop down on Calandrino’s cupidity, stupidity, or hubris (depending on the critic)<sup>33</sup> like two avenging angels. The unmistakable *contrapasso* of the stoning Calandrino receives in VIII.3 makes this reading particularly tempting, but I will offer another explanation for its appearance further on. Not only does this reading necessitate ignoring the heroic and likeable qualities of Calandrino as protagonist, it also requires some rather quick maneuvering to identify Calandrino’s punishable crimes. Leaving aside Calandrino’s gullibility, which is not properly a sin,<sup>34</sup> and which I also address below, the first and last stories about Calandrino are the only ones in which we could with reasonable certainty, identify a “sin” exactly: the inclination to use the heliotrope for theft and adulterous lust. Other possibilities that have been suggested include greed, laziness, the desire to deceive his friends, and finally, the violence directed at monna Tessa at the end of the *novella*. Calandrino’s greed we may maintain as a real sin, along with theft, though his greed incorporates his friends and the wish to help them as well, not out of keeping with their collective social standing and a natural desire for

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<sup>33</sup> For example, Betti writes: “...non si è mai accorto che i due fanno sempre tutto il possibile non solo per deriderlo, ma soprattutto per castigare quelle sue ambizioni volte alla conquista dell’ ‘arte del saper vivere’ (516; emphasis mine).” Marcus on the other hand, emphasizes his gullibility: “...Boccaccio never ceases to remind us that we must heed the consequences of literal-mindedness on the variously duped victims of the stories. Boccaccio underscores this warning to the reader by gathering a closely knit listening public around the figure who is to be the very apotheosis of gullibility in Days VIII and IX – the lovable but dull-witted Calandrino (*Allegory* 79).” For his greed, see Cozzarelli: “Calandrino exhibits many character flaws. He is greedy and egotistical (he believes himself clever) and he is also gullible, a quality essential to the nature of his character. Most of all, Calandrino’s life is an unquestioning fantasy, and he thrives in a world of deception that is almost impermeable (349).”

<sup>34</sup> Marchesi partially acknowledges this in a footnote: “La scelta lessicale con cui Elissa introduce il personaggio, cioè ‘semplice’, non ha di per sé una particolare connotazione morale: in teoria, la semplicità può essere sia una virtù, limitrofa all’innocenza, sia un vizio, quando si avvicini all’ottusità. Fin dal ritratto iniziale, la semplicità di Calandrino assume però una connotazione negativa dal contrasto con le descrizioni dei personaggi con cui interagisce. Bruno e Buffalmacco sono ‘uomini sollazzevoli molto, ma per altro avveduti e sagaci’ (111 n.11).” I disagree with his reduction of simplicity to morally neutral; in general Christian terms, it is a categorically positive characteristic (e.g. 1 Cor. 1.27). The idea that simplicity is closely linked with *otium* also escapes me, and I disagree with his conclusion at the end that “...il lettore ha ricevuto fin del primo suo ritratto sufficienti indicazioni per collocare con relativa certezza nel complesso universo morale del libro l’ottusa ‘semplicità’ del protagonista”, though the expression “universo morale” is telling.

improvement. The accusation of laziness seems to stem primarily from the get rich quick scheme and its reference to labor. With the aid of the heliotrope, Calandrino says: “potremo arricchire subitamente, senza avere tutto dì a schiccherare le mura a modo che fa la lumaca.” One wonders the extent to which the judgment of laziness here is not more a distaste for the dismissive terms in which Calandrino here speaks about art. After all, he exerts himself rather strenuously in the search for the stones, and his eager enthusiasm seems ill-compatible with a general inclination toward sloth.

The disturbing violence directed against his wife Tessa at the end of the *novella* seems the mostly likely candidate for actions that precipitate the just judgment of Calandrino for his flaws. Yet his vicious beating of Tessa comes *after* the stoning he receives at the hands of Bruno and Buffalmacco, rather than preceding it, so if they are instruments of judgment in this case, they must be prescient ones. Nor is his imaginary “loss” of the heliotrope punishment for his cruelty, but for his “foolishness” in letting Tessa near the stone. It is only Bruno and Buffalmacco who couch this entire event in terms of deserved, and even divine, retribution: “...dicendo di queste cose niuna colpa aver la donna ma egli, che sapeva che le femine facevano perdere la virtù alle cose e non le aveva detto che ella si guardasse d’apparirgli innanzi quel giorno: il quale avvedimento Idio gli aveva tolto... (VIII.3.64).” The entire *idea* of punishment or judgment originates with Calandrino’s friends, who are of course the perpetrators of the *beffa* and the “contrappasso” alike in the first place. They accuse him of their own faults in reminding him that he has betrayed them by sneaking off while invisible: “...perché egli aveva in animo d’ingannare i suoi compagni, a’ quali, come s’avvedeva d’averla trovata, il doveva palesare.”

What this moment should recall is the beginning of the story, when Maso contrives to have Calandrino eavesdrop on his conversation with an anonymous co-conspirator, passing himself off as a “gran lapidario.” After regaling Calandrino with tales of wonderful places and stones with magical properties, lacing his words heavily with double-entendres, Maso finally tells Calandrino where one of these stones, the heliotrope, can be found in a closer locale.<sup>35</sup> Having gained this knowledge, Calandrino dashes off to find his two friends. There is something very humanizing in this moment, and it is one of the instances in which we feel affection for and sympathy with him. To shake off Maso, Calandrino dissimulates his motives: “...avendo tutte queste cose seco notate, fatto sembianti d’aver altro a fare, si partí da Maso... (VIII.3.25).” Yet that deception does not extend to his friends, with whom he excitedly hastens to share this good fortune. The contrast between Calandrino attempt to obfuscate his motives with Maso and his open-handed eagerness to impart this coveted knowledge to his friends, only illuminates his affection for them and increases ours for him. The same scene is also recalled later when Bruno and Buffalmacco accuse Calandrino of perfidy within his hearing, pretending that he is invisible:

Disse Bruno: “Ben che fa poco! a me par egli esser certo che egli è ora a casa a desinare e noi ha lasciati nel farnetico d’andar cercando le pietre nere giù per lo Mugnone.” “Deh come egli ha ben fatto” disse allora Buffalmacco “d’averci beffati e lasciati qui, poscia che noi fummo sí sciocchi che noi gli credemmo. Sappi! chi sarebbe stato sí stolto, che avesse creduto che in Mugnone si dovesse trovare una così virtuosa pietra, altri che noi?” (VIII.3.43, 44)

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<sup>35</sup> Any reader of Voltaire must feel these sympathies while Maso describes the district of Bengodi in Berlinzone. Calandrino should number Candide among his descendents, in addition to Don Quixote.

The motives they claim for him echo their own in setting him up on this wild goose chase in the first place, and the disingenuousness of these accusations cannot but remind us of Calandrino's total lack of guile earlier. This is one of those points in the text where seeing Calandrino as guilty of greed or laziness and Bruno and Buffalmacco as the instruments of moralizing judgment becomes highly problematic. If Calandrino has been set up, we have been too. The fact alone that Bruno and Buffalmacco represent themselves as the *ingannati* alone should give us pause in accepting an uncritical interpretation that can read this *novella* as the justly deserved punishment of a flawed Calandrino.<sup>36</sup>

The same is true of IX.5. In Calandrino's final story, a sin proper again becomes identifiable in his adulterous lust, foiled, of course, before it can be fulfilled. Bruno and Buffalmacco together exaggerate rather than ameliorate the severity of the situation, by pretending that the prostitute is in fact the master's wife, and feigning to hide the whole concern from Nello, a relation of Tessa's, who is of course in on the joke. Far from correcting him for the error of his ways, Bruno and Buffalmacco encourage his behavior for their own amusement, and the elaborate lengths to which they go to perpetuate Calandrino's "affair" with Niccolosa turn this *novella* into something more akin to a medieval entrapment comedy than a morality tale. Bruno becomes a virtual *galeotto*: "Bruno d'altra parte gli rispondeva alle sue ambasciate e da parte di lei, ne gli faceva talvolte: quando ella non v'era, che era il piú del tempo, gli faceva venir lettere da lei... (IX.5.39)." Both the "sins" which we might identify in these two stories, theft and lust, are behaviors Calandrino does not even actually have the opportunity to indulge – he only possesses the imaginative inclination toward them.

In VIII.6, on the contrary, the *beffe* is precipitated by Calandrino's refusal to participate in the "theft" of the pig and the defrauding of his wife. He is motivated to honesty by the fear of Tessa discovering the fraud, but nonetheless, his stance is clearly the morally correct one. Nonetheless, readers have accused Calandrino here of the sin of avarice, though his circumspection in the affair is again in keeping with his social status. The priest who is complicit in this scheme describes Calandrino as *avar*, but no reason for the description is given. The reader's acceptance of it is dependent as well upon the preceding story, and upon the fact that, as the priest also says, Calandrino likes to eat and drink at the expense of others (as indeed do his "friends"). On the other hand, Bruno and Buffalmacco in this tale actually commit the theft, involve a priest in their scheme, publicly give lie to Calandrino's truth, accuse him of a patently fictional affair,<sup>37</sup> and finally, blackmail him into further financial losses. Far from a story of judgment, this excess of this tale evokes a sympathetic response from the *brigata*: "Molto avevan

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<sup>36</sup> Kirkham's meticulous and insightful scholarship has nonetheless defended precisely this view, in keeping with her generally synthetic interpretation of the *Decameron*: "In VIII, 3, Bruno and Buffalmacco make their initial Decameronian appearance to convince Calandrino that he has been rendered invisible by a heliotrope stone collected from the bed of the Mugnone. The stream was a millrace, and the millstones that are an important part of the tale's imagery...carry weight as well in the Apocalypse, when as tokens of worldliness, they shall be cast into the sea (Rev. 18.21-22). Significantly, the fifth – and central – story of the Eighth Day has for protagonist a judge, whom two notorious jesters successfully untrouser while he sits at the bench meting out justice ("Painters at Play" 275, 276)." Or, c.f. Martinez: "The intertextual presence of Dante's scenarios of divinely sanctioned retaliation thus help to mark the comeuppance of Calandrino. But this too is of course in one sense an effect of the day of the sun, also the day of the Lord, *dies dominica*. We saw how in the Eighth day, Sunday prefigures the time when all the souls will come under the scrutiny of the high judge (np)."

<sup>37</sup> Bruno says to him: "Intendi sanamente, Calandrino, che egli fu tale nella brigata che con noi mangiò e bevè, che mi disse che tu avevi quinci sù una giovinetta che tu tenevi a tua posta e davile ciò che tu potevi rimediare, e che egli aveva per certo che tu l'avevi mandato questo porco. Tu sí hai apparato ad esser beffardo! (VIII.6.53)." Again, they fraudulently reverse the tables, accusing him of being the deceptive prankster.



le donne riso del cattivello di Calandrino, e più n'avrebbero ancora, se stato non fosse che loro increbbe di vedergli torre ancora i capponi a color che tolto gli aveano il porco (VIII.7.2).” This sympathetic response of the female members of the *brigata* also precedes the story of Rinieri, which may well represent excessive, vengeful punishment, and the faultiness of human judgment. The position of this *novella* then, coupled with the audience’s response, should also make us question the vindication of Bruno and Buffalmacco as restorative instruments of punishment.

Similarly, Calandrino makes the right decision in IX.3, refusing to be profligate in the wasting of his inheritance. Though the gullibility reflected in his willingness to believe that he is pregnant is again on display, he seems to be guilty of little other than indulging in imaginative fantasies of how he may spend this small bequest, as if he had ten-thousand gold florins. This is a moment in the story where Calandrino’s sin is typically judged to be his hubris or foolish ambition – a disproportionate sense of his own importance or abilities. Yet a closer look at the text reveals that this is not at all why Bruno and Buffalmacco “punish” him:

Bruno e Buffalmacco, che queste cose sapevano, gli avevan piú volte detto che egli farebbe il meglio a goderglisi con loro insieme, che andar comperando terra come se egli avesse avuto a far pallottole; ma, non che a questo, essi non l’aveano mai potuto condurre che egli loro una volta desse mangiare. Per che un dí dolendosene, e essendo a ciò sopravvenuto un lor compagno, che aveva nome Nello, dipintore, diliberar tutti e tre di dover trovar modo da ugnersi il grifo alle spese di Calandrino. (IX.3.5, 6)

Neither of these judges is offended by Calandrino’s hubris, but by his refusal to offer them dinner – a dinner they will receive at his expense by the end of the *novella*. In any event, in both VIII.6 and IX.3, Bruno and Buffalmacco are motivated more by their desire to make use of Calandrino’s resources than by any genuine interest in ameliorating his character. Whether profiting from a meal or from the theatrical entertainment of a love affair, Bruno and Buffalmacco clearly think more of their own than of Calandrino’s moral well-being.<sup>38</sup>

On the whole, Bruno and Buffalmacco make lousy instruments of judgment, particularly since their own behavior is hardly above reproach. They make for fallen angels at best, and unless we take them as early representatives of that power with eternally wills evil yet eternally works good, it is difficult to seem them as instruments of real justice, particularly since they are often implicated in the same failings of which Calandrino stands accused: laziness, greed, and gluttony, and in their case, we might also add cruelty. It is also unclear, even if we were to see

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<sup>38</sup> Martinez writes: “For many readers, the repeated gulling of Calandrino by his fellows merely indicated that they are cleverer tricksters than he is; but this is to miss the fact that Calandrino has desires and aspirations, as well as vices, *that his fellow artists do not share and that make him a legitimate target*; indeed, we know from VIII.9.7-11 that they live hand-to-mouth, but want nothing, are perpetually cheerful (“così lietamente vivevano”) (np; emphasis mine).” This too easily glosses over the greed and cruelty of Bruno and Buffalmacco and their repeated abuse of Calandrino’s purse and property to support themselves in wine and entertainment. It is also telling that the positive description of them on which this depends comes from the story in which Calandrino does not appear (VIII.9), an intertextual parallel that should serve to stand in contradistinction to these other *novelle*. Martinez does point out that while Bruno and Buffalmacco are more or less indigent, Calandrino is a property owner, which is certainly true, and is a theme to which Bruno and Buffalmacco will return repeatedly. Calandrino is still clearly of a very low social status, however, and these very limited inheritances that he receives hardly put him in the position of power that the artist generally serves to critique.

Bruno and Buffalmacco as instruments of justice, exactly what lesson Calandrino is supposed to be learning from these punishments. For despite Day VIII's association with the day of reckoning,<sup>39</sup> we have not yet arrived at the last judgment, and prior to that moment chastisement ought theoretically to have some didactic function; yet as has been repeatedly noted, it is clear that Calandrino neither learns nor changes.<sup>40</sup>

Even if we take his hubris or simplicity or greed as flaws, they are not sins of a nature to justify an overarching reading of the Calandrino *novelle* as moral judgment and punishment inflicted. Those things for which he is criticized seem fairly harmless social vices at worst.<sup>41</sup> Though Bruno and Buffalmacco frame their actions as punishment, the transparency of their own motives is made explicit; the *brigata* does not see them as instruments of justice, nor should we if we read carefully past their own self-justifications. They are eager to represent themselves as sinned against by Calandrino, but their viciousness is on display as well, as we will shortly see. Despite our inclination to read the Calandrino *novelle* as existing within a Dantean moral universe of *contrapasso*, this approach overlooks the troubling aspects of violence and cruelty that lie under the surface of the comedy and also ignores the positive characteristics of Calandrino, and the many real ways in which he is, in fact, a comic hero.

### *Boccaccio and Calandrino*

Even once we have recognized the ways in which Calandrino is a likeable protagonist, not merely an object of condemnation for the *Decameron*, and noted a few of the associations that link him to the authorial surrogates represented by Prometheus and Phaethon, ought we to identify him with Boccaccio? (I will return to the christological associations of Calandrino below.) After all, there are other seemingly more likely candidates in the *Decameron*. In the first (VIII.3) and the last (IX.5) of the Calandrino *novelle*, however, there are two moments that frame the autobiographical resonance of this comic hero, which should lead us to associate him with Boccaccio.

Boccaccio introduces us to Calandrino in the story of the heliotrope, where we meet him standing in the Florentine baptistery, gazing with rapt attention at some recently finished

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<sup>39</sup> On the association of Day VIII and Bruno and Buffalmacco with the last judgment, see Durling 1985 and Martinez 2003. Kirkham sees the eschatological concerns as central to the day as a whole: "Its parodistic implications, in turn, open new possibilities for exploring a theme implicit throughout the storytelling on day eight, namely, the Last Judgment. Identification of that numerologically apt motif then permits Boccaccio's Eighth Day to be read in the overall calendrical plan of his 100 tales as counterpoise for the Third, that is, the Resurrection Day ("Painters" 256)."

<sup>40</sup> This unchangeableness is one of his most vaunted characteristics in the criticism: "Calandrino's folly is never permanently corrected, but it is exposed through the play of his tormentors; the small, recurrent disequilibrium between folly and punishment is persistently righted. Master Simone, whose pretensions to dignity are stressed at the opening, may learn a minimal degree of humility from the outcome of his adventure... (Greene 305)." "Like a piece of architecture, Calandrino remains unchanged by his experiences; he is predictable, he is like the masks of the *commedia dell'arte* (Passaro 149).

<sup>41</sup> Greene, in his discussion of threats to social order in the *Decameron*, cannot see in Calandrino a real danger, describing him as at most a "social irritant". Between the lines of this seminal article one can see Greene's awareness that the Calandrino *novelle* do not fit well in his accommodation narrative. "It could be argued that these stories constitute artistically 'pure' examples of human manipulation without any therapeutic function, since the butts – Calandrino and Master Simone – represent no real threat to society. But perhaps these stories...do contain nonetheless a certain primitive therapy. The kind of foolishness incarnated by the butts might be said to constitute at the least a social irritant, at the most a social danger, which a healthy society will strive to expose and correct." (304, 305)

decorations of the tabernacle. There is ample historical evidence for the existence of the painting Calandrino is examining. A document from 1313 records payment to Lippo di Benivieni for painting the tabernacle,<sup>42</sup> and the less dependable Vasari writes regarding them: “Lippo medesimamente fu quegli che dipinse i portelli nel tempio di San Giovanni, cioè del tabernacolo dove sono gl’Angeli et il San Giovanni di rilievo di mano d’Andrea, nei quali lavorò a tempera molto diligentemente istorie di San Giovanni Battista.” Calandrino is therefore not just in the city and the church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, but the images he contemplates are of the life of the saint. A number of suggestive and insightful interpretations of this opening scene have been suggested, most of which are predicated upon a sophisticated network of intertextual references and theological glosses. The most immediate impact of Calandrino’s gaze and location, however, is a simple identification with San Giovanni Battista, and thus, an autobiographical identification with the *Decameron’s* Giovanni, with whom the historical Calandrino also shares a name: Giovanni di Perino.<sup>43</sup> Nor is the relationship between the poet and the saint predicated solely upon their shared name. The saint and the writer of the non-synoptic gospel, as well as of John 1, 2, and 3, and Revelations, now referred to as the Evangelist or the Apostle, was often conflated with the Baptist in Boccaccio’s time. Moreover, there is evidence from the *Geneologia* that Boccaccio identified St. John closely with poetry. He mentions him twice in close succession in Book XIV, both time in conjunction with a defense of poets and poetry:

...quo nomine vocanda sint ea, que per Iohannem Evangelistam in Apocalipsi mira cum maiestate sensuum, sed omnino persepe prima facie dissona veritati. Quo ipse Iohannes? quo alia alii que, qui eodem stilo Dei magnalia velavere? Ego quidem mendacia aut mendaces, etiam si liceret, dicere non auderem.<sup>44</sup> (*Gen.* 14 XIII.5,6)

<sup>42</sup> Cited by Bellosi, 71. He notes that the tabernacle and its paintings were destroyed, but Watson (45) records a few surviving fragments in the Museo Bandini. The date of 1313 fits realistically within the chronology of Calandrino, who was dead by the year 1318.

<sup>43</sup> The suggestion that this moment identifies Calandrino with Boccaccio should not be understood as a dismissal of any of these interpretations, some of which I will return to in my analysis of Calandrino’s christological associations. My point, however, is that Boccaccio is the first, and most straightforward identification, something that I believe has never been previously acknowledged.

Marcus’s elaborate reading views the scene as indicative of his gullibility and of his inability to “read” beyond surface meaning. Mazzotta considers it representative of the profane parody to follow as Calandrino turns something that represents the promise of rewards spiritual into the promise of rewards all to earthly. (“From one point of view, Calandrino’s adventure is a brilliant parody of the traditional spiritual associations with which the emblem of the tabernacle is burdened. The promise of the millennium is inverted into the quest for earthly pleasures; the mystery of the transfiguration is comically turned into a mad desire to be invisible so that he can rob the banks of their riches. But above and beyond these parodic reversals of the biblical and Christian motif, something very serious takes place. Calandrino, in effect, attempts to charge with an immediate reality both the world of symbolic constructs and Maso’s fable. Whatever is just pure image is valueless to him. The myth of formal, esthetic self-enclosure, in which even the *Decameron* ostensibly partakes, is dismissed by Calandrino’s sublime artlessness *World* 195).”

Like the moralizing readings above, both of these interpretations lay another fault at Calandrino’s door – his impoverished hermeneutic capabilities. Marchesi similarly sees in the tabernacle paintings a warning to Calandrino that he fails to heed: Turning to St. John the Evangelist, and citing an example from the *Quaresimale fiorentino* of Giordano da Pisa, Marchesi writes: “...la memoria di alcuni temi tradizionali che circondano la figura di San Giovanni (Evangelista) avrebbe forse potuto mettere in guardia Calandrino dal porsi in una situazione dalla moralità quantomeno precaria.” (109; see also 110, 111)

<sup>44</sup> “...con che nome sono da chiamare le cose scritte da Giovanni Evangelista nell’*Apocalypsis*, con mirabile maestà di significati, ma del tutto, almeno a prima vista, ben spesso discordanti dalla verità? E con che nome lo stesso

Audivi iam dudum interrogationi simili non nullos etiam fastidiosius respondententes, et – quod michi gravius fuit – virum quendam, etate venerabilem et sanctitate et doctrina precipuum, non respondentem, sed motu proprio longe exacrabilius obloquentem...Erat, ut tunc visum est, vir iste adeo poetici nominis hostis infestus, ut illud non nisi stomachans proferre videretur, quod, ubi minus honestati sue oportunum erat, ostendit. Nam mane quodam in generali Studio nostro, legens in cathedra sacrum *Iohannis Evangelium* auditoribus multis, cum fortuito in hoc incidisset nomen, accensa facie, flammeis oculis et altiori solito voce, totus frendens multa in poetas enormia dixit...O sancte Deus! Quid ignari dicturi sunt, si sic alias eruditus homo, annis gravis et autoritate, locutus est? Poterat ne loqui stultius ab insano?<sup>45</sup> (14 XV.6,7)

Boccaccio's impassioned defense and invocation of St. John as a writer combined with Calandrino's observation of the newly-complete paintings of the saint's life is one more indication of the extent to which questions of writing and poetry are at stake in the *Decameron* when artists are on stage. Calandrino's presence in the Baptistery immediately places us in a world of writing and writers, even before Bruno and Buffalmacco make their appearance.

The autobiographical reference in IX.5 is equally straightforward, obvious even, and would not have escaped notice thus far were it not for the insistence on this moral interpretation of the *novelle* that views Calandrino so negatively. Doubtless Calandrino's infatuation in this story is a parody of the conventions of courtly love,<sup>46</sup> but it also echoes Boccaccio's own love-sickness, his "...nobile amore forse piú assai che alla mia bassa condizione non parrebbe (*Proemio* 3)." This inappropriate infatuation with someone of a disproportionate status, while a trope of courtly love, is also the same disease that Calandrino suffers from in this *novella*.<sup>47</sup> He

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Giovanni? E con qual nome le altre cose e gli altri che con lo stesso stile hanno coperto con un velo le meraviglie compiute da Dio? Io davvero, anche se fosse lecito, non oserei chiamarle menzogne e definir loro bugiardi."

<sup>45</sup> "Già da tempo infatti ho sentito alcuni rispondere con dispetto a tale domanda e (cosa che mi è stata più grave) un cert'uomo di età venerabile e ragguardevole per santità e dottrina, non solo rispondere come costoro, ma di propria volontà biasimare ben più implacabilmente...Era costui (come allora mi parve) tanto minaccioso nemico del nome di poeta, che pareva non pronunciarlo se non con disgusto; e ciò mostrò, proprio dove era meno conveniente alla sua onestà. Infatti una certa mattina nel nostro Studio generale, leggendo in cattedra il santo *Evangelium* di Giovanni a molti uditori, avendo per caso incontrato il nome 'poeta', con il volto acceso, gli occhi infiammati e la voce più alta del solito, tutto fremendo, disse molte enormità contro i poeti...O Santo Iddio, che cosa diranno gli ignoranti, se un uomo, in altre cose erudito, grave d'anni e di autorità, ha così parlato? Avrebbe potuto un demente parlare con maggiore stoltezza?"

Osgood considers the reference to St. John in this second passage as a mistake: "The only possible passage is Acts 17.28 (175, n.6)." He sees it as evidence of Boccaccio's "treacherous memory", but it may also be indicative of the extent to which Boccaccio identified St. John as a writer. Boccaccio's St. John appears to be a precursor of sorts to Ariosto's, though the St. John of the *Furioso* expresses his fondness for writers and identifies himself as one while still categorizing them all as liars. Ascoli has drawn this connection previously; see "Worthy of Faith."

<sup>46</sup> Cozzarelli seems to be the only one to have noticed this parodic relationship (352), though Marcus' insight into the way in which Boccaccio encourages the audience to participate in the *beffe* of VIII.3 is relevant here as well (*Allegory* 90, 91)."

<sup>47</sup> The sun also comes back into play in this *novella*. Bruno promises Calandrino: "Ben ti dico che tu la fai struggere come ghiaccio al sole (IX.5.31; 1065)," an expression that Branca describes as typically Boccaccian. It is also possible that the suffering and the fever that Calandrino experiences during his pregnancy in IX.3 are reminiscent of Boccaccio's previous appropriation of Phaethon's symptoms to construct himself as a martyr. Gittes writes: "It is not by chance, but design that this catalogue of horrifying symptoms and excruciating cures reads more like a martyrology than a medical history. By affiliating himself in this way with an ideal genealogy of culture-hero

believes, though it is not the case, that Niccolosa is the lady of the house, and thus well above him and his *bassa condizione* socially. When warned by Bruno that she may be Filippo's wife, Calandrino responds: "Ma che vuol per ciò dir questo? Io la fregherei a Cristo di così fatte cose, non che a Filippo. Io ti vo' dire il vero, sozio: ella mi piace tanto, che io nol ti potrei dire (IX.5.17)." This disregard for social consequences is reminiscent of Boccaccio's *Proemio* where he remembers the inability of any force to stop or even dampen his own feelings: "Il mio amore, oltre a ogn'altro fervente e il quale niuna forza di proponimento o di consiglio o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo che seguir ne potesse, aveva potuto né rompere né piegare (*Proemio* 5)." Thought they are made into part of the joke, the same dangers are consistently raised in IX.5: Bruno warns Calandrino twice of the perilous position he will be in with respect to Filippo,<sup>48</sup> and Calandrino himself worries about the familial and social consequences of the affair, attempting to hide it from Nello,<sup>49</sup> who is a relation of his wife Tessa.

The essentially farcical nature of the comedy or the occasional vulgarity of its sexual double-entendres is no reason not to link Calandrino's infatuation with Boccaccio's love-sickness, as the *vergogna* merely threatened in the *Proemio* is in fact the basis for the entire *novella*. The ridicule and embarrassment that Calandrino suffers are in many ways the fulfillment of that threat, and the audience surrounding him is so large and varied as to constitute in microcosm a social universe. Calandrino's *innamoramento* also deals with questions of appropriateness, not just in social status, as in the *Proemio*, but also in age. He tells Bruno: "E intendi sanamente che io non son vecchio come io ti paio, ella se ne è bene accorta ella; ma altramenti ne la farò io accorgere se io le pongo la branca addosso, per lo verace corpo di Cristo, che io le farò giuoco, che ella mi verrà dietro come va la pazza al figliuolo (IX.5.36)." But if he is worried about his age, Calandrino may at least take heart that he is in good company:

E quegli che contro alla mia età parlando vanno, mostra mal che conoscano che, perché il porro abbia il capo bianco, che la coda sia verde: a' quali, lasciando il motteggiar da l'un de' lati, rispondo che io mai a me vergogna non reputerò infino nello stremo della mia vita di dover compiacere a quelle cose alle quali Guido Cavalcanti e Dante Alighieri già vecchi e messer Cino da Pistoia vecchissimo onor si tennero, e fu lor caro il piacer loro." (IV *Intro*.33)

Like Boccaccio in this passage, it is Calandrino who both raises and dismisses the question of whether he is too old to fall into a love that is potentially *vergognoso* and *oltre misura*, and his colorful proverbial expressions are hardly in excess of Boccaccio's green tail, in which Calandrino optimistically participates.

While recognizing the courtly love traditions operating in IX.5, Cozzarelli considers Calandrino's status as fool and victim to trump his role as lover:

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martyrs, Boccaccio gives us to understand that his agonies, like the notorious torments of these mythic cultural benefactors, have been incurred through acts of supreme generosity." (*Naked Muse* 142) Though again veering toward the parodic, Calandrino's unnatural pregnancy is still as symbol of production, creation, and the "gift" of life.  
<sup>48</sup> Bruno reminds him the second time: "...per ciò si vuol questa cosa molto saviamente fare, per ciò che, se Filippo se ne avvedesse, tutta l'acqua d'Arno non ci laverebbe (IX.5.26)."

<sup>49</sup> Nello seems to appear in this *novella* solely for the purpose of making these anxieties and pressures felt. His presence is a critical part of the staging of the *beffa*, and at 54, he returns to the villa in company with the outraged Tessa, now bent on revenge. Despite the humor, Nello is a reminder that the underlying social threat represented by adultery is very real, as are its consequences.

For Calandrino, it is a transformation [into the courtly lover] in words only. Whereas Calandrino consistently acts upon the statements of his friends, which he accepts as truths, he does not do the same with his own words. Instead, Calandrino's transformation is hidden in his mind and distorted self-image. This feature of Calandrino as unchanging allows him to be a repeat victim of the *beffa* in each tale. His companions carefully nurture his illusions and he never realizes that a joke has been played. Calandrino has been compared both to a child (Forno 136; Baratto 317), and to an animal, recalling the 'scimmione' associations with Cimone. (352)

Beyond Boccaccio's own characterization within the frame of the *Decamerone* of himself as open to ridicule and criticism, and his extensive treatment of his inability to arm himself against the *beffa* of love and infatuation, Dioneo's introduction to the final story of Day IX should also remind us that in the world of the *Decameron*, no one can guarantee his or her own invulnerability to deception and foolishness:

Leggiadre donne, infra molte bianche colombe agiugne piú di bellezza uno nero corvo, che non farebbe un candido cigno; e cosí tra molti savi alcuna volta un men savio è non solamente un accrescere splendore e bellezza alla lor maturità, ma ancora diletto e sollazzo. Per la qual cosa, essendo voi tutte discretissime e moderate, io, il qual sento anzi dello scemo che no, facendo la vostra virtù piú lucente col mio difetto piú vi debbo esser caro che se con piú valore quella facessi divenir piú oscura; e per conseguente piú largo arbitrio debbo avere in dimostrarvi tal qual io sono, e piú pazientemente dee da voi esser sostenuto che non dovrebbe se io piú savio fossi, quel dicendo che io dirò." (IX.9.3)

Perhaps this explains the affection of the *brigata* and the *Decameron's* readers for Calandrino, and the identification of him as the protagonist, rather than Bruno and Buffalmacco. It also, by comparing Dioneo to Calandrino, once again demonstrates the connection between Calandrino's *novellabilità* and the project of the fiction as a whole. But more importantly, it excludes the possibility of a definitive version of any story, by defining both reading and the judgment that reading entails as an inherently contingent process, dependent on circumstance, context, contrast, and the arbitrary position of the reader himself.

### *Art and Artists*

The real difference between Boccaccio's account of his love-sickness and Calandrino lies not in the two men themselves, but in the quality of their friends. Recognizing the connection between the two only highlights the difference between Boccaccio's friends, whose comfort sustained him through a difficult period, and who provide the inspiration and the *novellabilità* of the *Decameron* itself, and Calandrino's *compagni* who abuse this infatuation to the ends of their own entertainment. The contrast in IX.5 in particular between the repetition of the word "sozio" and the actual, malicious behavior of Bruno and Buffalmacco toward Calandrino ends the cycle on a note of heavy irony. After all, the *Decameron* opens by insisting, "umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti", a sentiment that stands in stark contradistinction to motives and actions of Bruno and Buffalmacco.

The manipulative misbehavior of Bruno and Buffalmacco in deceiving and entrapping Calandrino has been written off, and even glorified, however, as a part of their status as artists. Where this “moral” reading of the two artists has not sufficed, in its place is suggested their virtues as practitioners of *ingegno* has taken its place. In this reading, Bruno and Buffalmacco represent a new, Boccaccian ideal of men who live by wits and by art.<sup>50</sup> While their wit and creativity are certainly part of the textual dynamic, focusing on this alone is inadequate. The idea that they are hedonistic sensualists to be celebrated for their *sapere vivere* also fits too conveniently with De Sanctis’ vision of the trivial, amoral Boccaccio.<sup>51</sup> Seeing these two as the triumphant heroes of the stories necessitates overlooking their own flaws, particularly in those moments where they are at best, frivolous, and at worst, disloyal and mean-spirited.

The temptation, however, to view Bruno and Buffalmacco as both significant and triumphant stems primarily from the fact that they are artists, and as such potentially a symbol for poetry and the writer as well. Boccaccio (and of course Dante) are in no small part responsible for the creation of the myth and image of the artist, and certainly, as with the case of Prometheus and Phaethon, Boccaccio’s works abound with positive images of creation and artistry. In a brilliant article, Watson includes Bruno and Buffalmacco in his analysis of how Boccaccio “...create[s] a composite fictional type – the painter – whom the poet summons as an ally when the *Decameron* concludes.”<sup>52</sup> (Watson 1984, 44) In no way do I dispute the

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<sup>50</sup> This vision of Boccaccio as enamored with *ingenosità* is long-standing, but still appears with frequency. Sapegno considered “...l’esaltazione dell’intelligenza umana ne’ suoi vari gradi e ne’ suoi molteplici aspetti, che si diversificano secondo le diversità delle condizioni, degli ambienti, dei ceti” to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the *Decameron*, in direct opposition to figures like Calandrino: “E, accanto agli eroi dell’astuzia, le immortali figure degli sciocchi, altrettanto varie negli atteggiamenti, nei motivi, nello spirito: da Calandrino, in cui la sciocchezza si complica di avarizia e di stolidità diffidenza, e magari di una non so qual persuasione di furberia... (359).” Later, Betti writes: “Nel mondo del *Decameron*, l’individuo astuto, intelligente, non soltanto è ammirato, ma anche giustificato in tutte le sue azioni, purché esse lo portino al successo (514).” Marcus sees it as a marker of Boccaccio’s distance from Dante: “Boccaccio thus rejects the moral judgments implicit in Dante’s theme of novelty, and replaces them with a new, unorthodox ethical code which rewards wit and punishes gullibility, regardless of the moral ends so served. Distributive justice is meted out with exactitude, but the categories of good and bad which predominate in the surrounding social order are replaced by those of cunning and naïveté in this community of tricksters con artists, and their dupes (82, 83).” This passage reiterates the connection I draw between the moralizing approach and the glorification of *ingegno*, one replacing the other. More recently, Martinez writes: “Nevertheless, in the virtuosic manipulations of Calandrino we can discern Boccaccio staking his own claim to a supreme narrative *virtù*, to being a master of the *beffa* (np).” Cozzarelli continues: “The *ingegno* of the clever characters in the Calandrino cycle links them to the author of the *Decameron* himself. Boccaccio, too, is constructing a world of illusion and orchestrating the images we create in our own minds as we read. While Cimone and Calandrino as lovers experience violence, Bruno and Buffalmacco detach their own imaginations from that passion and so seem to remain unharmed. But they are rewarded for the exercise of their ingenuity with pleasure, a pleasure created by the humiliation of another that serves to prove the superiority of their own intellects. But even here love plays a role, for it is Calandrino’s love for his friends that allows him to cede control over his imagination and his passions to them (355).” She omits, however, Boccaccio’s role as lover, and here, must detach Bruno and Buffalmacco from the violence inflicted on Calandrino through their own actions, in order to link them with Boccaccio through *ingegno*.

<sup>51</sup> As the quote from Cozzarelli directly above demonstrates, the *ingegno* reading is merely the inverse of the moralizing reading that sees Calandrino as guilty of something for which he is punished. These interpretations are in fact two sides of the same coin, one blaming Calandrino’s stupidity and the other praising Bruno and Buffalmacco’s intelligence. Note too, that while the first interpretation locates the Calandrino *novelle* firmly in a Dantean moral universe, the second serves to valorize Boccaccio by his affiliation with what begins to sound like a very characteristically Renaissance glorification of human intellect and talent, an attempt to distinguish Boccaccio from Dante through periodization.

<sup>52</sup> The moment to which Watson refers is wrapped up with Boccaccio’s apology for the *Decameron* in the *Conclusion* and his insistence that even the Scripture is misread and interpreted. He in turn then uses interpretations

importance of the figure of the artist for Boccaccio; indeed, I have spent a great deal of time analyzing how the “culture heroes” Prometheus and Phaethon fulfill the roles of artist and creator as they are used as authorial surrogates.

I must however insist that in the *Decameron* as in life, not all artists are equal. This admiration for Bruno and Buffalmacco is based upon the idea that because they are artists they must in some way be aligned with Boccaccio. But Calandrino is also an artist, though his status as such had consistently been ignored. The *novelle* of the Calandrino cycle focus surprisingly little on their actual art, and the idea that these tricksters reflect Boccaccio’s particular admiration for imagination and *ingegno*, is undermined by the fact that their creative energy seems to be devoted to the *beffe*, rather than to painting. Yet Calandrino has often been characterized as an impoverished painter – a fraud, dabbler, and painter of houses, against Bruno and Buffalmacco, who are seen as genuine, talented artists.<sup>53</sup> But assuming the historical attributions of these three are correct, Bruno himself was represented as untalented, and Buffalmacco’s historical reputation is rather tarnished as well. Neither the *Decameron*’s portrait of them, as we have seen above, nor their historical or ensuing literary reputations are unqualifiedly positive.<sup>54</sup>

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of paintings as a general defense of artistic license. Watson summarizes the move thus: “Boccaccio’s first proofs of artistic freedom, Michael and George, continue visually the verbal game that proceeds them. Their weapons, *spada* or *lancia*, are the ferrous counterparts of a *salsiccia*: innocuous implements which only a corrupt mind would read, or see, as phallic. In most depictions of these warrior saints, such as St. Michael in the altarpiece in Bologna signed by Maestro Giotto and cited some pages back, the dragon receives the spear through its mouth. If we look at such pictures perversely, so the narrator implies, they imagine nothing less than fellatio. By this outrageously witty contrivance, the poet exonerates his own art: *honi soît qui mal y pense* (61).” Layman’s account, “Boccaccio’s Paradigm of the Artist and his Art”, omits Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Calandrino entirely.

<sup>53</sup> Passaro writes: “On the opposite end to Giotto, we find Calandrino, the most famous fool of the *Decameron*. Calandrino is the male counterpart of Lisetta. *He is a bad painter*; he is ‘uom semplice’, a theatrical and comical character. Calandrino is often associated with the word ‘festa.’ With Calandrino there is an assertion of freedom of imagination. He is a natural fool who tries to exercise ‘ingegno’ but with no art (148; emphasis mine).” Calandrino’s simplicity is not in itself a reason to assume he is a poor painter, especially as it is a common enough trope in the construction of the artist (see Layman and Watson, or compare Calandrino to Vasari’s account of Paolo Uccello in the *Lives*). Cozzarelli’s assessment highlights the extent to which this judgment of Calandrino as a poor painter is related to the one dismissive phrase he uses in VIII.3: “Calandrino exhibits many character flaws. He is greedy and egotistical (he believes himself clever) and he is also gullible, a quality essential to the nature of his character. Most of all, Calandrino’s life is an unquestioning fantasy, and he thrives in a world of deception that is almost impermeable. Paradoxically, as a creator of images, he scoffs at painting – and by inference the creative imagination – as a waste of time; but at the same moment he takes everything that others tell him at face value, immediately accepting words as truths (349, 350).”

<sup>54</sup> Particularly relevant in the comparison of them with the *Decameron*’s “true” artist, Giotto. Ladis writes of Buffalmacco in particular: “Perspective was the Renaissance painter’s vehicle into infinity and lasting fame, but Vasari’s Buffalmacco is limited: He does not go far. The intelligence behind his trickery allows him to get by in his own day but to what end? What is left? Most of the works that Vasari describes, by his own account, are either lost or spoiled, hardly surviving but a day. Likewise, Vasari’s Buffalmacco, like Giotto’s *Folly*, could not see past the moment. Of the fortune Buffalmacco made in Pisa, Vasari claims that he spent everything, for he was, Vasari says, “careless of today” and a spendthrift who died a pauper. Self-defeating in spite of his wits, Buffalmacco cannot see beyond the present. Too often he merely goes through the motions, like a comical monkey, willing to use his art to get what he wants and to victimize those around him without thinking that his works should be more than jokes and barbs but things that last beyond the circumstances of their creation. Ultimately, his buffoonery is self-annihilating, the saddening folly of an artist with talent but no prudence. . . . In this there is a moral: It is important to know the difference between a true artist like Giotto and one like Buffalmacco, who for all his cleverness fails. Vasari’s *Life* of Buffalmacco is a prolonged parable of wasted talent.



VIII.6 and IX.3 contain no references to their art and do not show them any of these three at work. Calandrino's love affair occurs in IX.5, and while the occasion for the *beffa* arises while they are undertaking a job painting Filippo's house, the novella shows us all three of them and Nello similarly at work, and neither discusses the painting itself nor prioritizes any one of the painters above the others. The story of the heliotrope in VIII.3 and the *beffa* that Bruno and Buffalmacco play on Maestro Simone in VIII.9 are the only stories in which their role as artists is at stake. Calandrino does not appear in VIII.9, and is therefore not put in direct comparison with his friends as an artist. Let's look for a moment at the representation of art in the story of the heliotrope, where they all do appear.

After Maso del Saggio tells Calandrino about the heliotrope, he goes in search of Bruno and Buffalmacco, finally finding them painting "nel monistero delle donne di Faenza". Our first sighting of Bruno and Buffalmacco thus shows them at work, but frames their art in dismissive terms, as so much painstaking and pointless labor by an insensate creature ("a schicchere le mura a modo che fa la lumaca"). Though the label is Calandrino's assessment, the difference between the toil here and the meaning-laden artistic expression that is at the heart of VIII.9 is clear. Yet the appearance of Calandrino at the beginning of the *novella* also shows him at work, when we first see him observing the paintings in the Florentine Baptistery: "Calandrino's scrutiny of the Baptistery's new tabernacle is also a portrait of a painter at work... What Calandrino does in the Baptistery must have been a common sight in Boccaccio's time: painters concentrating as they studied the art of other painters (Watson 46)." Thus, our first glimpse of Calandrino is in fact of him actively engaged as an artist, and moreover, engaged in the process of creating art as imitation, with an awareness of imitative distance. Before the search for the heliotrope even begins, this *novella* presents us with two different images of artists at work. Surprisingly, it is the inferior Calandrino (represented on the comic surface of all these *novelle* as inferior in skill, dedication, and mental capacity) who seems to be more seriously engrossed in the practice of art.

The primary reason for reading Bruno and Buffalmacco as "true" artists whose art is part of their wit and complicit in the *beffa* is the conflation of the Calandrino stories *per se* with the other two stories in which Bruno and Buffalmacco (VIII.9) and their sometimes conspirator Maso del Saggio (VIII.5) appear. A careful investigation of the intertextual relationship between these stories, unique in having characters appear and reappear, should reveal instead the differences between their behavior with and without Calandrino. In both VIII.5 and VIII.9, these troublemakers set out to avenge themselves against power, against a hierarchy of incompetent fools, yes, but fools of a higher social status. Targeting the pompous judge or the doctor who seeks explanation of their happiness in material goods, they easily fit the image of the trickster who undermines social order, who uses wit and his natural talents to establish a new order of

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Above all, Buffalmacco is less than Giotto, and Vasari's Buffalmacco allows us to better appreciate Giotto's accomplishment and to gain perspective on a loftier breed of artist. Giotto, Buffalmacco, Bruno, and Calandrino are like the reflected images of a mirror within a mirror, in which each successive reflection of the artist is progressively diminished with each remove from the source. If Calandrino is a fool and Bruno a trickster without ingenuity, Buffalmacco is a talented deceiver with judgment he fails to use. But Giotto is a sorcerer, a conqueror, a true painter. Giotto possesses judgment, wit, skill, and seriousness of purpose. Unlike Buffalmacco, he is never absent (so must every artist be who hopes to succeed), and as a result the world falls at his feet... By contrast, Buffalmacco is the poignant personification of unmet potential. He is a painter too clever for his own good, a wizard without a destiny, a sorcerer without a stone. Whereas Buffalmacco's delightful tricks are as ephemeral as a soap bubble, Giotto's conquest of nature and the realm of appearances is a legacy with substance... (29, 30)."

meritocracy.<sup>55</sup> But when they set to work against Calandrino, we have a harder time taking their side (and it is perhaps one of the reasons that we think of Calandrino, and not these two, as the protagonist). Rather than confuse the attacks on social hierarchy represented by VIII.5 and 9 with the Calandrino stories, the *beffe* from which Calandrino is absent should serve to mark the different dynamic at stake in his encounters with Bruno and Buffalmacco.

Giotto's appearance in the *Decameron* especially serves to mark the ways in which Bruno and Buffalmacco behave differently from the "true" artist. In Day VI, Panfilo introduces Forese da Rabatta and Giotto by describing their physical ugliness in opposition to their professional excellence. He speaks of Giotto with the highest respect, taking evident pride in the fact that he is a Florentine:

e l'altro, il cui nome fu Giotto, ebbe uno ingegno di tanta eccellenzia, che niuna cosa dà la natura, madre di tutte le cose e operatrice col continuo girar de' cieli, che egli con lo stile e con la penna o col pennello non dipignesse sí simile a quella, che non simile, anzi piú tosto dessa paresse, in tanto che molte volte nelle cose da lui fatte si truova che il visivo senso degli uomini vi prese errore, quello credendo esser vero che era dipinto. E per ciò, avendo egli quella arte ritornata in luce, che molti secoli sotto gli error d'alcuni, che piú a dilettrar gli occhi degl'ignoranti che a compiacere allo 'ntelletto de' savi dipignendo, era stata sepolta, meritamente una delle luci della fiorentina gloria dir si puote; e tanto piú, quanto con maggiore umiltà, maestro degli altri in ciò, vivendo quella acquistò, sempre rifiutando d'esser chiamato maestro. (VI.5.5, 6)

At first glance, Giotto's transcendence of the *pare* of art, turning illusion into to essence itself, particularly in its ability to deceive "il visivo senso degli uomini", making them mistake the painting for reality, seems to be that same capacity that Bruno and Buffalmacco possess: the ability to deceive Calandrino, to make him believe the illusions that they create for him. Yet the emphasis on Giotto's humility here distinctly sets him apart from their malice and arrogance. Moreover, the deceptive qualities of Giotto's art are clearly distinguished from cheap tricks that have the capacity to fool and entertain the *ignoranti*. Instead, he is so skillful in his art as to please "lo 'ntelletto de' savi". Panfilo is quite clear in attaching Giotto's greatness to precisely this quality, and the presence of the renowned and intellectual jurist Forese serves as a further marker of how different this story is from the Calandrino *novelle*. Giotto and Forese, though on the same level intellectually (which is, after all, what this story demonstrates), are not social equals. Forese uses the familiar *tu* with Giotto; even in his scornful retort, Giotto uses the respectful *voi* with Forese.<sup>56</sup>

This story is not a simple lesson in mistaking appearance for reality (the fault of which Calandrino stands accused), either in the illusions created by Giotto's masterful painting, or in the contrast between the unattractive physical qualities of Giotto and Forese and their intellectual capabilities. It is a construction of the true artist as one who uses his art and wit to shed the light

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<sup>55</sup> For the criticism of Maestro Simone inherent in Bruno and Buffalmacco's rather sacrilegious parody of the *agnus dei* and other images, see in particular Watson 1984 again, Kirkham 1983 and 2004, and McGregor 2007.

<sup>56</sup> On their journey, Forese turns to him and says: "Giotto, a che ora venendo di qua allo 'ncontro di noi un forestiere che mai veduto non t'avesse, credi tu che egli credesse che tu fossi il miglior dipintor del mondo, come tu se'?" And Giotto responds "prestamente": "Messere, credo che egli il crederebbe allora che, guardando voi, egli crederebbe che voi sapeste l'abici (VI.5.14, 15)."

of truth on deception, to challenge the established order, and to correct moral and social error. Giotto uses his wit as he does his art, to reveal – not to conceal, and he uses it as a sophisticated weapon against someone whose higher social status would otherwise allow him to go unchallenged and unproved.<sup>57</sup> Forese, in turn, represents an audience that is able to understand the rebuke inherent in Giotto's response, one who is able to learn by reading the meaning underneath.

Far from aligning Bruno and Buffalmacco with the genuine artistry of Giotto, this entire story marks how differently they use and abuse their artistic abilities: they are certainly not characterized by humility; their *beffe* are excessively harsh, and directed against someone incapable of interpreting them; and, as we have seen above, their tricks are used for their own entertainment and profit, offering no reproof or correction of Calandrino.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, their victimization of him simply does not require much art. Tricking an affectionate innocent is hardly a display of artistic sophistication. A real triumph of *ingegno* would be reflected in turning the tables on the powerful, reversing a disadvantageous social dynamic. And this is precisely what we see with Giotto, in the solo appearances of Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Maso of VIII.5 and VIII.9, in many of the stories of Day VI,<sup>59</sup> and in later narratives indebted to the *Decameron*.<sup>60</sup> In the case of Calandrino it is precisely the opposite. The very same social

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<sup>57</sup> Though Guiglielmo Borsiere is not an artist, the painting that he suggests to Ermino de' Grimaldi in I.8 likewise serves a corrective function and demonstrates the exalted role of art as social criticism.

<sup>58</sup> "Bruno and Buffalmacco want to induce just the state of self-forgetfulness in Calandrino that Forese falls into, and when they produce that state of delusion, they do the opposite of what Giotto does. Rather than calling Calandrino back to reality and to his better nature, they do everything in their power to maintain his state of befuddlement and to exploit his confusion for their own benefit. In effect then, while Giotto insists on the narrative, non-material aspects of his art even at its most illusionistic, the exploitative illusionists put all their energies into maintaining the deceptive material surface, which they exploit for material gain (McGregor 84, 5)."

<sup>59</sup> The general social upheaval of Day VI is introduced by the sudden prominence of the *brigata's* servants, who have become embroiled in an argument. Stories 1 and 3 reverse the dynamics of gender and social hierarchy; 2, 4, and 5 undermine clear class distinctions; in 7, wit proves a defense even against the institution of the law; and in 9 protection from sheer physical power. The only two that seem to be an exception to this pattern are 6 (Michele Scalza reveals the origins of the Baronci) and 8 (Fresco da Celatico rebukes his niece Cesca for her vanity). The story of the Baronci does, however, redefine the very idea of nobility in a less-than-flattering light. The story of Cesca seems like the odd one out; the shortest story in the *Decameron*, it has proved difficult to interpret. I believe the story stands in sharp contrast to that of Giotto in VI.5 – that it illustrates the difference between wit exercised as reproach on one capable of understanding (Forese) and one who lacks the ability to parse the criticism (Francesca). In VI.8, the attempt and the story fall flat, yet this is the story of Day VI most similar in structure to the Calandrino stories. If those stories simply rehash the unsuccessful meeting of *ingegno* and the incomprehension of the fool, their repetition and placement at the end of the *Decameron* seems perplexing. As an explanation of the significance of the cycle, the *ingegno* of our two troublesome painters falls far short.

<sup>60</sup> The artist's role as a destabilizing social critic who can use his talents to change, not merely the vision, but the attitudes and the assumptions of those around him is one of the primary lessons Vasari seems to have taken away from the *Decameron*. This painting at Faenza is also mentioned in Vasari's life of Buffalmacco, where we are treated to a much more extended description of what he is painting at the convent (though the work and the convent were destroyed in a fire in 1529 when Vasari was barely 18; see Bellosi 1974, 123):

... e fra l'altre storie che vi fece della vita di Cristo, nelle quali tutte si portò molto bene, vi fece l'occisione che fece fare Erode de' putti innocenti, nella quale esprese molto vivamente gl'affetti così degl'uccisori come dell'altre figure; perciò che in alcune balie e madri che strappando i fanciulli di mano agl'uccisori, si aiutano quanto possono il più, colle mani, coi graffi, coi morsi e con tutti i movimenti del corpo, si mostra nel di fuori l'animo non meno pieno di rabbia e furore che di doglia. (Edition and citation needed; corr)

authorities who are under attack in VIII.5 and 9 (or indeed in Day VI, for that matter) are complicit in the conspiracies against Calandrino. In the story of the heliotrope, Calandrino's imagination is engaged by someone he believes to be a scholar, with all the (fabricated) weight of learning and history behind him. A priest joins in the theft of Calandrino's pig in VIII.6, and the subsequent attempt to pin the blame on him. The doctor who is the target of Bruno and Buffalmacco's ire in VIII.9 helps bring about and end Calandrino's pregnancy, and in IX.9 everyone from the prostitute to Calandrino's brother-in-law to the land owner is in on the joke. In their tricks on Calandrino, rather than wage war against the established order, Bruno and Buffalmacco use the same social, political, and religious authorities which uphold that order to perpetrate the deceptions. Instead of using their *ingegno* to undermine the powerful, they make institutional authority complicit in defrauding Calandrino. Despite Calandrino's gullibility or innocence or naiveté, qualities which ought to render it unnecessary, Bruno and Buffalmacco create in the *beffe* an elaborate and inescapable theatre of deception, which, as I argue below, nonetheless remains distinct from true *ingegno*. The story of Giotto serves as a counterexample that illustrates the proper use and transformative potential of art. The tricks played upon Calandrino are exploitative rather than having a corrective function, and abuse the very power structures against which they are directed under better circumstance.

The lesson in all of this is not that Calandrino is perfect, or that Bruno and Buffalmacco should be read as purely negative fraudulent deceivers. There are clearly ways in which the comedy of these stories hinges upon Calandrino's buffoonery, and certainly moments in which we admire the *ingegno* of Bruno and Buffalmacco, who are after all described as "avveduti e sagaci". But all of these readings are necessarily partial – interpretations that cannot be exclusively insisted upon without glossing over the complexity of these episodes and ignoring the way in which the *Decameron* stages its own internal contradiction. The plurality of narrative voices and frames in the *Decameron* serves to remind us *in factis* of the "moral" that the *Conclusione* insists upon *in dictis*: there are as many readings as there are readers. No one narrative position in the *Decameron* is particularly privileged; thus, we ought not to take Bruno and Buffalmacco at their word when they claim to be correcting Calandrino, nor should we take the assessment of the *brigata* as the position of the text itself. What the *Decameron* teaches us is how to weigh these different perspectives against each other, how to reinterpret and read in an intertextual way. The *Decameron* pits interpretations against each other, forcing us to acknowledge the ways in which we must authorize our own readings.

I have focused here on the likeability of Calandrino and the interpretive problems presented by Bruno and Buffalmacco because it is one aspect of the complexity these *novelle* that has largely gone unaddressed. Insisting upon Calandrino only as a fool and a poor reader

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Besides this extended description of the artistic content created, Vasari attributes the work exclusively to Buffalmacco and does not mention Bruno. Vasari's account is more in keeping with a description of Buffalmacco as a true artist in his idiosyncratic individualism and his focus on the art itself. These descriptions of Buffalmacco are much more in keeping with his appearance in VIII.9. It is very apparent however, that the story that Vasari tells about Buffalmacco at the nunnery in Faenza is much more indebted to Boccaccio's description of Giotto in *Decameron* VI.5. First, the nuns assume that Buffalmacco is not the *maestro* because of his appearance, similar to Forese's jest; and second, like Forese (and unlike Francesca or Calandrino) the nuns fall into the category of readers capable of understanding the reproach inherent in the *beffa* that Buffalmacco plays upon them: "Poi conoscendo che egli aveva loro fatto quello che meritavano, e che l'opere che egli aveva fatte non erano se non lodevoli, fecer richiamar dal castaldo Buonamico; il qual con grandissime risa e piacere si ricondusse al lavoro, dando loro a cognoscere che differenza sia dagli uomini alle brocche, e che non sempre ai vestimenti si deono l'opere degli uomini giudicare (Vasari 219)."

who cannot see the deceptions in which he is embroiled without acknowledging the ambiguities operating here leaves us in jeopardy of being ourselves poor readers. At our own peril do we join with the *brigata* in aligning ourselves with Bruno and Buffalmacco, in assuming that we are above the dangers of deception, that we stand above the persuasive power of insidious rhetoric. Indeed, the staged repetition of these tales that defy our formal and aesthetic expectations so late in the *Decameron* suggests an ambush in the easy comfort of aligning ourselves with these sly tricksters and gloating over the stupidity of Calandrino. Marcus writes of this self-congratulation:

Should we assume complete knowledge and *avvedimento*, then we would share in the error of Calandrino and open ourselves to deception by the arch-manipulator of illusion, the writer himself. Yet Boccaccio has withheld no information pertaining to the machinations of Bruno and Buffalmacco that would make us his dupe. We are thus given the illusion of complete insight into the workings of this tale, and we leave it convinced of our alliance with its tricksters, and not with their prey. (90, 91)

Suggesting Calandrino as a Boccaccian surrogate completely inverts the standard interpretation of him as a poor reader, turning him instead into an image of a good writer – one who does not create an overdetermined, uninterpretable world of meaning, but instead insists on teaching us to recognize our own susceptibility and to take responsibility for interpretative work. Before moving on, there is one more link between Boccaccio and Calandrino to mention. Bruno and Buffalmacco have long been recognized as participating in the same typology of two other controversial Decameronian figures: Ser Cepperello (I.10) and Frate Cipolla (VI.10). On the one hand, it is impossible not to recognize the deviant pleasures inherent in the deceptions of these two characters,<sup>61</sup> on the other, they are clearly both socially and morally disruptive. From a theological perspective they are necessarily negative, yet from a literary one, they are entertaining and we cannot help but participate in that enjoyment.

The clearest link between the tale of Frate Cipolla and the Calandrino *novelle* is the similarity between Cipolla's explanation of the disappearance of the angel Gabriel's feather and Maso's description of the equally fictional land of Bengodi. The double-entendre of their rhetoric makes the connection obvious;<sup>62</sup> it is also no small part of the reason that we participate so eagerly in the pleasure of deception. For our enjoyment as readers is equally two-fold: there is the comedy of the *beffa* and the admiration of *ingegno*, and there is the fact that we are made to feel superior to the deception. The crafty double-entendre of their speeches is remarkable in being utterly unnecessary (neither Calandrino nor the inhabitants of Certaldo can understand it, and a lie without secondary meanings would be just as effective) *except* that this linguistic play allows us as readers to feel like we are in on the joke, a part of this inner circle. We parse what is

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<sup>61</sup> Even Kirkham, who generally defends the moral rectitude of the *Decameron* describes this perfectly as "...the powerful magnetic field of fun and evil centered on Ser Cepperello..." ("Guiglielmo Borsiere" 179)."

<sup>62</sup> Frate Cipolla also mentions Maso del Saggio by name in the course of his speech (VI.10.42). Russo does note that despite the rhetorical alliance between Cipolla and Maso, Bruno, and Buffalmacco, there is a difference between the Decameron's treatment of Calandrino, and the largely non-descript population of Certaldo: "...gli sciocchi non hanno storia, e basta una semplice nota, per colorirli nel mondo dell'arte. Per il popolo di Certaldo, il Boccaccio si è contentato di due o tre note: li gli sciocchi hanno un significato soltanto per dar rilievo alla figura del ciurmadore. Qui, invece, in tutte le quattro novelle, Calandrino è il personaggio principe; e uno sciocco e un credulone non può interessare il mondo della fantasia, senza ingenerare fastidio e sazietà. Ed è questo pericolo che il Boccaccio invece ha saputo costantemente evitare (282, 283)."

in reality a pre-determined, built-in interpretation as our own sophisticated ability to read between the lines. We pat ourselves on the back without seeing the way the speeches of Maso and Cipolla have actually taken away our ability to interpret them. Made to feel as though we have avoided deception once, we receive false reassurance of our hermeneutic skill. Sure in the sense that we are more like the deceivers than the victims, we begin to overlook the complex contradictions of the text, and the extent to which the deception is much more than a simple correspondence of linguistic tricks. Speaking of the problems with the *ingegno* reading of the Calandrino cycle, Marcus writes:

All this would imply that the writer is himself exempt from deception – that he alone, as the ultimate manipulator of illusions, is beyond gullibility. But such an inference fails to take into account the fact that Calandrino is a painter – at once the creator of illusions and their creature. By making this quintessential dupe himself an artist, Boccaccio calls into question his own exemption from gullibility and in so doing denies the privileged status of his perspective. It is just the different degrees of gullibility which distinguish victims and victimizers, for no one within the human order can claim the possession of absolute and unconditional knowledge. Those who make such claims become the greatest of dupes, subject to manipulation by those who accept the relativity and contingency of all human belief.<sup>63</sup> (92)

After moving past the obvious markers of gullibility and naiveté, there remain complexities to these *novelle* to interpret with significance beyond the rhetorically duplicitous rhetoric. Reading the Calandrino cycle as the triumph of *ingegno* cedes interpretive authority to those very tricksters who demonstrate themselves to be untrustworthy judges and poor artists. It prevents us from looking beyond basic linguistic levels, from reading individual stories in the *Decameron* in an intertextual way, and from acknowledging the very real undercurrent of tragedy that runs through the Calandrino *novelle* – ignoring the way that he is represented both as heroic and as a martyr, a martyr even with christological significance. The identification of Cipolla with Maso through their double-entendre similarly suggests a parallel between Calandrino and the inhabitants of our author's hometown, Certaldo. It may not be apparent at first glance, but we shall see, finally, if anything good can come out of Nazareth.

### *Calandrino's Martyrology*

Calandrino's martyrology and christological associations undermine the moralizing interpretation of judgment and the *ingegno* interpretation of the transcendence of art alike.<sup>64</sup> Our first indication of the christological associations of Calandrino is the odd line that appears in VIII.3.25, 26: "ma diliberò di non volerlo fare senza saputa di Bruno e Buffailmacco, li quali spzialissimamente amava." (910) This particular love for them echoes the disciple "whom

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<sup>63</sup> While she does not make a direct connection to the authorial role of Calandrino, Marcus is to my knowledge the only person to realize the importance of the fact that Calandrino is an artist as well.

<sup>64</sup> Noted in different contexts at least in passing by Baratto (1984), Gittes (2002), Martinez (2003), and Marchesi (2004).

Christ loved,” St. John the Evangelist.<sup>65</sup> This reference inverts our expectations by casting Calandrino as Christ and Bruno and Buffalmacco as his disciples, and associates him from the beginning with the virtue of love.<sup>66</sup> The Biblical echoes continue, when Calandrino finally finds Bruno and Buffalmacco at work, announcing “Compagni, quando voi vogliate credermi,” an invocation that not only reiterates their role as his disciples, but also invokes the act of faith in which he wants them to participate.<sup>67</sup> Even his vision of what to do with the heliotrope, once it is found, is potentially a reference to the cleansing of the temple by Christ, as it is the money-changers (*cambiatori*) whom Calandrino wishes to rob, and the subsequent wandering in the wilderness is also reminiscent of the temptation of Christ. The conclusion of the story of the heliotrope, much as it at first glance seems an instance of *contrapasso*, is also a quintessential scene of martyrdom, the stoning particularly reminiscent of the deaths of early Christians.<sup>68</sup>

The typology of the martyr continues in the other stories, most especially in VIII.6. The elaborate *beffa* played upon Calandrino in this *novella* is particularly cruel in the level of fraud that it perpetrates upon him (to the extent that it even invokes the sympathy of the ladies of the *brigata*,<sup>69</sup> and in the way that it makes a public display of Calandrino’s shame and punishment. This tale begins with an image of sacrifice in the form of a newly-slaughtered pig, slated to be salted and preserved for the winter months. Calandrino refuses to conspire with Bruno and Buffalmacco to pretend that it has been stolen and to spend the proceeds on entertainment, so along with a priest, the two ply him with wine and steal the pig anyway while he is sleeping. Despairing over the loss, Calandrino determines to discover which of his neighbors has stolen it. Bruno and Buffalmacco assure him that they can create a sort of “trial by ordeal” that will determine who is the guilty party. Bruno takes forty *soldi* from Calandrino (his second financial injury of the story) and travels to Florence where he buys ginger sweets and vernaccia, which are to be shared in a public gathering. The guilty party will not be able to swallow these delicacies, but will spit them out as though they are intolerably bitter. Bruno, of course, also secretly has prepared two bits of bitter “dog ginger”, made to look like the other candies. With the whole

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<sup>65</sup> Or, John the Apostle. At other times referred to as the “unnamed disciple” the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, he appears only in the gospel of John. The reference to Christ’s special love for this disciple occur in John 13.23, 19.26, 20.2, 21.7. In the Vulgate text, the verb *diligere* is used, except in chapter 20, where *amare* appears instead. Above I suggested that Calandrino’s gaze at the new paintings of the life of John the Baptist (often elided with John the Evangelist or Apostle) is a kind of identification. It can also be a mark of him in the role of Christ, as he stands in front of these paintings, we are reminded of the Baptist’s role as the one who comes before, a precursor to the arrival of Christ. Here, the paintings of the Baptist are a precursor, as Calandrino studies them as an artistic model.

<sup>66</sup> Marchesi sees this as a kind of caricature, but the prevalence of christological signifiers throughout the *novelle* ought to have greater significance. He offers, however, a useful example from the *vulgare*: “È notevole che il sintagma con cui Elissa definisce l’affetto di Calandrino per i suoi compagni sia lo stesso che nella tradizione agiografica caratterizza il rapporto tra Cristo e San Giovanni Evangelista. Nella leggenda di San Giovanni dal manoscritto BNCF II.IV.56, si legge: ‘Avea Cristo più tempo che Giovanni nel torno d’undici anni e mezzo, il quale garzone tutto puro e vergine, con aspetto mansueto e piacevoli, era umilissimo: onde che Gieso Cristo singularmente l’amava, e tutto il suo amore puose e mostrava a Giovanni, com’egli istesso Giovanni ne rende testimonianza nel suo vangelo; che quando si vole nominare non dice Giovanni, ma dice quello discepolo ch’era amato da Gieso Cristo’ (111,2, n.13).”

<sup>67</sup> The issue of faith and its significance for the cycle is tackled below. After all, Calandrino’s assertion that they will be able to find the heliotrope is no more incredible than the offer to make “fishers of men.”

<sup>68</sup> Martinez draws a parallel specifically with the stoning of St. Stephen Protomartyr. He also notes that in 59, Calandrino backs up his story that he had found and lost the heliotrope by showing them the bodily injuries he has received at their hands, casting them as two doubting Thomases, though they already know the truth of the matter.

<sup>69</sup> VIII.7.2: “Molto avevan le donne riso del cattivello di Calandrino, e più n’avrebbono ancora, se stato non fosse che loro increbbe di vedergli torre ancora i capponi a color che tolto gli aveano il porco.”

town gathered, they distribute the sweets and wine to everyone, making sure to give Calandrino the fake sweets. Calandrino is then denounced as the thief and publicly shamed in front of the entire community. Adding a final injury to this insult, Bruno and Buffalmacco demand that Calandrino give them two pairs of capons, or they will reveal the theft to his wife.

The publicity of this moment is another characteristic quality of scenes of martyrdom. In *Dying for God*, Boyarin characterizes scenes of martyrdom as distinct even from tragedy in that they are “deaths that are seen, murders in public spaces. Insofar as martyrdom is, then, by definition, a practice that takes place within the public, and therefore, shared space...” (1999, 21) Bruno acknowledges the function of this public shaming in his explanation of the trial by ordeal: “...e per ciò, anzi che questa vergogna gli sia fatta in presenza di tanti, è forse il meglio che quel cotale che avuto l’avesse in penitenzia il dica al sere, e io mi rimarrò di questo fatto (VIII.6.43).” The public disgrace of Calandrino, condemned despite his innocence, also makes him a sacrificial victim, in that he literally pays the penalty for Bruno and Buffalmacco’s sins, both financially and in the condemnation of the community. He is the scapegoat who pays for their theft and deception.<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, the peculiar substance of the trial by ordeal constructed by Bruno and Buffalmacco reveals another christological association of Calandrino. Buffalmacco initially suggests making the test by inviting the town for bread and cheese. Bruno objects, however, that people would see through the trick and not come, and instead suggests the ginger sweets and wine. Why this substitution should make a difference is unclear, until we realize that the switch changes the ensuing scene from one of a social contract of breaking of bread – the symbol of cohesion in a community of believers – to one of crucifixion, in which Calandrino is publicly ridiculed and mocked, and made to bear the collective blame of the town. The bitter “dog ginger” combined with the vernaccia is an allusion to the vinegar mixed with bitter herbs offered to Christ at the crucifixion, the moment that in the gospel of John immediately precedes his death: “vas ergo positum erat aceto plenum illi autem spongiam plenam aceto hysopo circumponentes obtulerunt ori eius cum ergo accepisset Iesus acetum dixit consummatum est et inclinato capite tradidit spiritum” (John 19.29, 30) Vernaccia wine appears twice in the *Decameron*, both times in conjunction with Calandrino and Buffalmacco, in VIII.3 and VIII.6. Vernaccia is also associated with the wine used in the celebration of mass (it appears again in this connection in Vasari’s life of Buffalmacco), and therefore more generally with the sacrifice of Christ.

I am less sure what to make of Calandrino’s pregnancy in IX.3, primarily because there any christological resonance verges on a parody that begins with an annunciation and ends with an ironic resurrection effected by death. Here, Maestro Simone (victim himself of Bruno and

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<sup>70</sup> Martinez makes the same point about Calandrino’s function in the story of the heliotrope: “Remembering the social functions of the *beffa*, however, we can trope Calandrino’s Christological role as that of the social scapegoat, who comes to take away – in the sense of bear upon his back, or carry the dead weight of the stones from the Mugnone – the sins of his fellow painters by virtue of the repeated exposure of his own frailties (n.p).” Calandrino’s frustration at Bruno and Buffalmacco’s refusal to believe that he has not stolen the pig may also echo the temptation of Christ by Satan in the wilderness, as the search for the heliotrope in the wilderness may. Calandrino exclaims: “Deh perché mi farete disperare? e bestemmiare Idio e’ santi e ciò che v’è? Io vi dico che il porco m’è stato sta notte imbolato (VIII.6.29).” The lack of faith expressed by Bruno and Buffalmacco seems to threaten Calandrino’s, leaving him open to the temptation of blasphemy and the rejection of God himself. Stones do also appear in the temptation; Satan challenges Christ: “si Filius Dei es mitte te deorsum scriptum est enim quia angelis suis mandabit de te et in manibus tollent te ne forte offendas ad lapidem pedem tuum.” (Matthew 4.6) Christ’s response is “scriptum est non temptabis Dominum Deum tuum” (4.7). *Tempto* in Latin has the sense both of attempt or try, like the elaborate schemes with which Bruno and Buffalmacco test Calandrino, but also the sense of assault, which may be more relevant to their active stoning of him at the end of the heliotrope story.



Buffalmacco in VIII.9) is roped into the conspiracy, and appears as a perverse Gabriel to announce Calandrino's pregnancy: "...e postoglisi il medico a sedere allato, gli 'ncominciò a toccare il polso, e dopo alquanto, essendo ivi presente la moglie, disse: 'Vedi, Calandrino, a parlarti come a amico, tu non hai altro male se non che tu se' pregno' (IX.3.20)." This male birth is an impossibility, one for which Calandrino is much derided for believing, but at the same time, the clear connection with the annunciation, for all its confusing and obvious parody does have once definite effect. It locates Calandrino's gullibility squarely in the realm of faith. The annunciation concludes with Gabriel's assertion, "non erit impossibile apud Deum omne verbum" (Luke 1.37). The virgin birth is after all an impossibility within the parameters of the rational, physical world, just as much as male pregnancy. In one case, no sex leads to an "unnatural" but believable (in fact, not just believable, but a basic, necessary tenant of Christianity) pregnancy, and in the other case, a sexual peccadillo leads to a similarly "unnatural" inversion of the natural state of affairs.<sup>71</sup> In a very strange way, the interpretive work that this parallel does is to call into question whether or not Calandrino's belief in his pregnancy is as ridiculous as it is on the surface – and to leave us as readers in an uncomfortable position – to dismiss him as a fool is to undermine one of the foundational theological principles of Christianity, to call believers, in essence, fools themselves.<sup>72</sup> The remorseless and relentless cruelty of Bruno and Buffalmacco also sets the stage for such a reading, particularly in the Christ-like mockery and humiliation they inflict upon him, and even acknowledge as such: "e Bruno e Buffalmacco e Nello rimaser contenti d'aver con ingegni saputo schernire l'avarizia di Calandrino..." (IX.3.33; 1053)."

The same is true of the odd resonance of the conclusion of the *novella*, where Calandrino's pregnancy is terminated after three days of treatment, in which the resurrection becomes a successful abortion. Calandrino's cure requires three days spent inside, drinking the medicine provided to him by Maestro Simone, at the end of which he is said to be restored: "Calandrino, tu se' guerito senza fallo; e però sicuramente oggimai va a fare ogni tuo fatto, né per questo star piú in casa." The three days, equivalent to the time spent by Christ in the tomb prior to the resurrection, might be coincidental, but the span of time is itself repeated three times, at IX.3.28, 32, and 33, and the number three is also echoed in the insistence, repeated twice at 29 and 30, of Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Maestro Simone, that he must give them three pairs of capons (as opposed to the two pairs he has already given them in VIII.6). Calandrino's "resurrection" is clearly celebratory, as he rejoices in his new state: "Calandrino lieto, levatosi s'andò a fare i fatti suoi, lodando molto, ovunque con persona a parlar s'avveniva, la bella cura che di lui il maestro Simone aveva fatta, d'averlo fatto in tre dí senza pena alcuna spregnare (IX.3.33)." This mysterious resurrection on the heels of the mysterious virgin birth has the same effect of forcing readers into the position of either deriding Calandrino's faith, which is, for all its silliness, consistent, or accepting it, thereby aligning themselves with a world of irrational miracles, in which he must, at the end, function as its hero. Is his simplicity a positive marker of Christian faith, or is it an insurmountable detriment in a world now ruled by skeptical *ingegno*?

The final Calandrino *novella*, Day IX.5, recalls Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman in two ways: first, in the centrality of adultery and prostitution to the story, and second, in Calandrino's initial encounter with Niccolosa: "...e a un pozzo che nella corte era del casamento lavandosi le mani e 'l viso, avvenne che Calandrino quivi venne per acqua e

<sup>71</sup> See Del Popolo for more on the moral implications of the sexual joke of IX.3 and 5.

<sup>72</sup> Calandrino's emphasis on religious faith, as well as his disproportionate, excessive sense of things is marked by the opening of the *novella*. Nello wishes him a "buon dí", and Calandrino responds, "...Idio gli desse il buon dí e 'l buono anno." A minor issue to be sure, but it begins setting the stage in the context of faith.

dimesticamente la salutò. Ella, rispostogli, il cominciò a guatare più perché Calandrino le pareva un nuovo uomo che per altra vaghezza (IX.5.9, 10).” The meeting over the well sets the stage, and Niccolosa’s curiosity at the sight of this “nuovo uomo” mirrors the Samaritan woman’s surprise and incomprehension in her interaction with Christ. The Samaritan woman at the well recognizes Christ as a prophet when he acknowledges the way in which her lie is in fact truth, responding to her denial that she has a husband by saying, “quinque enim viros habuisti et nunc quem habes non est tuus vir hoc vere dixisti (John 4.18).” This proliferation of “husbands”, either through prostitution or adultery, consolidates the connection to Niccolosa. Though the love that Calandrino will soon express for Niccolosa is clearly a sexual and erotic one, Calandrino’s innocence reflects the benevolence of Christ, who himself kept company with both prostitutes and thieves. There is a literalization of redemption in the figure of Calandrino, who is able to see through bad to good.

Indeed throughout these *novelle*, Calandrino is consistently associated with the faith, hope, and charity (his love for Bruno and Buffalmacco, his infatuation with Niccolosa). Though he is a fool, his foolishness is primarily represented as belief: belief in those “friends” that surround him, and belief in moments that are staged as scenes from the life of Christ (such as the virgin birth and the miracle of transubstantiation). As such, we are forced to wonder as readers if his naïveté, rather than an inherently negative quality, is in fact the positive Christian virtue of faith. Though his desires may exceed his capacity to achieve them, the pursuit of them is, like Prometheus and Phaethon, positive in itself, and though his faith leads him to foolishness, that faith must also be recognized as inherently positive because of its affiliation with Christ.

### *A Theatre of Deception*

To the extent that any reading of these *novelle* as a cohesive whole has been attempted, they have usually been seen, at the end, as an example of Calandrino as a poor reader – one who is easily deceived by words, who cannot see beyond the “literal sense” of things, to their underlying meaning. This in turn, has led to an interpretation that aligns Bruno and Buffalmacco with Giotto, glorifying their verbal wit and art, and denigrating Calandrino’s naïveté. But this overlooks Calandrino’s positive association with love and faith, ignores our sneaking admiration for his mock-heroics, and dismisses the cruelty and selfishness of Bruno and Buffalmacco, who at times look less like pranksters and more like bullies. For there is something excessive about Bruno and Buffalmacco’s treatment of Calandrino; we start to root, just a little bit, for one so patently the underdog. This is aggravated by the power imbalance of two-against-one and by the natural disadvantages Calandrino seems to have. Precisely because it is impossible for him to come out on top, we begin to root for one so patently the underdog.

This approach has necessitated an insistence that Calandrino is deceived by words alone; that these *novelle* are interesting because they demonstrate verbal deception and wit, like those of Frate Cipolla.<sup>73</sup> But just as in that story we are made participants in the deception precisely by the linguistic double-speak that exists exactly for the purpose of making us feel superior to the joke, our obsession with verbal pranks and subtle word-play in these stories suggests that we are the ones who equally fall victim to misreading, so enamored are we of our own intelligence as

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<sup>73</sup> Marchesi, as just one example of a very dominant claim, writes that it is “l’incapacità di Calandrino di rispondere con un’adeguata ermeneutica ai messaggi verbali che gli vengono indirizzati...l’incapacità di andare oltre la superficie delle parole che gli vengono rivolte (108).”

readers. Even leaving aside the many ways in which Calandrino is sympathetic, it becomes quite clear that he is not tricked by mere words, but by an elaborate theatre of deception.

The first sign of this theatre of deception is the elaborate preamble to the prank played upon Calandrino in the story of the heliotrope. The intricate set-up with Maso serves categorically from the outset as a warning that these tricks are not simply verbal, and that they illustrate more than Calandrino's foolish naiveté.<sup>74</sup> It is very clearly a scene that he walks into – the staging of the secretive conversation between Bruno and Buffalmacco and Maso is designed to pique his interest unobtrusively. Maso presents himself as an authority as a lapidary, cultivating the aura of professionalism: "...parlava come se stato fosse un solenne e gran lapidario." Though it is speech that he uses, it is at first still merely the appearance of authority that he uses to manipulate Calandrino, not any sort of duplicitous word-play. Likewise, when Calandrino goes to find Bruno and Buffalmacco, while they laugh inwardly at his ambitions, they are careful to maintain appropriate facial expressions (30). This same outward feigning is maintained at the end of the story, when rather than reveal to him the truth of the prank, they remind him of his own fault in appearing before Mona Tessa with the stone (63). Moreover, Bruno and Buffalmacco orchestrate events so that the search for the heliotrope occurs on a Sunday, when there are fewer people about to reveal the truth, and even prepare the city guardsman in advance. The *dies solis*, or perhaps even Judgment Day, is thus complicit in the joke, as well as Fortune herself: "tanto fu la fortuna piacevole alla beffa, che, mentre Calandrino per lo fiume ne venne e poi per la città, niuna persona gli fece motto (50). Calandrino's low social status is also complicit, as a kind of social invisibility aids in the *beffa*, both at the outset, when he "overhears" Maso's conversation in San Giovanni, and here, when no one in the city bothers to greet him. Nor is Calandrino unaware of the implications of these events – at the conclusion of the novella, he cites the absence of communication from the custom guards and greetings from neighbors as evidence of his invisibility.<sup>75</sup> Far from being tricked by words alone, he shows himself to be capable of rational deduction, and to pay attention to non-verbal details.

Perhaps the whole fault is Calandrino's for his belief that the heliotrope might exist in the first place. But beyond Maso's authoritative withholding on the power of the stone, the heliotrope also has a long literary history that represents a different kind of authority. As Russo astutely notes:

Anche su questa erba fantasticarono gli antichi, a cominciare da Dioscoride, che le attribuiva virtù terapeutiche contro il morso dei serpenti e degli scorpioni; e Plinio accolse nella sua Storia naturale la credenza che l'heliotropium (pietra), mescolato con l'erba omonima, rendesse invisibile chi la portava. Anche Dante

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<sup>74</sup> "This first part of the tale, wherein Maso sows the seed for the actual prank that Bruno and Buffalmacco will play on Calandrino in part two, is perhaps longer than the exigencies of the plot would require. The figure of Maso is an extraneous one, for Boccaccio could have made Bruno and Buffalmacco the source of the heliotrope idea, as well as the executors of the prank itself. But by separating the preparatory part of the hoax from its execution, and by giving a separate character the task of planting the seed in Calandrino's mind, Boccaccio dramatizes the onset of Calandrino's misbelief and calls attention to its particular dynamic. The protagonist's predisposition to delusion and the birth of this particular delusional system thus become part of the primary subject matter of this opening Calandrino tale, preparing us for the artistry of the deception to come (Marcus 85)."

<sup>75</sup> "E dicovi che, entrando alla porta con tutte queste pietre in seno che voi vedete qui, niuna cosa mi fu detta, ché sapete quanto esser sogliano spiacevoli e noiosi que' guardiani a volere ogni cosa vedere; e oltre a questo ho trovati per la via piú miei compari e amici, li quali sempre mi soglion far motto e invitarmi a bere, né alcun fu che parola mi dicesse né mezza, sí come quegli che non mi vedeano (60)."

prestava fede a tale bubbola...Non c'è da meravigliarsi che vi credesse il povero Calandrino. (839)

If Calandrino is guilty of anything, it is a lack of awareness of how elaborately and extensively prepared this prank has been. Behind his belief in the heliotrope is the weight of some fairly serious authorities – not just Maso's pretense of being a lapidary, but also real literary precedent, with some very serious *auctoritas* behind it. Far from merely "...neglecting to go beyond the surface of Maso's lie to discover its patent nontruth (Marcus 86, 87)," every event, every detail of VIII.3 contrives to keep him unaware of the deception. The sophisticated double-entendre of Maso's speech, to which has generally be attributed the success of the joke, is actually a very limited part of this elaborate theatre of deception.

The same holds true of the other three stories. In no small part, Calandrino is blinded to the pranks played upon him because of his love of his friends, who should, like Boccaccio's, not treat him so poorly.<sup>76</sup> These deceptions are not only perpetrated by his friends, but by a variety of representatives of established authority – precisely those same figures which, as I suggested above, should usually be the subject of such *beffe*, not participants in them. In VIII.6, a priest becomes part of the trick. Bruno and Buffalmacco must first make Calandrino drunk, and then steal his pig. What follows is a scene of entrapment, where they make Calandrino appear to be guilty of the theft. Even weighty than the priest himself, Bruno and Buffalmacco actually contrive to make God himself complicit in the *iudicium dei* that follows (the vernaccia wine, typically used in mass, should be another clue).<sup>77</sup> After setting up the scene in which publically humiliates Calandrino with divine verification that he is indeed the thief, Bruno and Buffalmacco finally couch the entire *novella* as a scene of judgment for Calandrino's behavior in the heliotrope story: "Tu ci menasti una volta giù per lo Mugnone ricogliendo pietre nere (54)." First, they construct the prank of the heliotrope, then justify their behavior in the second prank, by accusing him of their own fault.

In IX.3 it is again predominately Calandrino's good faith that Bruno and Buffalmacco abuse, this time in collusion with the doctor Maestro Simone, and Calandrino's brother-in-law, Nello. Again, there is an emphasis on non-verbal signifiers as part of this theatre; Calandrino's first hint of his "illness" is again, a facial expression: "Nello, trattenutosi un poco, lo 'ncominciò a guardar nel viso a cui Calandrino disse: "Che guati tu? (7)." It is not just a susceptibility to ideas that dupes Calandrino into thinking he is pregnant, but again, an elaborate staging, where various people who are in on the joke tell him he is looking ill, and then the entire game is upheld by the authority of a doctor, and medical testing. Nowhere, however, is complicity of an entire community more obvious than in the final Calandrino story, where he becomes enamored of Niccolosa. From the beginning he is deceived by her appearance, believing her to be a lady of high standing rather than a prostitute. The story informs us that this supposition is upheld by her

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<sup>76</sup> "Invece l'amicizia che lega Calandrino a Bruno e Buffalmacco... agisce in maniera più esterna, e comunque diventa pretesto necessario per creare quel clima di fiducia in cui potranno realizzarsi le molteplici beffe (Getto 223)."

<sup>77</sup> Again, scholarship has generally tended to see these events as obvious tricks that Calandrino by rights should be able to see through, rather than elaborately staged deceptions. As Watson writes of the deliberately disguised pig ginger: "Objects constantly fool him, such as pills that seem to be ginger sweets but taste otherwise... It is the heliotrope, however, that makes Calandrino ascend the Everest of credulity, for he truly believes that the stone has made him invisible – or, to paraphrase what is said of Giotto, he thinks that the visual sense of men here falls into error, believing that which is present to be absent (58)." Calandrino is not fooled by something as simple as an appearance, he is deceived by a network of people and things that he ought, by rights, to be able to trust.

physical appearance: “Aveva costei bella persona e era ben vestita e secondo sua pari assai costumata e ben parlante (9).” Beyond the involvement of co-conspirators Maso (VIII.3) and Maestro Simone (IX.3), in this final story, the deception extends so far as to represent an entire community in microcosm: Calandrino’s friends, Bruno and Buffalmacco, his family, Nello and Tessa (who is not so much involved in the joke as manipulated into being an instrument of judgment), the prostitute herself, and finally, even a higher social order as represented by Filippo. Given the solidarity of forces marshaled against him, it is no surprise that Calandrino falls victim to the trap.

This elaborate theatre of deception represents, not merely verbal deception, but an over-determined universe created by art, one much more comprehensive than an emphasis on language would have us believe. The story of the heliotrope is actually the only Calandrino novella in which duplicitous language is primarily at stake – and that stake turns out to be a relatively small one. My theory is that like Frate Cipolla’s double-edge rhetoric, Maso’s speech (which Calandrino interprets in one way, but underneath which we perceive another meaning) is an invitation to the reader to congratulate himself on seeing the dual meaning beneath the surface. The problem, however, is too easy a self-congratulation. The triumph that we feel upon recognizing one aspect of deception blinds us to the many others at work in these stories, to the theatre of the entire thing. The verbal duplicity gives us a false sense of security, enabling us to feel superior to Calandrino, rather than understand the degree to which, as readers, we are like him. What we miss in this security, are those constructs of community and authority which are also at work, and to which we ourselves may be more vulnerable.

The manipulation that Calandrino suffers, and the over-determined world in which he finds himself confined, is a subtle critique of a Dantean mode of writing. The association of Bruno and Buffalmacco with *contrapasso*, as well as their self-construction of figures of judgment, and the invocation of divine power and authority, all suggest that the world of Danetan justice is itself, too constrained to be open to a freedom of reading. It is effectively Dante’s masterful construction of authorship which here martyrs Calandrino, not leaving room for faith and imagination within an over-determined interpretation. A determination to read these *novelle* within Dante’s moral framework, on the one hand, or as distinct from Dante in a renaissance glorification of wit, has obscured this critique from our view.

While we may be more conscious of the potential duplicity of language, we are as open to manipulation by literary texts as is Calandrino. This is particularly true when it comes to the case of literary authorities. When Calandrino first meets Maso in VIII.3, Maso puts on the trappings of authority which derive from his feigned profession. Later, when Calandrino goes in search of Bruno and Buffalmacco to tell them of the wondrous potentials of the heliotrope, he tells them that he has acquired this knowledge from “un uomo degno di fede” (28). This traditional designation for an *autore* occurs only once in the *Decameron*, applied to a deceiver who more than proves himself unworthy of the title author. But when Calandrino grants Maso that faith, he is not being foolish, he is simply participating in the same established structures that we do when we cede interpretive authority without question to the author of the text. In this, we prove ourselves to be equally inadequate readers.

### *Da lor mal inteso: Solomon and Cavalcanti in the Decameron*

The ninth story of the ninth Day of the *Decameron* is at first glance not an especially remarkable or original tale. As is customary, it is told by the Day's queen, in this case, Emilia, who introduces her story with a rather long framing preamble. After these preliminaries the story can be divided conveniently into three principal sections. In the first part (10-15), we are introduced to the two protagonists, Giosefo and Melisso, two young men who become acquainted while traveling on the road to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Their common purpose is to ask King Solomon for advice: Melisso wishes to understand why he cannot win the affections of his townspeople, despite spending his money in entertaining and honoring them, while Giosefo cannot control his "ritrosa e perversa" wife (12). Arriving in Jerusalem, they are ushered in to see Solomon, who tells Melisso only "Ama" and replies to Giosefo merely "Va al Ponte all'Oca," after which brief responses the travelers are unceremoniously tossed out.

In what we may think of as the second part of the *novella*, Giosefo and Melisso travel homeward (16-22), confused and somewhat disconsolate at Solomon's seemingly unintelligible advice. After some days on their journey, the pair arrive at a bridge where they see a muleteer bludgeoning one of his mules which has refused the crossing. When Giosefo and Melisso remonstrate with him, the muleteer tells them that he knows his own mule and continues beating the animal until it gives in and recommences the crossing, thus, Emilia tells us, "il mulattiere vinse la pruova." As they depart, Giosefo finds that the bridge is called the Ponte all'Oca; this discovery calls to his mind Solomon's words, and Giosefo announces to Melisso that it is now clear to him that his domestic difficulties are the result of his failure to beat his wife properly, a lesson that he has now learned from the muleteer. The third part of this story sees Giosefo's interpretation of the events at Goose Bridge put into action, and a brief exegesis of Solomon's advice to Melisso: *Love* (22-35). The bulk of the final third of this *novella* takes place at Giosefo's home in Antioch where Melisso stops as a guest. When his wife fails to prepare dinner according to instruction, Giosefo implements the "consiglio di Salamone," beating his nameless wife viciously until she is covered in wounds and bruises, stopping only when he wears himself out with the effort. The next morning finds Giosefo's wife now tractable and docile, and the two men laughingly congratulate themselves over the change. Only a few final lines are reserved for the explication of the advice received by Melisso; upon returning home, he consults a "savio uomo" who must somewhat superfluously elucidate the meaning of Solomon's order "love": failing to love others truly, Melisso is himself unloved. The *novella* concludes with the quasi proverbial statement: "Così adunque fu gastigata la ritrosa, e il giovane amando fu amato." (55)

This *novella* seems to reflect the same crisis of creativity as many of the others of Day IX. The quarrelsome, vituperative woman who must be physically dominated in order to be properly controlled is by Boccaccio's time already a stock character of fiction,<sup>2</sup> one which continues to enjoy an afterlife of rather depressing fecundity, from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* to contemporary film and television. Beyond its other precursors, the *Decameron* itself

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<sup>1</sup> The Melisso who appears in IX.9 has generally been accepted by scholars to be the Greek philosopher Melissus of Samos from the fifth century BCE, though his appearance concomitant with King Solomon is therefore an anachronism by any standards. I also accept the identification, at least in part, for reasons discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent overview of wife-beating as a medieval trope across Europe is Vasvári's article "Buon cavallo e mal cavallo." She describes these retold stories about violence directed against the shrewish woman as "...subject to a limited number of conservative metanarratives, and that they are a form of trafficking in stories about women, which have important cultural functions of inculcating and maintaining conformity to socially determined and approved patterns of behavior." (317) Wife-beating as fiction applies equally, of course, to the case of Tessa in VIII.3.

has previously offered us a range of similar stories, from its episodes famous for their controversial misogyny, such as V.10,<sup>3</sup> VIII.1, VIII.7, and X.10, to those *novelle* which engage with direct violence against women, such as VII.8, VIII.3, and IX.7, even to the *Decameron*'s previous treatments of the problem of unrequited love, especially in V.8 and 9, recalled by the final lines of this story. The absence of a theme for Day IX already ties it to the first Day, as well as to Day VI, which although it is restricted in form to *motti*, is open in terms of content.<sup>4</sup> Both the word *brevemente* at the beginning of the *novella* (“...brevemente Melisso disse la sua bisogna; a cui Salamone rispose: ‘Ama.’”) and the laconic nature of Solomon’s responses, also encourage us to recall the theme and stories of Day VI.

In keeping with the general sense that Day IX is plagued by this sort of repetition and lack of creativity, what little scholarship there is on the story of Giosefo and Melisso has focused on the inherent misogyny of this scene of wife-beating and struggled to relate the tale to the ongoing debates regarding the *Decameron*'s general posture with respect to gender, women, and misogyny.<sup>5</sup> My argument here prioritizes instead the role of reading and interpretation in this *novella*, suggesting that it can and should be understood as a tale about the perils of careless reading and the costs of blindly accepting speech as authoritative. It again confronts us with the question of who bears responsibility for the interpretation of texts, their authors or their readers.<sup>6</sup> In my reading of IX.9, I propose to focus on three elements that are unique to Boccaccio’s tale, and that distinguish it from other commonly circulating versions of the “taming of the shrew” story: the appearance of the biblical character Solomon, the importance of the symbolic function of the two protagonists, Giosefo and Melisso, and the tensions between Emilia’s long prologue and the story itself. I wish to be clear, however, that in moving away from an analysis of gendered violence that is necessarily central to this story, I have no desire to clear it of charges of misogyny by insisting upon the thematized importance of interpretation. I believe Migiel is absolutely correct when she writes:

[There is a] camp that sees “misogynists” as “misreaders”...But this mode of reading has hardly lain the question of textual misogyny to rest. Mihoko Suzuki, for example, protests that readers of the *Decameron* have been far too blind to its misogyny, and that this misogyny continues to be reproduced on the grounds that it is “merely” a literary trope...I am sympathetic to both of these intellectual positions: I think that misogyny can be exposed as misreading; but I also think it

<sup>3</sup> For the import of Boccaccio’s changes to Apuleius’s text in V.10 with respect to gender and sexuality, see “Libido Sciendi” by Eisner and Schachter. See as well Gaylord, “Crisis of Word and Deed.”

<sup>4</sup> Migiel also notes the tie between Day IX and VI in *A Rhetoric* (113). The particular connection between VI.9 and IX.9 has not, to my knowledge, been made previously.

<sup>5</sup> Only two works have dealt with IX.9 substantively, Vasvári’s “‘Buon cavallo e mal cavallo vuole sprone...’: Medieval Cultural Fictions of Wife-Battering” and Chapter 7 of Migiel’s book “Domestic Violence in the *Decameron*,” where she writes: “Readers of this novella have found themselves at an impasse. Some, shocked at its misogyny, condemn both the novella and its author. Others, attempting to preserve the view of Boccaccio as a pro-woman writer, claim flatly that the resolution of the novella is so unsatisfactory that Boccaccio must want us to accept the resolution as ironic. This suggests to me that the scene of violence has been considered fundamentally unreadable. It has elicited outrage or apology, rather than analysis (150).”

<sup>6</sup> In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which Bruno and Buffalmacco may represent a particularly overdetermined kind of speech and writing that leaves little room for hermeneutic maneuvering. It is remarkable that in this *novella*, we are confronted with precisely the opposite of that sort of speech. Here, instead, Solomon’s words (and the way in which they are put to use) are the basis for all of the events of the story, precisely because they are a kind of speech so cryptic and non-specific that they are almost infinitely expandable.

is a mistake to claim that misogynist discourse is so ironic (or so allegorical or so figurative or so textual) that it cancels itself out entirely. It does not exist within an exclusively textual context. To allow misogyny to exist as a narrative alongside any other, and of equal value to others, is a political mistake and ethically wrong. (*A Rhetoric* 198, n.8)

Despite the fact that I here argue that we as readers ought to understand that the violence of IX.9 is produced, not by Solomon's words, but by Giosefo's interpretation of them, the violence directed at Giosefo's wife remains nonetheless an integral part of a stock tale. While IX.9 may add some new dynamics to an old story, its foundation is the repetition of

### *The figure of Solomon in the Middle Ages*

Though we associate him closely with the idea of judgment, Solomon is not actually one of the judges of the Old Testament, but rather the third king, after Saul and David. The kings of Israel replaced the judges as the ultimate human authority, after the Israelites insisted upon having a king like other nations, despite Samuel's warnings of the costs such a kingship will have for them. This decision is glossed in chapter 8 of 1 Kings as a rejection of God himself. In this sense, the line of kings represents both the corruption of a more ideal state (Israel under the judges, the direct representatives of God's authority on earth) and a fulfillment (since Christ himself will ultimately descend from David's kingly line). Despite some medieval controversy, Solomon occupies a privileged position among the kings of Israel, in part because of the comparatively substantive treatment of his reign in 3 Kings, and in part because along with his father David, he is one of only two of the kings to whom authorship of Scripture is attributed.

This popular image of Solomon as a judge, however, is not inaccurate.<sup>7</sup> It arises both from the language of vulgate text of his prayer for wisdom, and from the most iconic of stories about him, often referred to in the Middle Ages simply as "the judgment". These two defining moments occur at the beginning of his reign. After a bit of slick political maneuvering to hold on to the kingship after David's death, Solomon has a dream in which God appears to him and offers him whatever he asks. Rather than wealth or power or a long life, Solomon replies, "Give therefore to thy servant an understanding heart, to judge thy people, and discern between good and evil. For who shall be able to judge this people, thy people which is so numerous?"<sup>8</sup> Pleased with his request, God tells Solomon:

Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life or riches, nor the lives of thy enemies, but hast asked for thyself wisdom to discern judgment, behold I have done for thee according to thy words, and have given thee a wise and understanding heart, insomuch that there hath been no one like thee before thee, nor shall arise after thee.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In a highly suggestive article, Ménager notes that Jean de Joinville links kings and judges together in his *Credo* precisely because they are the two groups of people for whom right judgment is most important. He continues: "Le roi n'a pas montré sa puissance ni sa sagesse: il a montré qu'il savait juger (128)."

<sup>8</sup> "Dabis ergo servo tuo cor docile ut iudicare possit populum tuum et discernere inter malum et bonum quis enim potest iudicare populum istum populum tuum hunc multum (3 Kings 3.9)."

<sup>9</sup> "Quia postulasti verbum hoc et non petisti tibi dies multos nec divitias aut animam inimicorum tuorum sed postulasti tibi sapientiam ad discernendum iudicium ecce feci tibi secundum sermones tuos et dedi tibi cor sapiens et intellegens in tantum ut nullus ante te similis tui fuerit nec post te surrecturus sit (3 Kings 3.11,12)."



Solomon's initial request twice repeats *iudicare*, along with the words *docile* and *discernere*. There are two key ideas in this request; first, in the context of the kingship, Solomon does not ask for help with ruling, but with judging, and second, in the context of the kingly person, the overwhelming humility of the request – the desire to be taught and to learn. His requests are active; not only does Solomon not ask for things such as riches or victory, he does not ask for qualities either, but instead for the ability to be a good ruler. This pragmatic aspect to his character aligns him principally with a *vita activa* above the *vita contemplativa*, represented more closely by his father David.

The Judgment almost immediately follows this account of Solomon's request for wisdom, and it is the first demonstration of Solomon's wisdom, when he is still a very young king (1Kings 3:16-28). Two harlots come before him, both of whom had infants of the same age, one of whom has died in the night. They both claim to be the mother of the surviving child. Solomon, with his divinely bestowed wisdom, orders the living child to be cut in two: "The king therefore said: 'Bring me a sword.' And when they had brought a sword before the king, he said, 'Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other.' (24, 25)."<sup>10</sup> This order prompts the real mother to request that the child be given to the other woman, rather than killed, while the false mother is happy to see it murdered. Solomon then decrees the child to be returned to the woman who wished to see its life spared, declaring her to be the true mother. The conclusion of the story is the recognition of the wisdom of Solomon by the people: "And all Israel heard the judgment which the king had judged, and they feared the king, seeing that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment (3 Kings 3.28)."<sup>11</sup>

The story is psychologically compelling; one of the reasons for its popularity in the Middle Ages and even today is the emotional obviousness of its reasoning. Yet though few biblical figures have had the fictional or exegetical longevity of Solomon, but not all of his associations are so positive. On the one hand, he was the second king of Israel, divinely endowed with great wisdom, a just ruler, author of canonical scripture (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes [the Qoheleth], the Song of Songs, the Book of Wisdom, and credited with at least two of the Psalms), and the builder of the First Temple.<sup>12</sup> On the other, his reputation as a magician,

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<sup>10</sup> "dixit ergo rex adferte mihi gladium cumque adtulissent gladium coram rege. dividite inquit infantem vivum in duas partes et date dimidiam partem uni et dimidiam partem alteri."

<sup>11</sup> "...audivit itaque omnis Israhel iudicium quod iudicasset rex et timuerunt regem videntes sapientiam Dei esse in eo ad faciendum iudicium."

<sup>12</sup> The most comprehensive historical account is Pablo Torijano's *Solomon the Esoteric King* focuses on the figure of Solomon in Judaism and early Christianity through late antiquity. He writes: "Among the biblical figures, Solomon underwent an especially radical adaptation to the new circumstances. Somehow his character was always "problematic," since he was at the same time the wise king who built the Temple and the sinner indirectly responsible for the secession of the northern kingdom... Thus, the image which emerged from the biblical tradition was a mixed one, compounded of Solomon's quasi-divine knowledge and his sin (2)." Cizek's "La Rencontre de deux 'Sages'" also makes insightful points relevant to the discussion below. Bose's excellent article "From Exegesis to Appropriation: The Medieval Solomon" is an excellent overview of the medieval controversies in theological terms as well as an insightful analysis of the literary uses to which Solomon was put: "Thus, in a period during which the literary remains of both pagan and Christian antiquity were being dismembered, adapted, misattributed and selectively synthesized, Solomon presented not only a theological problem but also a spectrum of literary opportunities (Bose 192)."

exorcist, and astrologer is morally ambivalent at best,<sup>13</sup> and his famous harem of wives and concubines left him with a reputation for concupiscence and susceptibility to feminine wiles.<sup>14</sup> Particularly Solomon's dalliances with foreign women called into question his very salvation, as they led him to worship their foreign gods.<sup>15</sup> Conflicting opinions as to Solomon's ultimate fate surfaced early in the history of Christianity and were alive and well in Boccaccio's time, continuing to be current even through the beginning of the Reformation. Origen, who wrote a commentary and a series of homilies on the Song of Songs (both of which survive in Latin translations) claimed that he had been saved, though Tertullian condemned him. Augustine maintained an unfavorable but generally more neutral position on the question, preferring to see Solomon as a figure for the Church herself, and the goods and ills which may beset her.<sup>16</sup> The controversy resurfaced again in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but never really to be definitively settled, in theological terms at least. It is to this debate that Dante refers in *Paradiso* when Thomas Aquinas introduces Solomon:

La quinta luce, ch'è tra noi più bella,  
 spira di tale amor, che tutto 'l mondo  
 là giù ne gola di saper novella:  
 entro v'è l'alta mente u' sì profondo  
 saver fu messo, che, se 'l vero è vero,  
 a veder tanto non surse il secondo. (109-14)

The world is eager to hear of Solomon's fate, a question that for now, only Dante can settle categorically, by including Solomon among the first twelve lights of the sphere of the Sun. Dante's sympathetic and redemptive treatment of Solomon seems to be grounded in a vision of him as a pragmatic figure of political virtues.<sup>17</sup> The reasons notwithstanding, however, in

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<sup>13</sup> Cornish offers an insightful analysis of Dante's relationship to Solomon with respect to his affiliations with magic in "I miti biblici. La sapienza di Salomone e le arti magiche": "[Dante] privilegia il lato pratico del sapere. È da notare che anche la magia, per quanto fosse condannata e vilipesa, veniva comunque definite un'arte pratica, cioè una scienza applicata. E bisogna anche dire che, nonostante la sua grandissima cultura... per Dante il sapere aveva sempre uno scopo morale: la vita contemplativa non assolveva nessuno dagli obblighi della vita attiva... (393)."

<sup>14</sup> As problematic as his own self was Solomon's Song of Songs, which, without the help of allegory, seems to fall into the category of erotic love poetry. Expositions on the Song of Songs are especially instrumental in the development of allegorical exegesis for theological uses. The critical starting point on this note is the eighth chapter of Dronke's *The Medieval Poet and His World*, "The Song of Songs and Medieval Love-Lyric." Two relatively recent books that I have also found to be exceptionally helpful are Matter's *The Voice of My Beloved* and Astell's *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*.

<sup>15</sup> "rex autem Salomon amavit mulieres alienigenas multas filiam quoque Pharaonis et Moabitidas et Ammanitidas Idumeas et Sidonias et Chethheas de gentibus super quibus dixit Dominus filiis Israhel non ingrediemini ad eas neque de illis ingredientur ad vestras certissimo enim avertent corda vestra ut sequamini deos earum his itaque copulatus est Salomon ardentissimo amore. fueruntque ei uxores quasi reginae septingentae et concubinae trecentae et averterunt mulieres cor eius cumque iam esset senex depravatum est per mulieres cor eius ut sequeretur deos alienos nec erat cor eius perfectum cum Domino Deo suo sicut cor David patris eius (1 Kings 11:1-4)."

<sup>16</sup> "Apparet enim in persona hujus Salomonis et mira excellentia, et mira subversio. Quod igitur in illo diversis temporibus exstitit, prius bonum, et posterius malum, hoc in Ecclesia in isto adhuc saeculo simul uno tempore ostenditur. Nam bono illius, bonos Ecclesiae; malo autem illius, malos Ecclesiae significatos puto: tanquam in unitate unius areae, sicut in illo uno homine, bonos in granis, malos in palea; ut in unitate unius segetis, bonos in tritico, malos in zizaniis (*Contra faustum liber XXII, LXXXVIII*)."

<sup>17</sup> The single best treatment in my opinion on the work that Dante is doing with Solomon in *Paradiso* is Lauren Scancarelli Seem's article "Nolite iudicare: Dante and the Dilemma of Judgment." Pertile's *La Puttana e il Gigante* is, as usual, suggestive, particularly chapters 1 and 4.

*Paradiso* Dante takes centuries of theological debates, and (apparently) popular curiosity and reduces or resolves them in a mere six lines of poetry.

*Judgment and Interpretation in IX.9*

Amidst all of this complexity of his reception in the Middle Ages, the figure of Solomon has two principle resonances or iterations: Solomon the King and Solomon the Poet. The two manifestations reflect the two qualities with which he was primarily associated: wisdom and love, respectively. Love, that is, both earthly and divine; the earthly, excessive love of foreign women that endangered his very salvation, and the divine love that ultimately rescued him from damnation, for Dante, at least. In IX.9, Solomon is immediately associated with both those qualities. First, through the typical description of his *senno*, and then through the advice he gives Melisso: “Ama.” Despite this, it is not the Solomon associated with love we are seeing here, either earthly or divine. This Solomon is rather peculiar; he seems to share more with the cryptic philosopher than the biblical king. Giosefo and Melisso are not unaware of this. Hearing his arcane pronouncements in response to their search for advice, they leave his court feeling vaguely as though they have been hustled. After the extensive description of those coming to seek his great wisdom at the beginning, so do we as readers. “Che essendo già quasi per tutto il mondo l’altissima fama del miracoloso senno di Salamone discorsa per l’universo e il suo esser di quello liberalissimo mostratore a chiunque per esperienza ne voleva certezza, molti di diverse parti del mondo a lui per loro strettissimi e ardui bisogni concorrevano per consiglio... (11).”

The Solomon that they meet does not seem particularly “liberalissimo” in any respect. He seems unmoved (or perhaps even bored) by the “strettissimi e ardui bisogni” of the masses of people appearing before him; at any rate, he seems in something of a hurry to get through them. If we are assured he is wise, he also seems dispassionate, cold even. There is no trace of the effusive Solomon the lover, no hint (other than his command to Melisso) of the other Solomon. This is Solomon the King and Judge, the one whose wisdom exceeds all others. The only quality at stake here is his judgment, and that is beyond question. This is but one way of saying that of the two Solomon’s, Boccaccio has chosen to represent him as a philosopher, a man of great *senno* and intellect, not as a poet. The opening description of Solomon should recollect the arrival of the Queen of Sheba at his court, who came explicitly to test his wisdom. This is I think the valence of Solomon’s willingness to demonstrate his *senno* to “chiunque...ne voleva certezza”; merely to call to mind the encounter with the Queen of Sheba. Because from the following sentence, it seems that the multitudes of people who are coming to see him do not come because they doubt his wisdom, but because they are sorely in need of help. This is certainly the case with Giosefo and Melisso. We are aware of their “pressing” needs before they even meet Solomon, and his advice to them is certainly not demonstrable or testable in that moment (if ever). While his wisdom is already well-established by reputation, this is not an action or scene or speech that allows us (or Giosefo and Melisso) to judge by consequences at least whether or not the advice is wise.

Like the story of the Judgment, Solomon’s words are not themselves “true,” but have ultimately positive results which are not brought about by the literal application of his command. The tension of this story is not predicated solely upon the successful resolution of a problem, but lies also in the first of Solomon’s two pronouncements. His first decree is to cut the baby in half in order to share it between the two women, a violence that will, strictly speaking, resolve the problem, but which does not work toward a social good. The threatened violence, however, is

not the actual intent, but rather the means by which the truth is revealed. Solomon's second statement, which restores the baby to its rightful mother, acknowledges the validity of her claim, her identity revealed by her love for the child, and a concern for its well-being that exceeds selfish interest. It will be obvious that I am suggesting a parallel between the events of the Judgment and Solomon's two statements in IX.9: "Va al Ponte all'Oca" and "Ama." One more element that reflects this possibility are the names of the two characters, Giosefo and Melisso. The Hebraic resonance of Giosefo, and the anachronistic appearance of the Greek philosopher Melisso, reflect an allegorical interpretation of the Judgment still current in the Middle Ages. It originated with St. Augustine, who, notwithstanding his criticism of Solomon, saw embodied in the two mothers of the episode an allegory for the old and the new church,<sup>18</sup> in the false mother, Judaism, and in the true mother, the rebirth of the Christian church. If the parallel is Hebraic and Greek, Jewish and Christian,<sup>19</sup> then Giosefo's use of Solomon's advice is called into question. I am arguing that rather than being a rather trite, misogynistic story, IX.9 is about the dangers of interpretation (and specifically about the dangers of relying on external events and self-interest) when we do not have access to the kind of universal knowledge or wisdom required to interact with a divine absolute.<sup>20</sup> In turn, I consider this to be a metaphor for the act of reading done without the "insurance" of allegorical reading. Considered in this light, IX.9 shifts the emphasis of the story from issuing judgment (which requires divine knowledge to give) to the problem of how to interpret Solomon's words.

The rest of IX.9 can be broken into three parts: the scene at Goosebridge, the events at Giosefo's home, and the explication of the advice given to Melisso. Understanding neither the "intendimento" nor the "frutto" of Solomon's advice, Giosefo and Melisso begin their journey home. On the way, they encounter a muleteer who is viciously beating a mule who refuses to cross the bridge. When they call out to him to cease, he responds, "Voi conoscete i vostri cavalli, e io conosco il mio mulo..." and continues beating the mule until he finally moves forward and crosses the bridge. Thus, in the words of our narrator Emilia, "...il mulattiere vinse la pruova (20)."

The word *pruova* will resurface later when Giosefo "tests" the advice of Solomon on his wife, but here I want to emphasize the seemingly rational language in which this entire scene is couched. The terms of the debate seem to be grounded in logic; the muleteer's decision to beat the animal is based on his knowledge of and experience with its character, and this decision can be tested and proved. The beating is justified – the *frutto* of the decision is obvious, since the muleteer achieves his desire, and the proof, as they say, is in the pudding.

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<sup>18</sup> See for example *Sermones* 188 (*Novae patrum bibliothecae*, 445,6).

<sup>19</sup> Actually, there are a number of ways in which we could consider Giosefo and Melisso to be dichotomous: violence-love, lower-upper class (c.f. Bàrberi-Squarotti 34), vulgar senses-philosophy. The figure of Solomon himself inverts a standard dichotomy and reverses the usual hierarchy; for him, youth is met with wisdom and old age equated with folly.

<sup>20</sup> Melissus is condemned by Dante in *Mon.* III.430-3 and in the voice of Thomas Aquinas in *Paradiso* as a poor thinker: "ché quelli è tra li stolti bene a basso, / che sanza distinzione afferma e nega / ne l'un così come ne l'altro passo (XIII.115-7)." Aquinas includes him with others guilty of misinterpreting Scripture: "E di ciò sono al mondo aperte prove / Parmenide, Melisso e Brisso e molti, / li quali andaro e non sapèan dove; / sì fè Sabellio e Arrio e quelli stolti / che furon come spade a le Scritture / in render torti li diritti volti (124-9)." Dante's opinion of Melisso seems to follow Aristotle, who also criticized Melissus reasoning, but to note here is that Melisso is mentioned in Canto XIII in explicit contrast to Solomon and his wisdom. Boccaccio takes a much more favorable view of Melissus, and includes him in the *Amorosa visione*, where he is seated along with Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato as well as others Chrysippus, Thales, and Aleander of Aphrodisias.

But this seeming rationality is only on the surface. First, the muleteer is described as “oltre modo adirato (18),” reacting emotionally, rather than rationally. The two travelers seem to recognize this when they first speak to him, asking, “perché non t’ingegni tu di menarlo bene e pianamente? (19).” The muleteer’s response, forcing the mule ahead by violence, rather than leading him, reflects his inability to use his *ingegno*. When he defends his actions based on his knowledge of the animal, his words should lead us back to Emilia’s proverb in the introduction to the story: “Buon cavallo e mal cavallo vuole sprone, e buona femina e mala femina vuol bastone (7).” If women and horses are here proverbially equated, then the muleteer’s statement that he knows his mule as well as they know their horses is to say not very well at all, since it is Giosefo’s marital troubles which have brought him on this journey in the first place.

The equation of women and animals reflects both their general subservience and their mutual lack of rationality. Thus, their need to be “led” and governed by men, as Emilia repeatedly describes in the introduction. Note the proliferation of the language of law and government, one of the social aspects of man that most requires his rational and therefore highest capacities:<sup>21</sup> “...e dalle leggi essere agli uomini sottomessa e secondo la *discrezione* di quegli convenirsi *reggere e governare*...E quando a questo le *leggi*, le quali *il ben commune* riguardano...” and “...cose tutte testificanti noi avere dell’altrui *governo* bisogno. E chi ha bisogno d’essere aiutato e *governato*, ogni *ragion* vuol lui dovere essere obediante e subgeto e reverente al *governatore* suo: e cui abbiam noi *governatori* e aiutatori se non gli uomini? (3, 4 emphasis mine).” She also uses other words that emphasize rationality as well: “sana mente,” “ciascuna savia,” “estimo,” and “nel mio giudizio cape.”<sup>22</sup> And if we need anything else to clarify the link between the power structures that subjugate women to men and rational leadership, we need only turn back to Elissa’s comment in the introduction to the *Decameron* which structures the choice of the brigata in the first place: “Veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo e senza l’ordine loro rade volte riesce alcuna nostra opera a laudevole fine... 74).”<sup>23</sup> As the head may stand in for rational government in the political body, so here are men the rational and intellectual, natural leaders of women.

This emphasis on governance and leading, combined with the muleteer’s inability to “menarlo bene” turns the head from the thing which leads through rationality into the thing which drives with brute force. What we see here is not the logical *pruova* that Giosefo takes it to be, but a descent into bestial action, the forfeiture by men of their natural position as rational leaders. According to Emilia, women may be like horses, but here it is men who act as beasts, driven by emotion and frustration, rather than taking a place of leadership. And the problem with mad bestiality, if we also remember our *Ethics*, is that it compromises that very quality which is most proper to and therefore highest in man. Looked at from this perspective, the events at

<sup>21</sup> “Patet igitur quod ultimum de potentia ipsius humanitatis est potentia sive virtus intellectiva. Et quia potentia ista per unum hominem seu per aliquam particularium comunitatum superius distinctarum tota simul in actum reduci non potest, necesse est multitudinem esse in humano genere, per quam quidem tota potentia hec actuatur... Potentia etiam intellectiva, de qua loquor, non solum est ad formas universales aut speties, sed etiam per quandam extensionem ad particulares: unde solet dici quod intellectus speculativus extensione fit practicus, cuius finis est agere atque facere. Quod dico propter agibilia, que politica prudentia regulantur, et propter factibilia, que regulantur arte: que omnia speculationi ancillantur tanquam optimo ad quod humanum genus Prima Bonitas in esse produxit; ex quo iam innotescit illud *Politice*: intellectu, scilicet, vigentes aliis naturaliter principari (*De monarchia*, I.iii.7-10).”

<sup>22</sup> And the referent of all of these phrases is women. Even the first one, “sana mente,” beyond the mere use of a feminine noun, is prefaced by an address to the “amabili donne.”

<sup>23</sup> If the connection between these two statements seems tentative, it was apparent enough to Branca, who cites IX.9 straightway in the notes to Elissa’s statement in the introduction.

Goosebridge do not vindicate an interpretation of advice that leads to violence (cut the child in half), but instead reflect the absence of *ingegno* and the failure of the very *senno* by which this novella is framed in the figure of Solomon.

Not so, however, does Giosefo “read” the events at Goosebridge.<sup>24</sup> Two important things happen prior to the arrival of the two travelers at Giosefo’s house that highlight the interpretive problems represented by the muleteer. The first occurs when Giosefo turns to one of the men (who, coincidentally, is sitting “a capo del ponte”) and asks the name of the place. It is only when he hears that it is called Ponte all’Oca that he even makes the association between the “parable” of the muleteer he has just seen, and the advice given to him by Solomon (“...così si ricordò delle parole di Salamone...” 22), of which apparently he has not even been thinking. The interpretative force required to make sense of Solomon’s words is an arbitrary event that takes place at the bridge, a scene that must be understood as prophetic in order for it to be meaningful. Giosefo is unable to understand the wisdom of Solomon using his intellect; it is not an internal interaction between his *senno* and the words spoken to him by Solomon. Rather, Giosefo’s interpretative ability is limited to the explication of events that are beyond his control. No interpretation, here, without external assistance.

So Giosefo can only read in this way, through the use of events which are naturalized and endowed with meaning. Even as contemporary readers of the *Decameron*, we can see that the only way in which these events can have the meaning that Giosefo ascribes to them is if we are in a world that is divinely ordered – if Solomon were privy to a divine prescience that knew Giosefo would inevitably arrive at the bridge in the moment at which this scene took place, *and* that he would also be able to understand the meaning of those events. That is to say, if the we are in a world divinely and immutably ordered by its Author, the overdetermined world of allegory.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the problem of needing external assistance to interpret the words of Solomon, there is also the continued problem for the novella of whether or not Giosefo’s understanding of the advice can be successfully tested. Again, at first glance, beating his wife seems to have the desired results. But it is not necessarily Solomon’s advice that is put into effect (unless, again, we are willing to assume that within the *Decameron* we are in a highly allegorical world). This becomes obvious even before Giosefo has returned home. He tells Melisso: “Or ti dio io, compagno, che il consiglio datomi da Salamone potrebbe esser buono e vero, per ciò che assai manifestamente conosco che io non sapeva battere la donna mia: ma questo mulattiere m’ha mostrato quello che io abbia a fare (30).” Now that they have witnessed this quotidian event at Goosebridge, *now* Giosefo considers that Solomon’s advice may indeed be useful.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> I do think it is notable that Melisso does not engage with Giosefo’s interpretation of Solomon’s advice to him. Here he is silent, at Giosefo’s house later, Melisso merely declares that he will not interfere with Giosefo’s actions in his own house, and finally before leaving, he and Giosefo are both described by the narrator as praising the advice of Solomon, which they had previously not understood. Even in the final interpretation of Solomon’s advice to Melisso, we do not hear his own voice, merely that of the “savio uomo” and the narrator.

<sup>25</sup> Instead we are, as a number of Boccaccio scholars have already noted, in a world where different narrative voices constantly come into conflict with each other, as their rhetorical goals and ideological positions diverge: “Boccaccio’s artistry lies not in adherence to any one supreme manner of narration but rather in his ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing (Booth 16).” What Booth describes as the “supreme manner of narration” is what I am here aligning to the self-interpreting, coherent nature of the world of allegory; very much, I think, not the case of the very contradictory interpretive positions of IX.9.

<sup>26</sup> The use of the conditional is marked, as though Giosefo is still not completely persuaded. Like Thomas, he will need proof. Unfortunately, what he is proving is not the validity of the advice, but the utility of his own interpretation of it.

conclusion that he draws (I need to learn how to beat my wife properly) does not reflect, however, on Solomon's advice, but on his own self-serving and self-interested interpretation of scene at the bridge. On the one hand, this seems to be the most literal of readings (I should beat my wife like that mule is being beaten), on the other, it is the essence of allegory (the relationship between the muleteer and the mule represents my relationship with my wife, therefore the treatment the mule receives is the treatment she that she deserves. The problem of self-interest in interpretation is one that we will return to in IX.10, but again here note the need for external guidance in interpretation – the *muleteer* “m’ha mostrato.” But the most important thing that happens in these few brief lines is Giosefo’s assumption that the advice he was given and the arbitrary events at the bridge are interchangeable and the same. Unless we as readers are willing to make the same assumption, we must acknowledge that Giosefo has traded the wisdom of Solomon for that of a vulgar muleteer.<sup>27</sup>

This casts a new light on the remaining events of the novella. Arriving at Giosefo’s house, the travelers give instructions to his wife<sup>28</sup> as to how to prepare dinner, which she does not follow. An argument ensues between the two of them, and Giosefo turns to Melisso, reminding him of what they have seen at Goosebridge, warning him not to interfere, and to remember “[la] risposta che ci fece il mulattiere quando del suo mulo c’increbbe.”<sup>29</sup> (26) Rather than reference any of the earlier events, or to express an opinion as to the actions of Giosefo or his *donna*, Melisso simply responds, “Io sono in casa tua, dove dal tuo piacere io non intendo di mutarmi (27).”

In the scene which follows, Giosefo severely beats his wife, who starts by yelling, then moves on to threatening, and finally under duress begins to beg him to stop: “...ma veggendo che per tutto ciò Giosefo non ristava, già tutta rotta cominciò a chieder mercé per Dio che egli non l’uccidesse, dicendo oltre a ciò di mai dal suo piacer non partirsi. Giosefo per tutto questo non rifinava, anzi con più furia l’una volta che l’altra... (29).” The excessive cruelty of the beating is reflected not only in the language here,<sup>30</sup> and in the fact that Giosefo continues to beat

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<sup>27</sup> In an article on the *poeta theologus*, Witt writes of Boccaccio’s statements on allegory in *De genealogia*: “The difficulty of the language protected [the poets’] message from corruption at the hands of the vulgar and made their meaning all the more precious because of the labor of interpretation required (545).” Though I disagree with his sense of Boccaccio’s relationship to the source of poetic knowledge and/or truth, I do think that here the cryptic and/or prophetic nature of Solomon’s pronouncements calls into question the deliberately vulgar origin of the “explication” of “Va al Ponte all’Oca.”

<sup>28</sup> His wife is unnamed. In the beginning, while discussing his “troubles” with Melisso, Giosefo uses the word *moglie* and then *femina*, but from the time he has his epiphany about the meaning of the events at Goosebridge, until the final line of the story (where she is referred to again as *la ritrosa* – the word that only appears in one other place in the *Decameron* IX.7, the novella which Emilia identifies as having prompted her tale) she is referred to only as *la donna*, even in a direct address to her from Giosefo. This is repeated ten times, and only three of those times is *donna* followed by a modifying adjective. First, when Giosefo understands that he has not previously known how to properly beat “la donna mia”, and the final two times, where she is referred to as “la buona donna” and then again as “la donna cattivella.” Branca glosses *cattivella* in this context as *miserella*, as she certainly is. But the most interesting, I think, is the application of *buona*, which does not refer to the change in her behavior, as one might expect: “...in brieve niuno osso né alcuna parte rimase nel dosso della buona donna, che macerata non fosse (30).” Again, we must remember here that this is the narrative voice of Emilia speaking, who seems to be here reiterating what she suggested in the introduction: the only good woman is a beaten and broken one.

<sup>29</sup> Our thoughts should probably return to this *c’increbbe* further along when *la donna* begs God for mercy.

<sup>30</sup> I do think the brutality of this scene contrasts explicitly with Emilia’s description in the introduction as to how nature herself dictates the inferior position of women: “...la natura assai apertamente cel mostra, la quale ci ha fatte ne’ corpi delicate e morbide, negli animi timide e paurose, nelle menti benigne e pietose, e hacci date le corporali

her after she is penitent and vowing now to oppose his wishes any longer, but also in the very length and duration of the scene. In a novella where the trip from Jerusalem to Antioch takes place in the space of a few words, and even Solomon speaks in clipped sentences, the duration of this one is notable. The only other scene so lingered over is the description of the beating of the mule, as though the narrator is enjoying the descent into violence. Here again too, Giosefo seems to be ruled by emotion rather than rationality, as was the muleteer. As this violence escalates, Giosefo does not stop even after his wife promises to change: "...né prima ristette che egli fu stanco...(30)." Even the muleteer, presumably, stopped beating the mule once it had crossed the bridge.

This scene of violence finally concluded, Giosefo turns to Melisso and comments, "Doman vedrem che pruova avrà fatto il consiglio del 'Va al Ponte all'Oca' (31)."<sup>31</sup> The contrast between the reversion here to referring to Solomon's advice as it was actually given ("Go to Goosebridge") and the preceding excessive description of the beating highlights the disparity between the *consiglio* as actually given, and the interpretation that Giosefo ascribes to it. This is all the more notable, as prior to this scene Giosefo describes Solomon's advice solely in the terms of the muleteer. This reminder to Melisso not to interfere, despite what he might naturally feel or sense to be the case about the events which will ensue, elides the fact (both for Melisso and the reader) that the gloss of the muleteer is not necessarily the advice of Solomon, but merely Giosefo's personal interpretation of it. Thus, both the prelude to the scene and the conclusion refer theoretically to the same thing (i.e. "il consiglio di Salamone"), the first does so in the terms that Giosefo wants to interpret it, in such a way as to prevent objections to his actions, and the second does so in a rhetorical move that glosses over this change and reverts back to the authoritative source that serves as a seal of legitimization for the events of the *novella*. When Giosefo and Melisso arise the next morning, they find everything in order according to his wishes, they attribute this result to the success of the advice received from Solomon. Before thinking in more detail about the conclusion of Giosefo's troubles "...per la qual cosa il consiglio prima da lor male inteso sommamente lodarono (33)": let us examine the few remaining lines of the *novella*.

It is clear that despite the accidental paring of Giosefo and Melisso as they travel for advice to Solomon, the novella focuses primarily on Giosefo. Melisso rarely speaks directly<sup>32</sup>, and as I mentioned above does not actively participate in the act of interpretation performed by Giosefo which constitutes the bulk of Emilia's story. It is only in the very final lines Melisso returns home by himself to investigate Solomon's advice to him. Apparently, despite the moment

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forze leggieri, le voci piacevoli e i movimenti de membri soavi... (4)." The particular emphasis on the weakness of the physical female body makes the violence directed at it here seem even more excessive.

<sup>31</sup> I think this echoes the jeering comments directed at Cavalcanti by Betto's brigata in VI.9: "...quando tu avrai trovato che Idio non sia, che avrai fatto? (757)." While the identification may seem a bit tenuous, this future perfect construction of *fare* occurs very infrequently in the *Decameron*. Beyond these two instances, it appears only at VII.4, 12; VIII.8, 14; VIII.9, 58; IX.1, 23; and X.7, 14, and in all of these cases, it merely expresses the order of future events, as opposed to the hypothetical future results of action (or perhaps, more on point, thought), implied in IX.9 and VI.9. In both of these cases, there seems to be a tension between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. The philosophical life, represented in the figures of Solomon and Cavalcanti, is fundamentally misconstrued by Giosefo and Betto's *brigata*, both of whom cannot see past the pragmatic limits of action and demonstrable result or utility. In this way, the possibilities of interpretation are restricted to the provable.

<sup>32</sup> Melisso speaks directly only twice: first, to describe to Giosefo the problem for which he is seeking advice at the beginning, and second, to promise not to interfere with Giosefo's actions in his own house. At 19, his speech is presumably bound up with Giosefo's as they both scold the muleteer, and they are both indirectly reported as praising the wisdom of Solomon at 33.



in which he and Giosefo praise the change in his wife's behavior due to Solomon's advice, and the extended process through which that advice has been "explicated," Melisso is still at a loss to understand Solomon's command to him ("Ama") despite the fact that this seems much more transparent than the advice given to Giosefo. Our attention must be drawn as well to the competing nature of Solomon's two instructions as interpreted by the pair: act with violence and act with love.

If this *novella* has been a lesson in how to interpret (rather than, as I am suggesting, in how not to do so), it seems to have been completely lost on our philosopher Melisso. Upon his return home, he has to find a "savio uomo" to whom he repeats Solomon's advice. The response given to him, and upheld by Emilia's final statement, is so trite and trivial as to be baffling. It is no more than a recapitulation of his question (Come posso essere amato?) plus the answer given him by Solomon: Ama, e sarai amato. Not only is Melisso incapable of interpreting this advice on his own (as Giosefo needs external events to explicate Solomon's words, Melisso needs the assistance of another, apparently more *savio* man than he himself is), but the interpretation he receives is such as to be transparent to a child. Compounding this, is the sheer conventionality of the Melisso part of this story. Branca notes but a few examples of this "sentenza diffusissima e nei classici e nei moralisti medievali (1099, n.6)." Surely we must understand this conclusion as a shocking lack of interpretive ability.

This somewhat frustrating sense of simplicity is also echoed in the final sentence of the novella: "Cosí adunque fu gastigata la ritrosa, e il giovane amando fu amato." The finality of the statement gives it the semblance of an interpretive seal, mirroring that of parable or morality tale. Despite its rather unsatisfactory feel, however, it is apparently still tempting to view this as a (or even possibly the) valid reading of IX.9 in terms of the *Decameron* as a whole. But we need to remember, first, that it is Emilia who is speaking here, concluding her own story, and that voice is not to be confused with an authoritative, authorial voice. As I began to indicate above, her rhetorical capacity, as well as her motivation, is clearly called into question when looked at in the larger context of Day IX.

Yet the unsatisfactory feeling of this conclusion does not entirely depend on our analysis of Emilia's rhetorical intent; it also present in the logical content of the final statement. Despite the paradigmatic essentialism, this sentence does not actually refer particularly well back to the actual events of the text. While the novella concludes with the "savio uomo" praising Solomon's advice to Melisso, we do not actually see the success of loving and being loved in return that is put forth in Emilia's summary, indeed as seems to be emphasized by the future "sarai amato" at the end of the penultimate sentence. The first phrase too ("Cosí adunque fu gastigata la ritrosa...") seems a bit at odds with the primary emphasis of the novella; or rather, it seems to reflect more Emilia's intent in telling the story, rather than the content of the story itself.<sup>33</sup> That is, the focus of the novella, and indeed of Giosefo as he describes it in the beginning, is "curing" his wife of her stubbornness. He wants to change her behavior ("...dalle sue ritrosie ritrar poteva") and this is actually what he considers to be the *pruova* of Solomon's advice. But here in this final sentence the emphasis is on how his wife was punished, rather than on how she was

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<sup>33</sup> "Throughout her *novella*, as in her introduction to it, Emilia's strategy is to provide universalizing statements no matter how partial or questionable the evidence. Strangely enough, the protagonists of her story use the evidence that violence is successful in order to reaffirm the wisdom of Solomon; it does not occur to them to question their interpretation of his pronouncements.... These gaps and inconsistencies are no barrier to Emilia's universalizing statements. Hers is a layering of different texts apparently to be read differently by different readers, each of whom derives a partial lesson that, according to the narrator, reaffirms the coherence of the entire system (Miguel 151)."

changed. This seems to reflect Emilia's purpose in her introduction, rather than the actual content of this story, and in fact the same word appears there, that in her judgment "...tutte quelle esser degne...di rigido e aspro *gastigamento* che dall'esser piacevoli, benivole e pieghevoli, come la natura, l'usanza e le leggi voglion, si partono (6, emphasis mine)."

The general premise of the reading that I have offered here does not fundamentally differ from that of Miguel in one of the very few extended treatments of IX.9 in *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, although her primary focus is on the gender issues of the *novella*, rather than its own thematization of interpretation.<sup>34</sup> The focus of her entire book, is the interaction of the contradictory rhetorics of the various narrators of the *Decameron*.<sup>35</sup> This applies not only to members of the *brigata*, as Miguel so clearly demonstrates, but in IX.9, applies, I think to the characters of the story as well. Another way of saying this is that the *Decameron* refuses to engage in any kind of totalizing reading, instead playing narrators and characters against each other as both writers and readers.<sup>36</sup> But we search in vain for a coherent, authorial voice to tell us what position to take. Instead, we are left with an invitation to engage in judgment on our own. More, perhaps than invited, even, to read the *Decameron* is to be forced into an act of judgment by the act of reading. In his *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*, Mazzotta makes the claim that "the *Decameron*, without ever leaving the world of reality...launches us into the realm of the imagination where we confront the traps of delusion characters construct for others and, consequently, for themselves (6,7)." If, for imagination, we may substitute interpretation, we begin to see why the responsibility for the text's meaning shifts from author to reader.

And so we return to the conclusion of the episode with Giosefo's wife, where given her changed behavior, Giosefo and Melisso "...il consiglio prima da lor male inteso sommamente lodarono." The description of them as having *male inteso*, not withstanding whether it means that they have understood badly, or merely not understood at all, still contrasts with the stronger language describing their confusion as they leave Solomon's court: "non potendo d'esse comprendere né intendimento né frutto alcuno...". Or the phrasing could easily be "now understanding Solomon's advice", or "Solomon's wisdom thus demonstrated," emphasizing the moment of clarity, rather than raising the specter of interpretive problems. Regardless, it demonstrates the possibility that Giosefo has misunderstood the advice of Solomon, either at the beginning of the *novella*, when he has not comprehended it at all, or in his evaluation of the events at Goosebridge, and his application of them to his wife. This polemicism of narrative

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<sup>34</sup> That is to say that the *Decameron* is involved in the process of training its own readers, an idea, again, raised by a number of people in different contexts, e.g. Marcus who writes, "My task here will be to answer those who would accuse Boccaccio of an amoral exercise in aesthetics, and peripherally to suggest some weaknesses in a strictly thematic approach, by showing how the writer manipulates his genre in polemic ways, using the *novella* form to interpret and evaluate its own content. Without directly positing a moral stance, Boccaccio embodies his teachings in the very mode of his narration (8)." We can certainly retain the idea of the form of the narrative polemic serving as a perspective for evaluating content, while still being suspicious of the simply elision of aesthetics with amorality and didacticism with morality.

<sup>35</sup> "Fundamentally, I read the *Decameron* not as a work that dictates which sort of narratives will be best for women, but rather as a work that invites us to reflect on how narratives can be used for good or ill. These two reading stances imply two different types of rhetoric's. In the former, the prime focus of a rhetorical inquiry would be Author-centered: we would ask questions such as 'Of what does the Author wish to persuade us?' The latter way of reading, to which I subscribe, places much more responsibility on the reader, whose active engagement with the text is required to produce meaning (Miguel 4)."

<sup>36</sup> "Thus if Boccaccio's style is 'realistic' its realism consists at least as much in foregrounding the 'reality' of different narrative perspectives that is the 'reality' of literature itself, than in giving a 'mimetic' representation of 'reality' (Ascoli "Boccaccio's Auerbach" 385)."

voice that I have tried to illustrate above also leaves us as readers uncertain whether or not we have understood Solomon's advice, or the problems with Giosefo's interpretation of it, or Emilia's own motivations in telling the story, or how this story fits the scheme of the day, or indeed, how it is situated within the entirety of the *Decameron*.

The problem with Solomon's pronouncements is that they are infinitely interpretable. Elsewhere, this might cause them to descend into meaninglessness, but because of who he is (the embodiment of wisdom and judgment), the meaning simply becomes infinitely expandable. In Boccaccio's version of the judgment, the events make sense of the *consiglio*, rather than the other way around. It changes the situation from one in which a pronouncement anticipates events (understanding that the baby's real mother will want to spare its life), thus demonstrating the wisdom, to one in which the events that follow are required to interpret the pronouncement. It suggests that meaning inheres in interpretation (reading) rather than language itself (writing), that suggests that anything can be made meaningful, and that interpretation is arbitrary.

The problem, given this multiplicity, then is how to arrive at a "correct" interpretation. In an allegorical world (the world of Scripture or the Song of Songs, the world of the *Divine Comedy*), the guarantor of meaning is the text's divine origin, either as the word of God or by those divine qualities in which the authoritative poet has a share. Here though, Boccaccio becomes a kind of Solomon hovering over his text; his role as author functions in the same way as Solomon's reputation for wisdom – it's the authoritative stamp that prevents the text from degenerating into meaninglessness while still leaving it open to an almost infinite and potentially arbitrary interpretation. Boccaccio's refusal to self-interpret *à la* Dante, sets up the problem of meaning differently by suspending it within the text, which becomes a place for contemplation, prior to the end of reading and the final act of judgment, asking, or rather requiring, the reader to do his own interpreting. Judgment, in the *Decameron*, is conclusion (though not conclusive) and the *conclusionone dell'autore* refuses to give us a final, authoritative answer. As is the *brigata*, we are required to move from a *vita contemplativa* to a *vita attiva*, which our author cannot create for us. To offset the dangers of an infinitely interpretable text, he seems willing to suggest only a sort of apophatic knowledge of how not to interpret, rather than how to.

### *Cavalcanti between Boccaccio and Dante: VI.9*

In the search to understand the *Decameron's* relationship to the *Commedia*, few of Boccaccio's *novelle* offer as clear and direct an intertextual relationship to the *Commedia* as the ninth story of the sixth Day, in which appears Dante's fellow poet and "first-friend," Guido Cavalcanti.<sup>37</sup> Like the other stories of the Day, this one, told by the queen Elissa, is quite brief. To situate the tale, we are introduced to Betto Brunelleschi, another historical Florentine and contemporary of Dante's, famous as one of the leaders of the Black Guelfs, but also known for his hot-temper and inclination to violence. At the time, Elissa tells us, it was common for Florentines of this class to form into bands or cohorts who regularly entertained each other and rode together throughout the city on important occasions. The *brigata* surrounding Betto is particularly desirous of counting Cavalcanti among its number, less on account of his proficiency

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<sup>37</sup> Durling's "Boccaccio on Interpretation: Guido's Escape" remains the must-read essay on VI.9; to my mind, this deeply insightful essay offers one of the most nuanced treatments of Boccaccio as a reader to date. See also especially Ascoli's "Auerbach fra gli Epicurei."

in philosophy and the natural sciences, as Boccaccio snidely notes, than his fortune and extravagant hospitality.

But Cavalcanti will have nothing to do with Betto's group, which they correctly understand as a snub. One day, therefore, when this band is out riding in the city, spying Cavalcanti alone walking among the marble sarcophagi near the Florentine baptistery, they begin to taunt and tease him, saying in particular, "Guido, tu rifiuti d'esser di nostra brigata; ma ecco, quando tu avrai trovato che Idio non sia, che avrai fatto? (11)," a reference to Guido's supposed Epicureanism and refutation of the immortality of the soul, at stake in Canto X of *Inferno*. Guido, who is quite cornered in the narrow space responds simply: "Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace (12)." Then, with a great leap, he jumps over the neighboring sarcophagus and escapes the band. The group is left puzzling over his strange words, until Betto explains to them that standing among the sarcophagi they are in the house of the dead, and that by calling the place "their house," Guido has liked them to the dead for being uncouth and unlearned. This explanation has the dual effect of liberating Guido from future harassment and of cementing Betto's reputation for perception and sophistication.

Both the sarcophagi amongst which Guido is trapped and the repeated references to his associations with Epicureanism make obvious the intertext of this *novella* with *Inferno* X, where in the circle of the heretics, Dante and Vergil encounter two famous Epicureans: Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, Guido's father. These spirits who "l'anima col corpo morta fanno (15)" are lying in open sepulchers where they will be joined by their bodies after Judgment Day. When Cavalcante recognizes Dante, he asks him why his son, Guido, is not with him also. Dante replies with a famously ambiguous tercet: "Da me stesso non vegno: colui ch'attende là per qui mi mena forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno." Taken aback by Dante's use of the past tense, Cavalcante assumes mistakenly that his son Guido is dead, and faints back into his tomb.

Without actually locating Guido's spirit in hell, *Inferno* strongly implies that he himself will be damned for the same heretical beliefs as his father. Even the most generous reading of this passage at least casts doubt upon Cavalcanti's spiritual well-being and indelibly associates his reputation with Epicureanism.<sup>38</sup> This affiliation is the impetus Elissa's story on Day VI of the *Decameron*. But though here we again see Guido among the tombs, the *novella* is clearly opposes, in some sense, the scene of Dante's hellish encounter with his father: if Dante's account damns him, then Boccaccio's literally sets him free as Guido escapes over the sarcophagus. Yet despite the obviously Dantean overtones of VI.9, criticism of the *novella* has hesitated to affirm the ways in which these two accounts of Guido Cavalcanti are antithetical. When the *Commedia* has been explored as a subtext in this story, it has largely been understood as a playful or humorous response which reveals a more positive attitude toward Cavalcanti on Boccaccio's part, but which does not involve a serious engagement with or criticism of Dante.

It is all too easy to see VI.9 as an amusing rather than weighty story; like the others in Day VI, the brief verbal retort it features easily gives the impression of frivolity. But for all the lightness of the *motti*, the theme of the day specifies that these witticisms must serve the purpose of avoiding "perdita o pericolo o scorno." Cavalcanti's story, for all its brevity, is not without

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<sup>38</sup> Opinions as to Dante's intent and motivations vary of course; I am inclined, with Baranski, to read *Inferno* X's treatment of Cavalcanti less charitably than some: "Dante's attack against Guido's religious orthodoxy is almost certainly without foundation, because no independent evidence exists to corroborate it; it is a carefully crafted calumny, a memorable and disconcerting instance of the growing bitterness of his feelings toward his former *primo amico* (Barański, "Alquanto" 289)."

such dangers. A threat of real violence hangs over the tale. Though no harm comes to him, Guido is outnumbered and physically trapped prior to his athletic escape. Nor is the threat of harm limited to him. The initial description of convivial bands of friends hosting each other in their homes, is followed by a description of these *brigante* riding together through the city, dressed alike, especially "...quanto alcuna lieta novella di vittoria o d'altro fosse venuta nella città (6)." This conjures not merely images of celebration, but of uncontrolled and unrestrained bands that might molest those citizens out in the streets, an possibility all too in keeping with the turmoil of *trecento* Florence. The struggles for power between magnate families through much of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries led to a permanent unrest in Florence where feuds that began over little more than an insult or street disagreement could escalate into a virtual civil war. Cavalcanti himself attacked Corso Donati in the street after an assassination attempt;<sup>39</sup> the same Betto Brunelleschi who appears here murdered Donati, and was in turn later killed by his family.<sup>40</sup> Thus the possibility of personal violence directed against Guido is a real social and political threat to the larger citizenry as well.

Like Dante's encounter with Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti in hell, and the possibility it raises that Cavalcanti himself will end there as well, Elissa's story is also situated within a framework of risk. That VI.9 is intellectually engaged with *Inferno*, not simply making reference to it in an ancillary way, is also reinforced by the way that Cavalcanti is introduced as "Guido di messer Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti. This invocation of his father should immediately recall the infernal scene and Cavalcante's pathetic and moving concern for the well-being of his son. Even more relevant, however, is the description of Betto and his *brigata*, and their opinion of Guido: "...e credeva egli co' suoi compagni che ciò avvenisse per ciò che Guido alcuna volta speculando molto abstratto dagli uomini divenia; e per ciò che egli alquanto tenea della oppinione degli epicuri si diceva tralla gente volgare che queste sue speculazioni erano solo in cercare se trovar si potesse che Iddio non fosse (9)." Betto and the rest are unable to understand the true object of Guido's philosophical abstractions; like the "gente volgare" they can only categorize him as an Epicurean, concerned solely with disproving the existence of God. Given the systematic references to *Inferno* X, however, this description ought also be understood to identify Dante himself with this vulgar crowd. The damage caused by Dante's imputation of heresy to Guido (for which there is no historical evidence pre-dating *Inferno*) is similarly equated with the threat of violence in this novella. If Dante be not disingenuous, then here he is clearly accused of being a poor student of philosophy and a poor reader of Cavalcanti, no better than Betto Brunelleschi. (The fact that it is Brunelleschi who appears as Cavalcanti's antagonist may imply an especially stinging rebuke, since Dante addressed a sonnet to Brunelleschi, "Messer Brunetto, questa pulzelletta," that mocks him for being a poor interpreter who cares more for food and wine than poetry.)

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<sup>39</sup> Watson seems to be one of the few who note that Elissa's rather nonchalant description of these bands is at odds with the darker, historical reality. He writes: "Such bands proliferated in Florence during the late Dugento as the chronicler Dino Compagni records. They were, in fact, instruments of factional strife of the most vicious kind... When Elissa speaks of the armed bands of a generation before, she argues that they were merely a charming fashion... Nowhere in her exposition does she reveal that these groups were also gangs of thugs ("On Seeing" 304,5)." Watson also remarks upon Boccaccio's characterization of Cavalcanti as an innocent bystander in this story, though Compagni and others, describe him as violent and choleric as well. The fact that Cavalcanti in VI.9 seems to be more a peaceable victim than antagonist only serves to heighten the sense of danger.

<sup>40</sup> Dino Compagni at least considered Betto to have been responsible for the murder of Donati. His *Cronica* gives a contemporary account of the turmoil of Florence in Dante's time.

In these terms, Dante understands Cavalcanti no better than the gang that corners him in the street. By aligning Betto with the poet, Boccaccio makes it explicit that what Guido escapes at the end of the *novella* is, in fact, Dante's rough treatment of him in *Inferno*. Viewed in this light, Guido's cryptic statement to the *brigata*, "in your house you can say to me what you like," takes on a very different hue, and becomes an critique of the uses of authorship. The power that Dante has over the memory and reputation of historical figures in the *Commedia* is here called into question. Here, Boccaccio has Guido "speak" for himself, or perhaps, speak *up* for himself, otherwise unable to respond to Dante's use of him in *Inferno*. Guido's statement with reference to the memory of himself that has, thanks to Dante, permeated culture, then becomes, effectively, in your *text* you can say to me what you like.

But why should this defense of Cavalcanti be so heavily veiled in intertextuality, and why should Cavalcanti's response be so cryptic in Boccaccio's text? I believe the reason that Cavalcanti's vindicating speech in this Day of *motti* and *battute* in the *Decameron* still exemplifies such arcane expression relates not only to the complexity of Cavalcanti's own poetry, but equally to Dante's treatment of him in *Inferno X*. Many reasons have been offered for Dante's critical attitude toward Cavalcanti, including the waning of their friendship, their political disputes, a genuine accusation of heresy, or a competition for poetic reputation. One criticism that I believe is present within the text of *Inferno X* is of the ambiguity generated by overly subtly writing lacking in philosophical clarity. In particular, the complex line which Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti misunderstands to mean that his son is dead, I think is meant to be reflective and critical of the complexity of Cavalcanti's own poetry. The fact that the entire canto centers around problems of misunderstanding and miscommunication, not only in Dante's discussion with Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, but also in the exchanges between Dante and Vergil, suggests that what is truly on trial is Cavalcanti's lack of mastery in authorship. This canto reflects, one of Dante's great anxieties in writing – how to prevent misinterpretation of his work. Not, by any means, to suggest that Dante is not a complicated or subtle poet, but that the way in which he works to constrain meaning in his poem, to ensure that it will be free from the possibilities of misinterpretation, is a fundamental part of his construction of himself as author, integral to his poetics. What we see demonstrated in *Inferno X* is an objection to Cavalcanti's failure to be masterful, to the openness of his poetry to (mis)interpretation.

While it damns Cavalcanti in *Inferno*, in the *Decameron* is its this very ambiguity that saves him, providing the moment for his escape while Betto and his group are puzzling over the meaning of his seemingly irrelevant, if not crazy (*smemorato*) speech. Perhaps this is Boccaccio's sense of justice ironically displayed, in which by suggesting that Cavalcanti will have a place among the sepulchers of the heretics, Dante only opens the possibility that he himself has a place among the intellectually unenlightened. More importantly, however, VI.9 represents the triumph of Boccaccio's own poetics, an insistence upon multiplicity of interpretation, comfort with a lack of ultimate authorial control, and an insistence that the reader bring his own judgment to bear upon the work. For the *Decameron's* critics, Cavalcanti's words have proved in their ambiguity almost endlessly interpretable, which is perhaps the point after all.

Such a suggestion appears to be at odds with the conclusion of the *novella*, where Betto confidently spells out the significance of Cavalcanti's phrase:

Gli smemorati siete voi, se voi non l'avete inteso: egli ci ha detta onestamente in poche parole la maggior villania del mondo, per ciò che, se voi riguarderete bene,

queste arche sono le case de' morti, per ciò che in esse si pongono e dimorano i morti; le quali egli dice che sono nostra casa, a dimostrarci che noi e gli altri uomini idioti e non litterati siamo, a comparazion di lui e degli altri uomini scienziati, peggio che uomini morti, e per ciò, qui essendo, noi siamo a casa nostra. (14)

Betto's glib production of this gloss gives him thereafter the reputation among his friends for sophistication and subtlety. I suggest, however, that the *Decameron* not only gives us room to see the ways in which Betto's interpretation is facile and certainly not definitive, but it actively insists that we do so.<sup>41</sup> Like IX.9, the conclusion of this story is an invitation to us as readers to think about what happens when interpretation takes place, to consider how many different modes and possibilities of interpretation there are (even as many interpretations as there are readers, as Boccaccio reminds us elsewhere),<sup>42</sup> as well as what the motivations and results of acts of interpretation mean. The need to see behind or through interpretation, as it were, is about a kind of morality of reading, that is, about our responsibilities as readers not merely to accept what is given us, whether it is represented authoritatively or no. Betto's interpretation of Guido's words feels correct particularly because of its placement within the *novella*; that is, literary structure implies authoritative weight. In the balance, however, are the narrative tensions that the *Decameron* should already have taught us to acknowledge, especially the distance between Boccaccio, his authorial persona, and the proliferation of the narrative voices of the story tellers. By Day VI, we should be learning as readers how we must weigh these different elements against each other, and how meaning lies in the tension produced by these conflicting perspectives. Having only just escaped the weight of Dante's judgment, Guido should not so easily fall under that of Betto Brunelleschi. Far from being definitive, the interpretation offered at the end of VI.9 is merely one of many, offered by a single character (and a compromised one at that), within a single story, only a part of a long work of conflicting and competing narratives and voices, all of which raise questions that its author refuses to definitively settle. Hopefully, by this point in the *Decameron*, the reader has learned to reject the semblance of transcendent meaning, especially when supported by merely formal or structural evidence.

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<sup>41</sup> Above, my reading has been that this *novella* expresses reticence, to say the least, at Dante's masterful construction of authorship. See Durling on the shortcomings of Betto's interpretation. His article understands the entire story as concerned thematically and conceptually with interpretation; my own emphasis on Boccaccio's interest in reading explains my sympathy with his insightful treatment of Cavalcanti's appearance in the *Decameron*: "The *novella* of Guido Cavalcanti, too, is a little model of the interpretive situation, and it is also clearly about the reader of the *Decameron*, who is being cautioned not to be one of messer Betto's *brigata*, is being invited to see further than messer Betto. It shows messer Betto as making the essential beginning of interpretation by understanding the root metaphor of Guido's joke and by applying it to himself and the *brigata*, but it also shows him as devoid of any desire to *follow* Guido: he accepts the condemnation and does not fundamentally change. As we have seen, the *novella* convey a strong suggestion that the intertextuality of the *Decameron* with the *Commedia* is an important key to its interpretation, and – since messer Betto and company are shown trying (unsuccessfully) to close things off – Guido's escape suggests that the meanings of a text will always elude such critics: to follow the meanings, interpretation must be light... ("Boccaccio on Interpretation" 291)."

<sup>42</sup> "Veteres quippe, relictis licteris suis nominibus insignitis, in viam universe carnis abiere, sensusque ex eis iuxta iudicium post se liquere nascentium, quorum quor sunt capita, fere tot inveniuntur iudicia. Nec mirabile. Videmus enim divini voluminis verba ab ipsa lucida, certa ac immobili veritate prolata, etiam si aliquando tecta sint tenui figurationis velo, in tot interpretationes distrahi, quot ad illa devenere lectores." (*Gen.* I.43,4)

These moments that show characters engaged in the act of interpretation, which I called scenes of non-authoritative interpretation in the first chapter, are the fundamental connection between VI.9 and IX.9. In both *novelle*, we see two characters, Giosefo and Betto, explicitly verbalize their interpretations of the admittedly cryptic words of Solomon and Cavalcanti, respectively. Within the *novelle* themselves, nothing openly challenges the interpretations of these two characters; yet while they may be allowed to stand as one interpretive possibility, the larger context of the *Decameron* should illustrate to readers how contingent these expressions are. It is effectively impossible to identify a single moment in the *Decameron* expressive of Boccaccio's "true" perspective or in what is unequivocally his voice. The interpretive distance created by the elaborate framing of the *novelle* within the trope of storytelling and the competing and conflicting voices of the narrators, leaves us as readers with nowhere certain to stand and no place to locate the author's own position. This insistence on a multivocal text and the often polemical and dissonant nature of the interactions of the *brigata* is part of Boccaccio's deconstruction of his authorial role and authorship in general. Within the *Decameron's* model of flawed and inconstant authorship, where even the authorial persona's position is contested by the competing voices within the text, Boccaccio lays bare the ways in which different, more "successful" models of authorship work – what the author's role in the generation of meaning in a text is, and how readers should evaluate it.

Thus, for example, the case of Emilia's role as "author" in IX.9. We are already alive to the possibilities of conflicting meanings, having been trained by now to anticipate conflict and even disagreement among the *Decameron's* ten narrators. Put in other terms, the reader of the *Decameron* is now habituated to the presence of competing authorial voices, and to the idea that the assertions of an "author" of one novella can be challenged by its audience, or by the subsequent "writing" of another story. Since the *Decameron's* actual author declines to settle the questions raised by these conflicts with any sort of finality or unity, that interpretive burden falls on the reader, who must by now confront his assumptions about the infallibility and disinterestedness of authors. When, therefore, near the end of her tale, Emilia describes Giosefo and Melisso as enthusiastically praising the advice of Solomon "prima da lor male inteso (33)," the phrase affirms from her perspective that they have now understood it in the correct fashion, but for the reader, it is a strong reminder of the ever present threat of misinterpretation, instead suggesting the possibility that the advice is still poorly understood or misconstrued. Emilia's own objectivity, as it were, has already been called into question by her lengthy and somewhat strident introduction, which serves as a concrete instance of the sway held by exegesis performed before the story has even been told, in a way however, that shows her hand and her intent in this *novella*.<sup>43</sup> The same effect is achieved by her quasi-proverbial conclusion: "Così adunque fu gastigata la ritosa, e il giovane amando fu amato (35)." The artificiality of such a simplistic and rather trite summary at the end of so complex a novella is striking, and only emphasized by the subsequent glimpse we are offered of the *brigata's* reaction: "Questa novella dalla reina detta

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<sup>43</sup> "What is the logic behind Emilia's two references to Filomena's tale of Nastagio degli Onesti? In order to shore up her own narrative authority, Emilia carries out a pre-emptive strike. She tries to occupy positions that Filomena cannot attack; she tries to ensure that Filomena has no way to respond. If Filomena does so, *she* will look incoherent: she will inevitably be arguing against a position that she herself took earlier. If she attacks Giosefo, she must acknowledge that she is attacking Nastagio. If she attacks Melisso, she must acknowledge that she should have ended her own story about Nastagio differently (Miguel 157)."



diede un poco da mormorare alle donne e da ridere a' giovani (IX.10.2).” Though we are not privy to the precise murmurings of the women, the response divided along gender lines serves as a reminder that the meaning of the *novella* is by no means as monolithic as Emilia would wish to represent. A similar dynamic plays out in VI.9; when Betto says “Gli smemorati siete voi, se voi non l’avete inteso,” it raises again the possibilities that none of the characters are particularly comprehending, including himself. Though his gloss of Guido’s words feels authoritative because it is the final line of the story, the interpretation offered here is not even that of Elissa, let alone Boccaccio, but of a character within the story. We are left with a shifting network of meaning between representation and interpretation, of perspectives various offered within a kaleidoscope of constantly changing vantage, all of which should activate the reader’s expectation that interpretive responsibility for the production is ultimately his alone.

The scenes in which Betto and Giosefo offer interpretations of the words of Cavalcanti and Solomon are present, not to explain in any exhaustive or authoritative way these two *novelle*, but rather to draw our attention as readers to the idea of interpretation itself, to put the act of reading and deciphering of meaning at center stage in the stakes of these stories. There are a few other small ties between these two stories, in addition to these two moments of non-authoritative interpretation. As the stories emphasize, Cavalcanti and Solomon both enjoy the resonance of being famous as both philosophers and poets, in each case distinguished from their fellows by their exceptional wisdom and intellect. Both tales are the ninth stories of their day, told therefore by their respective queens, Elissa and Emilia.<sup>44</sup> In Day VI, Cavalcanti is sought after by Betto’s crowd principally for his lavish entertainments; in Day IX, we discover that Melisso is loved by no one, despite offering similarly extravagant hospitality (“...spendo il mio in metter tavola e onorare i miei cittadini” 13).<sup>45</sup> I also find consonance between Guido’s “voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace” and Melisso’s response to Giosefo’s request that he not interfere or intercede at the beating of his wife: “Io sono in casa tua, dove dal tuo piacere io non intendo di mutarmi (27).”<sup>46</sup> The repetition of the house as a figure for a proper sphere of ownership or control, which changes the power dynamics seems an apt metaphor for the cultural stakes of the power exercised by literary representations of the historical past.

The lesson in these moments of interpretation is precisely the reader’s responsibility for the use made of texts. In both cases of cryptic speech, Cavalcanti’s and Solomon’s, the question of meaning is one that Boccaccio declines to settle unambiguously, precisely because there is no way to interpret definitively, just as there is no way to write in a way that is only singularly decipherable, notwithstanding the semblance of definitiveness in the authoritative text. To return to the *Conclusione dell’autore*, such writing eludes Boccaccio as everyone else: “Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son più santé, più degne, più reverende che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sí sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto. Ciascuna cosa in se medesima è buona a alcuna cosa, e male adoperata può essere

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<sup>44</sup> See the brief article by Kirkham and Menocal for some thoughts on the significance of ninth stories in the Decameron. About Cavalcanti they note briefly: “...Boccaccio counters Dante’s condemnation of the Cavalcantian heresy, advocating openmindedness in the matter of Guido’s alleged Averroism. His escape from an encroaching *brigata* by vaulting over a tomb playfully affirms the eloquent philosopher’s resurrection into Christian immortality (100, 1).” I differ on the degree to which Boccaccio’s account is a serious, rather than humorous one. The article omits for the most part the story of Solomon.

<sup>45</sup> Branca also remarks this connection in the notes to IX.9. See p. 1493, n. 10.

<sup>46</sup> The tenuousness of this connection is somewhat mitigated by the fact that other than his appearance in IX.9, Solomon is mentioned in the *Decameron* only two other times: in VI.8 and VI.10, the two *novelle* that frame the story of Guido Cavalcanti.

nociva di molte; e così dico delle mie novelle (12,3).” In the face of writing that must always be morally ambivalent and dependent on the use made of it, not on the craft of the author, the best option is to train readers in the use of their own judgment – to recognize when interpretation, rather than the simple transmission of authoritative meaning, is happening, and to weigh not only the “intendimento” of the text, but also the “frutto” of the interpretation. These scenes of reading in VI.9 and IX.9 illustrate the potential consequences of interpretive decisions and the stakes of ceding interpretive authority to the author or to another reader, of uncritically accepting someone else’s judgment in the place of one’s own.

It is no coincidence that the stakes of interpretation move to center stage in these *novelle* which feature two important figures from the *Commedia*. Both Cavalcanti and Solomon are not just memorable characters from the poem, however, but are two particularly notable examples of figures over whose representation in the *Commedia* held enormous sway over their subsequent appearance in culture. In both cases too, Dante’s judgments were surprising changes from what we might expect; on the one hand, the implicit damnation of one he called his “primo amico” and on the other, the categorical salvation of one of the most controversial figures in religious history, one whom “...tutto ‘l mondo là giù ne gola di saper novella (*Paradiso* X.110, 1).” The nature of Dante’s authoritative poem makes these accounts seem to be definitive, but Boccaccio, by returning to Cavalcanti and Solomon in the context of interpretation and invoking Dante’s poem, returns them to the world of narrative and intertextuality, makes them again part of a discussion between texts. As the *Decameron*’s storytellers offer tales that respond to previous ones, that “read” as they write, so that the reappearance of these two in Boccaccio’s text restores them to a fuller version of themselves, complex and ambiguous, moved back into dialogue and into history and into reading, as Cavalcanti escapes the judgments of Betto’s *brigata* and Dante alike, and as Solomon’s fate is no longer definitely settled, and he becomes one about whom we may again thirst to have news.

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