THE GOVERNANCE OF FRIENDSHIP
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Law and Gender in the Decameron

Michael Sherberg
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WITH THIS book I repay a debt to the author who first inspired me to study Italian literature. I begin therefore by thanking several galeotti who arranged trysts with the Decameron over the course of my education. Elissa Weaver set my future course when she assigned the tale of Madonna Oretta in my first-year Italian course. In my struggles to understand the novella, I received generous assistance one night from Margery Schneider, then a graduate student at the University of Chicago; her patient instruction in Boccaccio’s syntax awakened a pleasure in me I had not before known. One tale led to the entire book, first with Elissa and then with Marga Cottino-Jones, with whom I studied Boccaccio at UCLA, and whose socially grounded readings continue to inform much of my thinking about the text. Finally, the late Fredi Chiappelli could have had no idea that a single lesson on the forensic nature of Boccaccio’s text would be so inspiring, or so fondly remembered.

At Washington University and beyond I have also enjoyed the piacevoli ragionamenti d’alcuno amico. Stanley Paulson unintentionally abetted my interest in constitutionalism when he introduced me to the work of Hans Kelsen. Eric Brown, Cathleen Fleck, and Julie Singer supplied some missing links on other topics. Harriet Stone read two of the chapters in draft form and helped me remember what good style is all about, and my undergraduate research assistant, Andrew Hiltzik, did a great deal of proofreading. Lynne Tatlock listened as I talked through my ideas, and Joe Loewenstein cheered from the sidelines. Across the country Ted Cachey, Victoria
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The present study finds its origins in some earlier published work of mine: first, an essay I published in Romance Quarterly in 1991, “The Patriarch’s Pleasure and the Frametale Crisis: Decameron IV–V.” The arguments I first advanced there find themselves, significantly revised, in chapter III. Another essay, “The Sodomitic Center of the Decameron,” which appeared in Essays in Honor of Marga Cottino-Jones, formed the basis for some of my arguments about the novella of Pietro di Vinciolo, in chapter III as well.

Finally, my three wonderful boys, Adam, Eric, and Eli, don’t entirely understand why I have spent so much time staring at a computer screen, but for the most part they have let me. Through it all I have enjoyed the extraordinary patience and support of my beloved Simeon, a true friend in every way. In the end this book can only be for him.
This study takes its title from two observations about the Decameron: first, that it traces its origins to a gesture of friendship, and second, that its initial focus on friendship opens onto a wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between friendship and governance, both in the household and in the state. Boccaccio’s first mention of friendship seems almost incidental to the broader thrust of the Proem, subsumed as it is by the structuring metaphors of suffering and relief (Hollander, “The Decameron Proem”): “Nella qual noia [his unrequited love] tanto rifrigerio già mi porsero i piacevoli ragionamenti d’alcuno amico e le sue laudevoli consolazioni, che io porto fermissima opinion per quelle essere avenuto che io non sia morto” (Proem.4). Of course, as readers of the Decameron know all too well, his friends’ ministrations do not just save the author, they also inspire him to return the favor—though, as I shall discuss later, in a decidedly asymmetrical way, not by a direct reimbursement of those same friends, but by a gesture of friendship toward women in love. The gesture takes the form of the Decameron itself.

That friendship is not the isolated qualifier of nonfamilial, nonsexual (and, depending on one’s definition, some sexual) relationships of caring that we see it as today is something Boccaccio would have known well, thanks to his own familiarity with Aristotle’s Ethics and Thomas Aquinas’s Commentary on same. Back in 1968 Anna Maria Cesari identified codex A 204 inf. of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, a copy of the Ethics in William of Moerbeke’s Latin translation along with Aquinas’s Commen-
tary, as an autograph by Boccaccio himself. Since then one critic, Francesco Bausi, has studied the influence of Aristotle and Thomas on the Decameron, specifically in the tenth day, and others, including Victoria Kirkham and Giuseppe Mazzotta, have found Thomistic echoes in the text. However, no one has yet undertaken to elucidate how the Aristotelian theory of friendship informs the Decameron at all levels: in the interventions of the authorial voice (Proem, Introduction to Day IV, Conclusion), in the cornice, and in the stories themselves. Likewise absent from Boccaccio criticism has been a systematic look at how Boccaccio might have applied his knowledge of law and legal theory, acquired over six apparently unpleasant years of study that he laments in the Genealogie, in the Decameron.¹ This book undertakes to fill both lacunae, linking the two.

For the sake of readers who are not readily familiar with Books VIII and IX of the Ethics, in which Aristotle elaborates his theory of friendship, herewith I offer a summary. Aristotle defines three kinds of friendship, each a feeling of affection directed at a human object. The first is based on utility: we care for another because the other can do something for us. The second is grounded in pleasure: we care for another because the other makes us feel good. The third type lies in goodness: one is a friend of the other for the other’s sake and not for one’s own. The first two motives, Aristotle explains, generate transitory friendships and are often associated with less mature phases of life, while the third offers the possibility of a more enduring friendship.

While these initial definitions presuppose friendship between equals, Aristotle then complicates matters by examining the possibility of friendship between unequals. Here the concept of friendship broadens to include parents and children, husbands and wives, and siblings. Such relationships qualify as friendships because they offer a means to compensate for their inherent inequity: the inferior party shows greater affection for the superior one than vice versa. Aristotle’s analysis of unequal relations also enables him to introduce the concept of justice to his discussion of friendship. Unequal friendships achieve justice thanks to the greater affection that the inferior shows for the superior, thus compensating for his or her subordinate status and achieving a parity that is not readily apparent in the social standing of the two parties.

All of the above serves as a basis for the second half of Aristotle’s argument, which addresses the relationship between friendship and political communities. The political models he discusses—monarchy, aristocracy,

¹ Fredi Chiappelli proposed such a study, advancing a suggestive theory of the influence of Boccaccio’s legal studies on his masterpiece; see “Discorso o progetto per uno studio sul Decameron.”
and timocracy and their negatives, tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy—actually mimic, to his mind, the relationships, functional and dysfunctional respectively, found in families. Parenting assumes the form of monarchy or tyranny; marriage can take the form of an aristocracy or an oligarchy; and sibling relations are either timocratic or democratic. In their positive forms each model enacts justice as well by establishing some form of parity, whereas in their negative forms there is no friendship, and therefore also no justice.

Underlying Aristotle's theory are two important concepts. First, he believes that the dynamic of friendship involves both reciprocity and goodwill. The former seems self-evident; according to the latter the friend "wishes and does what is good, or appears good, for the sake of the other" (1166a13). He does so because he wants for his friend what he wants for himself, because he is a good friend to himself; according to this equation the friend becomes "another self" (1166a31). Today we might call such an impulse altruism, and it finds immediate expression in Boccaccio's opening aphorism: "Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti" (Proem.1). The same notion that friendship consists in wanting what is best for the other, for the sake of the other, braces the narrative that follows, in which alcuno amico saved him from amorous perdition through, and this is especially important, piacevoli ragionamenti: those friends, already good friends to themselves, wanted what was best for Boccaccio, that he should end his suffering. Even the notion of piacevoli ragionamenti, which McWilliam has translated as "agreeable conversation" (45), may carry an Aristotelian nuance, as Aristotle dedicates a significant portion of Book VII of the Ethics to the notion of pleasure, which he defines as an unimpeded activity (1153a14). Boccaccio will return the favor, as we know, by attending to the piaceri of ladies in love, imagining for them the unimpeded activity of reading.4

2. In citing Aristotle, I refer to the standard numbering, so that readers can consult any translation they wish. Throughout, unless otherwise specified, I am using Rowe's translation. I find it to be the clearest and most thorough of the many translations available, and readers will appreciate Broadie's thorough commentary as well.

3. William of Moerbeke gives the Aristotelian passage as follows: "Est enim amicus alius ipse." Moerbeke's translation appears in Aquinas, In decem libros Ethicorum; see 475.

4. The gesture also presupposes female literacy, though the text itself also makes the point that women need not be literate to "read" the Decameron. The arrangement of telling stories out loud adumbrates a setting in which a literate woman might read the book aloud to others. Whether what Boccaccio dreams for women comes to pass in his own time remains unclear. Victoria Kirkham notes (The Sign of Reason 118) that Florentine mercantile families numbered among the many early owners of copies of the book, and she cites a 1373 letter from Boccaccio to Maghinardo Cavalcanti, in which the author discourages his interlocutor from allowing women to read the book, as proof that it may have found its way into women's hands. I
Such gestures are possible thanks to the notion of the friend as “another self,” as Aristotle explains in a key passage: “if being alive is desirable, and especially so for the good, because for them existing is good, and pleasant (for concurrent perception of what is in itself good, in themselves, gives them pleasure); and if, as the good person is to himself, so he is to his friend (since the friend is another self): then just as for each his own existence is desirable, so his friend’s is too, or to a similar degree” (1170b2–b8; Rowe trans. 238). This concept, that being alive is desirable, lurks behind Pampinea’s early claim that “Natural ragione è, di ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere” (I.Intro.53). Her speech, in which she undertakes to convince the other six young women that they should escape Florence, exemplifies the principle that Aristotle is elucidating here: that if you want what is good for yourself, then so too will you want what is good for your friend.

Aristotle’s own concept of like-mindedness, implied here and made explicit shortly thereafter, leads not only to personal friendships but to political ones as well. He distinguishes between two forms of like-mindedness, the first suggested in the quotation above: a shared belief that to exist is good and pleasant, which leads each friend to want for the other what is good. Beyond that, there is another, more impersonal form, which allows Aristotle to make the transition from personal friendships to what he calls friendship between citizens. In this latter case, “a city is said to be like-minded when its citizens share judgements about what is advantageous, reach the same decisions, and do what has seemed to them jointly to be best” (1167a27; Rowe trans. 232). The basis for such like-mindedness is a generalized form of goodwill. Aristotle posits two different types of goodwill. The first is personal, based on “excellence, or a kind of decency, where one person appears to another a fine character, or courageous, or something like that” (1167a19–20). In its second, generalized form, goodwill allows people to enter into relationships even though they do not know one another personally: “good will occurs even in relation to people one does not know, and without their being aware of it” (1166b31). In this latter sense it is important to recall that while the members of the brigata already share links before they meet in Santa Maria Novella, friendship is not their

should add in passing that I disagree with Marilyn Migiel’s inference, based on a reading of the same letter, that “Boccaccio might not have meant women to read his book at all” (4). Boccaccio clearly distinguishes his feelings now about dissemination of the text among women and its effect not only on them but on his own reputation, from what he wanted when he wrote the book, when he was younger and implicitly under Cupid’s control. In other words, the letter assumes the character of a late expression of regret about a youthful indiscretion, though we can only speculate on the sincerity of the gesture.
only connection: “si ritrovarono sette giovani donne tutte l’una all’altra o per amistà o per vicinanza o per parentado congiunte” (I.Intro.49); and the men “andavan cercando . . . di vedere le lor donne, le quali per ventura tutte e tre erano tralle predette sette, come che dell’altrè alcune ne fossero congiunte parenti d’alcuni di loro” (I.Intro.79). In other words, the mix of relationships that one finds among the members of the brigata mirrors the mix of relationships that one would expect to find among a single class in a city: some are friends—including erotic relationships—while others are relatives or simply neighbors. They therefore do not constitute a preexisting unit, either political or personal, prior to their departure for the countryside, and the goodwill they feel for one another falls more into the broader category of friendship between citizens than into the specific category of personal friendships.

One final point in Aristotle’s theory of friendship may be the most important of all, for the present purposes: that friendship consists in spending time together in conversation. Friends seek friends, he argues, because one seeks in his other self “to observe decent actions that bear the stamp of his own” (1170a3; Rowe trans. 237). That perception results from time spent together: “this will come about in their living together, conversing, and sharing their talk and thoughts; for this is what would seem to be meant by ‘living together’ where human beings are concerned, not feeding in the same location as with grazing animals” (1170b12–14; Rowe trans. 238).

This idea, that friendship consists of spending time together in conversation—Aquinas’s “convivendo sibi secundum communicationem sermonum et considerationem mentis” (1910), resonates throughout the Decam-
The author himself benefited from the *piacevoli ragionamenti* of his friends, and he attempts to return the favor through an indirect form of companionship, the book, offered “in soccorso e rifugio” of women in love (Proem.13). Moreover, time spent together in conversation is the activity that Boccaccio represents—almost to the exclusion of every other—in the ten young people. While initially their friendship is arguably more political than personal, it quickly assumes the trappings of genuine friendship, even if through the rather artificial means of storytelling.

Aristotle’s logic, which leads from friendship to community and from household to state, offers an exceptionally plastic means of drawing together concerns that would otherwise seem to be quite disparate. While today we still resort to metaphors that suggest analogies, such as that of the tyrannical father, or of George Washington as the father of our country, less often do we consciously associate the way we run our families with the way we run our country. And yet—my second point—it is the comprehensive nature of Aristotle’s vision that allows Boccaccio to play with the themes of friendship and the structuring of relationships, whether domestic or political, in the *Decameron*. At times he appears overtly to apply Aristotle’s analogous reasoning—the *novella* of Tancredi and Ghismonda (IV.1) springs to mind—while elsewhere he applies lighter tracings. Still there can be little doubt that the idea of friendship, first introduced in the Proem, moves steadily through the text, binding together the textual levels—author’s statements, frame tale, and stories—in suggestive ways. The concept of friendship first introduced in the Proem carries over into the frame tale and from there into the stories. Whereas in the Proem Boccaccio does not develop his definitions or his taxonomies with particular attention, the Aristotelian details come into play in the frame tale and the stories, which reflect back and forth upon one another in an ongoing investigation of the forms and implications of friendship. As friendship unites the ten young people as they plan their escape from a stricken Florence, so too does it yield a political community, as the group decides on the rules of the argument rests, as Boccaccio recounts that grazing animals began to behave *quasi come razionali*, while humans died like beasts, and it is a clear example of engaging in unimpeded activity—“come meglio piaceva loro”—that is Aristotle’s definition of pleasure.

7. This idea of the book as indirect or substitute companion would appear also to inform Boccaccio’s choice of a subtitle for the *Decameron*, *prencipe Galeotto*. In invoking Dante’s great go-between for Paolo and Francesca, he reminds his reader of the power of texts to touch us, to reach intimate recesses of our lives, even if not with the positive results that Aristotle attributes to friendship.

8. Boccaccio surely was familiar with other theories of friendship, such as Cicero’s as set forth in the *De amicitia*. However, Cicero limits his definition of friendship to relations between excellent men; his theory thus does not provide the sort of extensive architecture that characterizes Aristotle’s.
by which they will live during their self-imposed exile. Moreover, as I shall argue, each of the three young men in the group conceives of his role as king in unique terms, according to Aristotle’s definitions of friendship and types of government. Finally, the smooth elision between domestic and state governance enacted by Aristotle finds its way into many of the stories told, mirroring, almost as “another self,” the ten narrators.

From its grounding in Aristotle’s theory of friendship grow other important considerations. Not least among these is the role that gender plays in relations within the brigata. Not for nothing does the brigata come together in two separate moments, first as a group composed exclusively of women, and second as a group of women integrated with men. Significantly, Boccaccio never focuses on the men as a group; all we know of them when they first appear is that they are searching for their donne. They have missed mass, and if there is a leader among them, we are not privy to any conversations that would expose him. The admixture of men, who bring with them conceptions of male leadership that will charge the Decameron, will have critical implications for the way in which the brigata works and works together.

A fuller understanding of the group’s function, and the ideologies and theologies that inform it, comes with the assistance of another important theorist, the great Austrian legal philosopher Hans Kelsen. Dubbed the best lawyer of the twentieth century by Bernhard Schlink in the New York Times, Kelsen was the author of countless books and articles, which have in turn generated a raft of critical studies. His first book was a study of Dante’s Monarchia, Die Staatslehre des Dante Alighieri, published in 1905 and translated into Italian as La teoria dello stato in Dante. He is perhaps best known today for the Reine Rechtslehre, the first edition of which (1934) appears in English as Introduction to the Problems of Legal Theory, while the 1960 second edition is available under the title Pure Theory of Law. Another important work, General Theory of Law and State, was translated from a manuscript and never published in the original German.9

A legal positivist, Kelsen offered, in answer to natural law theory, the theory that the law is a coercive order that monopolizes the use of force. For him law is “the social technique which consists in bringing about the desired social conduct of men through threat of coercion for contrary conduct” (“The Law as Specific Social Technique” 236). Kelsen recognizes the paradox that the coercive element of law is the same type of act that law attempts to repress in individuals, but distinguishes state-sanctioned coer-

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9. There is also an excellent critical anthology on Kelsen, Normativity and Norms, which contains 30 articles by legal scholars around the globe.
cation because it seeks to promote peace, whereas the use of force by individuals subverts peace: “Law is an order according to which the use of force is forbidden only as a delict, that is, as a condition, but is allowed as a sanction, that is, as a consequence” (238). The goal of law is not therefore justice, in the ethical sense that we attach to the word, but rather the maintenance of order, even at the cost of acts—think of Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War—that some may subjectively consider to be unjust. Boccaccio addresses this very problem in the famous novella of Madonna Filippa (VI.7), which I shall discuss later. I shall also have occasion later to comment on this distinction with regard to private acts of force undertaken by characters in the Decameron.

Kelsen’s critique of natural law theory comes very close to Boccaccio’s position on the question, at least as I infer it from the Decameron. Kelsen labels natural law theory an ideology:

The need for rational justification of our emotional acts is so great that we seek to satisfy it even at the risk of self-deception. And the rational justification of a postulate based on a subjective judgment of value, that is, on a wish, as for instance that all men should be free, or that all men should be treated equally, is self-deception or—what amounts to about the same thing—it is an ideology. Typical ideologies of this sort are the assertions that some sort of ultimate end, and hence some sort of definite regulation of human behavior, proceeds from “nature,” that is, from the nature of things or the nature of man, from human reason or the will of God. In such an assumption lies the essence of the doctrine of so-called natural law. This doctrine maintains that there is an ordering of human relations different from positive law, higher and absolutely valid and just, because emanating from nature, from human reason, or from the will of God. . . . When the norms claimed to be the “law of nature” or justice have a definite content, they appear as more or less generalized principles of a definite positive law, principles that, without sufficient reason, are put forth as absolutely valid by being declared as natural or just law. (General Theory of Law and State 8–10)

10. Kelsen’s analysis of Aristotle’s concept of justice as equity supports his theory: “The substitution of the logical value of noncontraction for the moral value of justice, inherent in the definition of justice as equality before the law, is the result of the attempt to rationalize the idea of justice as the idea of an objective value. Although this substitution is no solution, but an elimination of the problem of justice, it seems that the attempt will never be abandoned—perhaps, because of its important political implications. This type of rationalistic philosophy, pretending to answer the question what is just, and hence claiming authority to prescribe to the established power how to legislate, ultimately legitimizes the established power by defining justice as equality before the law and thus declaring the positive law to be just” (“Aristotle’s Doctrine of Justice” 134).
The language of Kelsen’s analysis—that natural law is an ideology that asserts certain assumptions, and that the claim of natural law is used to defend the validity of principles of positive law—leads to an inevitable conclusion. Natural law theory, particularly as expressed in language, is a rhetoric, a rhetoric employed by those in power to maintain their power by asserting the transcendent basis of a law that favors them and their ordering of society.

This analysis is crucial to any reading of the Decameron. As readers well know, the *brigata* as a group of seven women and three men reaches its final form thanks to a claim made by Elissa: “Veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo e senza l’ordine loro rade volte riesce alcuna nostra opera a laudevole fine” (I.Intro.76). She is of course citing a phrase found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, “vir caput est mulieris” (Eph. 5.23), though to understand the full import of Elissa’s assertion one needs to return the phrase to its original context. In the latter, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to abandon paganism. His argument includes a series of norms for the Ephesians to follow. The Ephesians, he explains, should try “to imitate God, as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5.1–3). In the sentence containing the citation from Elissa he narrows his focus to apply the imitation of Christ to the structuring of the home: “Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church submits to Christ, so should wives to their husbands, in everything” (Eph. 5.22–24). Paul thus derives a norm for domestic behavior, “so should wives to their husbands, in everything,” from the hierarchical ordering of Christianity: as the Church submits to Christ as its authority, so too should wives submit to their husbands. Christ thus indirectly authorizes the norms of domestic life, if one assumes—at some risk, as I shall discuss later—that men correctly understand Christ’s law. Paul’s argument is consistent with natural law theory, inasmuch as it relies, as Alf Ross puts it, on “principles that have not been created by man but are discovered, true principles binding on everyone, including those who are unable or unwilling to recognize their existence” (151).11 Among

11. I shall have occasion to discuss the specifics of medieval natural law theory in the course of my argument. For now I cite the following general definition, coined by Ross, which includes the phrase I have given in the text: “Despite manifold divergencies, there is one idea common to all natural law schools of thought: The belief that there exist universally valid principles governing the life of man in society, principles that have not been created by man but are discovered, true principles, binding on everyone, including those who are unable or unwilling to recognize their existence. The truth of these laws cannot be established by the methods of empirical science, but presupposes a metaphysical interpretation of the nature of
the latter we may count the non-Christian Ephesians. That the exercise is essentially rhetorical is manifest in Paul’s own use of a standard rhetorical device, argument by analogy: a husband’s relationship to his wife is as Christ’s relationship to the Church. As Boccaccio will make clear, the only real basis for Paul’s claim is his belief that Christ is the son of God; the fact of competing religions, each of which claims legitimacy over the other two, undermines Paul’s claim.

As an alternative to natural law theory Kelsen proposed the much-discussed Pure Theory of Law, which relies on the concept of the basic norm. He makes the following distinction: “the norms of natural law, like those of morality, are deduced from a basic norm that by virtue of its content—as emanation of divine will, of nature, or of pure reason—is held to be directly evident. The basic norm of a positive legal system, however, is simply the basic rule according to which the norms of the legal system are created; it is simply the setting into place of the basic material fact of law creation. . . . Tracing the various norms of a legal system back to a basic norm is a matter of showing that a particular norm was created in accordance with the basic norm” (Introduction to the Problems of Legal Theory 56–57). Kelsen then offers the example of how one rationalizes incarceration. He shows how the judge’s act of incarceration relies on the criminal code, which was formulated by authorities instituted by the state constitution, whose validity may be retraced to the “the first constitution, historically speaking, established by a single usurper or a council, however assembled. What is to be valid as norm is whatever the framers of the first constitution have expressed as their will—this is the basic presupposition of all cognition of the legal system resting on this constitution” (Introduction to the Problems of Legal Theory 57).

Identifying the basic norm of a legal order turns out to be rather more challenging. To the extent that it reflects the will of the framers, it requires a certain reading between the lines of whatever documentary evidence

man. For this reason, the validity of these laws and the obligations deriving from them do not imply anything observable. The validity of the laws stemming from natural law has nothing to do with their acceptance or recognition in the minds of men, and the obligations they create have nothing to do with any sense of being duty-bound, any sanction of conscience, or any other experience. The unconditional validity of the laws, and the non-psychological character of the obligations, are simple consequences of the point of departure, namely, that these laws are discovered, objectively given, a reality, although not the reality of sensory observation. . . . ‘natural law’ is considered to be the part of general ethics that deals with the principles governing the life of man in organized society with his fellows, making it possible for him to attain his moral destiny” (151–52). Boccaccio’s own insistence upon subjective, as opposed to objective, reality, makes natural law theory difficult to sustain.

12. For a comprehensive introduction to this notion, see Raz, “Kelsen’s Theory of the Basic Norm.”
remains. A statement of the basic norm of the Constitution of the United States is not necessarily to be found in the words of the Constitution, because the Constitution is the expression of the framers’ will, which necessarily antedates the document. The norms of a positive legal system thus trace their origins to an event whose content must be inferred, just as the norms of natural law or morality trace their origins to an equally elusive figure, God. The virtue of Kelsen’s theory, however, lies in the fact that it traces law to human will rather than divine. Given the immanent nature of human beings and human will, the law thus finds a firmer basis than it does when traced to God, whose existence remains an inference at best.

As I shall argue in the pages that follow, both of these key elements of Kelsen’s legal theory—the concept of the coercive nature of the legal order and the notion of the basic norm—find residence in the Decameron. Boccaccio was not reading Kelsen, obviously, but he was reading natural law theory, such as that offered by Aquinas, and, I believe, he was gifted with an intellectual detachment that facilitated a critique of it. If his medieval predecessors had often sought to codify received wisdom, Boccaccio addresses it more questioningly. Years ago—in 1964, to be exact—Carlo Dionisotti observed that Boccaccio did not enjoy the sort of intellectual respect accorded the other two crowns, Dante and Petrarch. The seriousness with which Boccaccio studies has progressed since Dionisotti first published his j’accuse would tend to put the lie to that claim today, and I offer the present study in a line of engagement with Boccaccio as a serious and committed intellectual.

Once the Decameron deals away the claims of Christian natural law—and it does so in its first three stories, as I shall demonstrate—it has to offer another basis for the law that undergirds so much of it. I believe that Boccaccio understood, some six hundred years before Kelsen, that the law—particularly the same domestic law that Paul addresses in Ephesians—founds its authorization in the coercive power of men over women, which in turn

13. “Qui, con Dante non si scherza. Le più assurde ipotesi sono state e sono, come s’è visto, lecite, ma non se tocchino il religioso culto della Commedia. Pertanto l’idea che possano esserci stati cantari dugenteschi in terza rima ai quali Dante si sia ispirato, non è mai stata presa, grazie a Dio, in seria considerazione. Anche non è lecito scherzare col Petrarca. Questo culto è stato nel secolo scorso e nel nostro molto più tepido e controverso. Ma vivo e morto il Petrarca ha sempre imposto una salutare soggezione. Anche quelli che si tengono a distanza e ne parlano a denti stretti, non possono sottrarsi al fascino. Col Boccaccio il rapporto sempre è stato ed è diverso. Necessariamente, né mette conto spiegare perché. Ma a guardar bene, si ha l’impressione che fin dal Trecento le debolezze scoperte dell’uomo e dell’artista, la sua stessa generosa umiltà e devozione di discepolo dei due maggiori che lo avevano immediatamente preceduto, si siano prestate a una famigliarità eccessiva e ingiustificata e un po’ anche alla rivalsa dei minori e minimi, con lui e più di lui, seppure meno generosamente e intelligentemente, soggetti all’impero dei due maggiori” (127–28).
introduction

derives from two sources: first, the rhetoric of natural law theory itself, and second and more important, the superior physical strength of men, which enables them to institute a coercive domestic legal order. Like Elissa, women may subscribe to the rhetorical claims of natural law theory, but in the end they must subscribe to the everyday threat of violence that men incarnate. No man, however, wants to say that he controls women because he can—and sometimes does—beat them up. Such a statement might work for a Machiavelli, but of course he is not talking about himself when he says it, and he couches the claim in metaphor. The more circumspect man says that he controls women because God authorizes him to.

The question of men’s power over women, first expressed by Elissa, plays itself out at all levels of the Decameron. Boccaccio first refers to it in the Proem when he talks about how women suffer isolation at the hands of men, then returns to it in the dynamic of male–female relations among the members of the brigata. While readers of the Decameron have focused, for multiple reasons, on the question of which boy loves which girl, or on the moments in the frame tale that bring erotic questions to the fore—Tindaro and Licia, or the Valle delle Donne—far less attention has gone to the way in which the men and women negotiate issues of governance, and how the tensions among them play out in the stories they tell, particularly in the third, seventh, and tenth days, all ruled by men. In the chapters that follow, I examine these questions. In chapter I, “The Order of Outsiders,” I propose that the Decameron rhetorically marginalizes men only to enact their return, vehemently and at times vindictively, to the textual space. In this chapter I focus in particular on the three important authorial interventions, the Proem, the Introduction to Day IV, and the Author’s Conclusion, as well as on the organization of the brigata in the Introduction to Day I. In chapter II, “Lessons in Legal Theory,” I undertake to expose in a more systematic fashion Boccaccio’s deconstruction of the claims of natural law theory, with particular attention to the first three stories of Day I and the last two of Day VI. These two chapters function as a diptych that prepares for the three that follow, in which I look at what happens to the brigata—both among the ten and in their storytelling—when men take control. Chapter III, “Strategies of Coercion: Filostrato,” examines the deployment of male power by the king in Day IV and Fiammetta’s attempt to provide a remedy in Day V.

14. In De principatibus 25: “la fortuna è donna, ed è necessario, volendola tenere sotto, batterla e urtarla. E si vede che la si lascia più vincere da questi, che da quelli che freddamente procedano; e però sempre, come donna, è amica de’ giovani, perché sono meno rispettivi, più ferosi, e con più audacia la comandano.” Even Machiavelli, however, must temper his claim about male power over women by asserting that it is okay to beat up on women because they like it.
Chapter IV, “Dioneo and the Politics of Marriage,” focuses on Day VII and Dioneo’s governance of it, particularly the paradox of his position as an outsider who becomes an insider and the sincerity of his rhetoric of support for women. Finally, chapter V, “The Rule of Panfilo: Fables of Reconciliation,” looks at Day X with particular concern for how women fit into the idealized world of male friendship represented in that day’s stories.

Throughout the book I undertake to bind concepts of legal theory to notions of friendship. The brigata, as I have already stated, enacts various forms of friendship, but always under the umbrella of the governance of the tiny state the group has founded. The domestic world of the Decameron stories relies on a legal principle, enunciated by Elissa, while at the same time addressing the various sorts of friendship models—both between peers and among family members—that Aristotle discusses. The governance of friendship thus involves both the rules that govern friendship and the way in which friendship creates rules that govern us.

My aim here, in sum, is to introduce a new paradigm for reading the Decameron, one that looks closely at how issues of law and gender combine to create a dense interplay between various textual levels. Given the amount of textual space they occupy and their sheer number, it is really no surprise that Decameron criticism has often focused on the tales at the expense of the frame, as the former can easily be extracted from the work and read as autonomous units. This critical practice has in fact led in my scholarly lifetime to a series of excellent English-language studies, beginning with Guido Almansì’s The Writer as Liar (1975) and continuing with Millicent Marcus’s An Allegory of Form (1979), Giuseppe Mazzotta’s The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron (1986), Pier Massimo Forni’s Adventures in Speech (1996), Robert Hollander’s Boccaccio’s Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire (1997), and most recently Marilyn Migiel’s A Rhetoric of the Decameron (2003). Other critics, such as Joy Hambuechen Potter in Five Frames for the Decameron (1982), and Marga Cottino-Jones in Order from Chaos (1982), have undertaken to read the Decameron more organically, with an eye to the relation between textual levels (Potter) or as a text that moves purposefully from a beginning point to an endpoint (Cottino-Jones). The present study borrows from both critical trends, highlighting individual tales to advance an argument about gender relations and law, and outlining a programmatic approach to the question of gender relations that originates in the frame—both the author’s statements and the narrative of the brigata—and plays out in the stories.

Looking back over the critical tradition as it has evolved in the last few decades affords telling insights into where we were and where we have come. In the introduction to An Allegory of Form Marcus unwittingly echoes
Dionisotti’s earlier lament that the critical tradition has not taken Boccaccio seriously: “Although Boccaccio chose and perfected a genre utterly alien to his two predecessors, although he took his literary inheritance in a direction distinct from theirs, critics persist in reading him as a ‘fallen’ Dante, as a Petrarch wanting in refinement and conscience, as an apostate from the world of serious moral concerns” (1). It seems hard to believe today that as recently as 1979 someone writing about the *Decameron* would feel the need to rise to its defense, especially given the accelerated attention the work has enjoyed since then. Nor does it seem plausible any longer to think of Boccaccio as shying away from serious moral concerns. One of those concerns, which the *Decameron* addresses but for which it has only recently begun to receive its due, regards the status of women. Important voices foregrounding gender in the *Decameron* include the aforementioned Migiel and, before her, Teodolinda Barolini, whose 1993 essay “Le parole sono femmine e i fatti sono maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*” is perhaps the first to signal how gender-based readings can expose previously invisible features of the text. I offer but one small example to demonstrate not merely the shift but how dramatically it has altered our understanding of the work. Forni comments on Dioneo’s privilege almost in passing: “The only narrator not bound by the rule of topic is Dioneo, who is granted this privilege by Filomena at the end of Day I” (*Adventures in Speech* 7). Migiel, on the other hand, sees the question of the privilege as a significant site of gender tension in the group, upending the received notion that Pampinea is the group’s natural leader: “But the fact remains that Dioneo has served as Pampinea’s guide by shaping the possibilities for the groups’ future discussions” (27–28). It is precisely the feminist critical framework that enabled Migiel to recognize a dynamic that others had overlooked.

The present book also owes a strong debt to gender studies, acknowledging the significance of Boccaccio’s protofeminism along the lines enunciated by Barolini: “the *Decameron* can be inscribed within a specific tradition, which, if not in itself feminist, is arguably the tradition in which feminism could later take root” (“Notes toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature” 376). At the same time, my perspective differs from that of other feminist readings of the text, such as Migiel’s. Migiel’s book, as the title suggests, continues the rhetorical/narratological tradition of *Decameron* studies. “Our task,” she states, “is to examine the very structure of the questions that the *Decameron* poses about reading and sexual difference. Only then will we be able to grasp the intellectual and political investments that contemporary readers have in trying to understand—or to ignore—these issues” (15). The second sentence is key to understanding her intentions:
her book seeks to expose what contemporary readings of the Decameron say about both the text and its readers. My own study takes questions of gender in a different direction, turning the mirror of the Decameron back not on the reader but on the intellectual and ideological backdrop of its age. In my readings I am guided by Cesare Segre’s claim that “[o]gni testo è la voce di un mondo lontano che noi cerchiamo di ricostruire” (Semiotica filologica 7). Segre continues: “Chiunque componga un testo opera una sintesi di elementi analitici della sua esperienza. Sintesi discorsiva (linguistica) di elementi culturali. A sua volta il lettore—il filologo, nel nostro caso—analizza la sintesi attuata dallo scrittore, e ne ricostruisce gli elementi in una sintesi interpretativa. Questo ciclo analisi-sintesi-analisi-sintesi costituisce un’attività eminentemente semiotica, dato che sono in gioco, in ogni fase del ciclo, dei significati, e che la comprensibilità è comprensibilità di significati.” Following these principles, I have attempted to reconstruct (some of) the cultural elements that are comprised in the Decameron, particularly with regard to the status of women. I find that status to be rooted in a notion of social order that is finally juridical, inasmuch as the family models that cast women in certain roles (wife, daughter, sister) are replicated in governmental institutions.

Boccaccio would have learned of these relations through Aristotle, as mediated by Aquinas, and he also would have understood the application of the moniker of friendship to this discourse. It bears remembering that for a Boccaccio reading Aquinas, Aristotle’s philosophy remains compelling. Still, Boccaccio appears to receive philosophic wisdom less as dogma than as discourse to be held at a critical arm’s length. At the same time, however, I would argue that Boccaccio does not excuse himself from the traditional duty of the intellectual to formulate a comprehensive vision of the universe, even if that vision highlights the universe’s many contradictions. Despite its fractious nature the Decameron also subscribes to an order, as demonstrated by the careful organization of the brigata and the naming of themes for the eight of the ten days of storytelling. My reading, which privileges the organization of the brigata as a conditioning force of their narrative and not simply as a pretext for storytelling, attempts to identify a comprehensive notion of how the world of the Decameron, both the artificial world of the brigata and the world reflected in the stories, functions.

As readers know, the Decameron never exhausts its lessons, nor does it make them easy to grasp. The steady pace of new studies of Boccaccio’s masterpiece over the last 35 years is testimony to both its vitality and its

15. Indeed, Aristotle’s status would soon come under fire by none other than Petrarch, who questioned it in the De sui ispius et multorum ignorantia. On the medieval origins of anti-Aristotelianism and its humanist evolution, see Bianchi.
ingenious hermeneutic resistance. Like a many-faceted jewel, it continues to expose new surfaces to the light while hiding still others from view. It is my hope that this study will illuminate one of those facets, and in so doing enhance the overall beauty of the invaluable stone that is the object of so much scrutiny.
In dedicating the Decameron to women in love, Boccaccio executes a seemingly innocuous first step in orienting his text toward women. That decision does not lack for ramifications, however, for just as the Decameron puts women and their experiences at its center, so too does it relegate men to its sidelines, only to represent them as angling to reassert their authority. They do so as critics of the author, as kings whose choices challenge the ladies in their company, or as characters in the stories who overpower women in multiple ways. In this sense the book offers a variant of what Francesco Orlando has called the return of the repressed, specifically as the “ritorno del represso come presenza di contenuti censurati da una repressione ideologico-politica” (27), the repression here being specifically that of masculinist claims to control. The Decameron thus enacts a version of the model of revenge literature that Richard Posner discusses in Law and Literature. While in the first two instances the repressed returns in fairly harmless ways—Boccaccio deftly defends himself against the critics’ barbs, and the three kings do not finally derail the women’s survival project—the stories themselves either enact or envision more extreme practices of revenge that make clear what is at stake, particularly for women. Moreover, both the frame narrative and the stories involve variants of the essential means of revenge, which according to Posner are tantamount to “taking the law into your own hands” (32), with consequences for women that depend entirely on the extent to which men reassert their power.

The impulse to vengeance, as Posner argues, “depends on a cluster of


emotions, such as wrath and touchiness and unforgivingness, and, above all, refusing to behave ‘rationally’ in the face of slights . . ." (30). Any argument therefore that posits a revenge system at work in the Decameron must first identify those offenses that would provoke a desire for retributive justice. At all three textual levels the slights take the form of gestures of exclusion, rhetorical or real, of men, as either readers of the Decameron or participants in the creation of the law that will govern the onesta brigata, or finally as authorities in the lives of female characters who assert their own agency despite men’s rules. In this chapter I shall detail how each of these gestures is enacted. I shall also discuss forms of retaliation as narrated in the author’s statements and in some of the stories, leaving the question of the responses of the three kings, both in their leadership and in the types of stories they engender, to the succeeding chapters. I shall conclude this chapter with a reading of a single tale, the story of the scholar and the widow, which falls outside of the three days led by men but best reflects the revenge motive that to my mind is a principal structure of the Decameron.

Be Nice to Your Friends

In his essay “Semiotica e filologia,” Cesare Segre elaborates on a theory of culture first introduced by Juri Lotman to explicate the position of the writer with respect to the world he describes. The writer, explains Lotman, divides the world in two according to an inside/outside paradigm, locating himself in one of these two spaces. The consequent “us vs. them” model implies the writer’s identification with a group that in turn stands in opposition—or at the very least in juxtaposition—to all other groups. Applying this concept to medieval Christian models, Segre details a “Christian vs. infidel,” “order vs. chaos” dynamic, with Christianity and order inside, the infidel and disorder outside. One may readily intuit in Lotman’s model, and in Segre’s expansion on it, the rudiments of contemporary theories of alterity. In its simplicity, however, this model offers an important reminder: that the discourse of alterity, with its emphasis on the Other, can overlook the identity of the agent perceiving the other, and in particular that agent’s own identity with a group.¹

¹ Lotman’s model rather complicates the theory of alterity. In subsuming the individual agent within a group Lotman unwittingly creates a model that subdivides repeatedly: the group labeled “us” can easily divide into two, subgroups “us” and “them,” with each of these subgroups dividing as well. For example, the self-identified white Christian heterosexual male may see himself in opposition to nonwhite, non-Christian, nonheterosexual women, but just as easily in opposition to white, Christian, nonheterosexual males, and so forth. In identifying
The question of one’s identity within a group leads us to the authorial voice, more or less identified with Boccaccio, of the Decameron Proem. Boccaccio’s own double and paradoxical identity, disclosed in the Proem, gives entry to the patriarchal discourse that informs and troubles the book. He in fact identifies sequentially with two different groups in the Proem, first that of spurned (male) lovers, and second that of women suffering in love. He unites the two groups through the key word afflitti, which famously appears in the Decameron’s opening aphorism: “Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti” (Proem.2). As proof of his assertion he offers the example of his own experience when, thanks to the “piacevoli ragionamenti d’alcuno amico e le sue laudevoli consolazioni” (Proem.4), he survived the torments of unrequited love, which eventually diminished. Unlike the Dante of the Vita nuova—who will emerge as an important figure here—Boccaccio conquers his love not by sublimating erotic desire in a theology of eros, but by letting nature take its course, so to speak. He does so, moreover, not with the assistance of women endowed with a Dantean intelletto d’amore, but with the help of men who undertake to distract him.

The Decameron here takes its first noteworthy turn. Explaining that while the suffering has diminished, the memory of the consolation rendered has not, Boccaccio feels obligated to return the favor: “ho meco stesso proposto di volere, in quel poco che per me si può, in cambio di ciò che io ricevetti, ora che libero dir mi posso, e se non a coloro che me atarono, alli quali per avventura per lo lor senno o per la loro buona ventura non abisogna, a quegli almeno a’ quali fa luogo, alcuno alleggiamento prestare. E quantunque il mio sostentamento, o conforto che vogliam dire, possa essere e sia a’ bisognosi assai poco, nondimeno parmi quello doversi più tosto porgere dove il bisogno appare maggiore, sì perché più utilità vi farà e si

with other Christians, however, he may see himself as a Catholic in opposition to Presbyterians, Anglicans, and so forth. Identity and difference end up overlapping.

2. I use the name “Boccaccio” here while fully cognizant that this narrative voice, like all those in the Decameron, is a construct. Wayne Booth’s distinction between real author and implied author remains wholly valid for the Decameron. Booth writes, and it is well to remember, that “The ‘implied author’ chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices” (74–75). Janet Smarr has demonstrated the indebtedness of this voice to Ovid; see Boccaccio and Fiammetta 166 and “Ovid and Boccaccio: A Note on Self-Defense.”

3. I use the term “patriarchy” in the sense given by Gayle Rubin, though I disagree with her limitation of it to Old Testament characters: “Patriarchy is a specific form of male dominance, and the use of the term ought to be confined to the Old Testament-type pastoral nomads from whom the term comes, or groups like them. Abraham was a Patriarch—one old man whose absolute power over wives, children, herds, and dependents was an aspect of the institution of fatherhood, as defined in the social group in which he lived” (168). Boccaccio affirms the absolute power of the father in his Proem and in many of the stories the brigata tells.
ancora perché più vi fia caro avuto” (Proem.7–8; italics mine). Through his gendering of nouns and pronouns Boccaccio suggests that he will return the favor whence it came, continuing a cycle of male camaraderie and exchange. Quite unexpectedly then he announces that he will lend his assistance, as consolation and entertainment, to another group, ladies in love: “E chi negherà questo, quantunque egli si sia, non molto più alle vaghe donne che agli uomini convenirsi donare?” (Proem.9). This is a strange comment coming from a man whose very life was saved by the piacevoli ragionamenti of generous male friends. Indeed, he now speaks of men in the third person, distancing himself from them rhetorically: “Essi [the innamorati uomini], se alcuna malinconia o gravezza di pensieri gli affligge, hanno molti modi da alleggiare o da passar quello . . .” (Proem.12; italics mine). If Boccaccio himself had tried these remedies, they apparently did not work, for language cured him, not sport.

This passage also marks Boccaccio’s shift from identification with love-lorn men and subscription to the norms of male friendship, which involved personal gestures of goodwill, to identification with lovelorn women and subscription to a depersonalized code of goodwill. Boccaccio’s gesture toward the women is not one of friendship per se, for as Aristotle points out, people can feel goodwill even toward others whom they do not know. Rather, Boccaccio’s goodwill toward women represents an Aristotelian “starting point of friendship, just as the pleasure gained through sight is of being in love” (1167a3–4; Rowe trans. 232). The analogy says much about the novelty of Boccaccio’s move here, for in attempting to establish a nonerotic relationship with his female audience—he undertakes to please them, though without any expectation that they will reciprocate sexually—he appears to work outside of the traditional courtly dynamic as it had applied to literature. Rather than send a single woman a poem in which he entreats her to reciprocate his love, he sends an entire group of women a far weightier text, while asking nothing from them in return but the goodwill he feels toward them. Indeed, nothing more can develop because author and audience will never know one another personally.

So while recognizing men’s affliction, and even associating their suffering with his own etymologically, Boccaccio neither caters to them nor repays any debt to them. He minimizes men’s suffering in comparison to that of women, who require his own piacevoli ragionamenti much more acutely: “delle quali [novelle] le già dette donne, che queste leggeranno, parimenti diletto delle sollazzevoli cose in quelle mostrate e utile consiglio potranno pigliare, in quanto potranno cognoscere 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” (Proem.14–15; italics mine). The debt to men may not be so great after all, for it was Amore himself, and not the chatty companions, who really made the difference. The distance between the philogynist voice of the Decameron’s author and the later misogynist voice of the Corbaccio’s narrator finds its full realization here, where a Boccaccio who has loved fruitlessly rededicates himself to pleasing women, rather than to execrating them. And yet his final claim is not so clear-cut. The noun piaceri logically refers to “le già dette donne,” but its grammatical referent is another, “[i] suoi legami,” the pleasures of love’s ties. The oxymoron finds its rationale in the very gesture of writing for ladies in love, of Boccaccio’s decision to revisit his own amorous experience by undertaking a lengthy exercise whose origin he locates in his own past pain. Boccaccio creates a chiasmus of identity: he identifies with the lovesick ladies, and he identifies the pain of love with pleasure.

By speaking of men in the third person, Boccaccio thus signals their removal from the communicative system of the Decameron, marking their presence as an intrusion into his direct relationship with the ladies to whom he dedicates the book. Indeed, in his description of the plight of ladies in love, he labels men, and more generally the patriarchal order, as the source of much of women’s suffering: “ristrette da’ voleri, da’ piaceri, da’ comandamenti de’ padri, delle madri, de’ fratelli e de’ mariti, il più del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano e quasi oziose sedendosi, volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora, seco rivolgendo diversi pensieri, li quali non è possibile che sempre sieno allegri” (Proem.10). The world of women in love is one of conflicting desires and pleasures. On the one hand there are the voleri and piaceri of the men who control women’s lives, and of those women, specifically the mothers, who likewise subscribe to the patriarchal order. On the other there is the “volendo e non volendo” of the ladies themselves, specifically their desire for pleasure and their resistance to it. For the erotic pleasure denied them Boccaccio offers a substitute: the pleasure of literature. The Decameron thus immediately construes itself as

4. At all levels of the semiotic model of communication, the figure that Seymour Chatman calls “the transmitting source” (147)—be it narrator, implied author, ideal author, or author—establishes a second-person relationship with its audience. While Boccaccio no doubt wrote the Decameron expecting men to read it, rhetorically he distances them from the text. The historical record bears out the validity of the “return of the repressed.” According to Victoria Kirkham, “the Decameron’s most avid early readers belonged to the very group whom he is least concerned about reaching: powerful men of business” (118). Kirkham names the Buondelmonti, Acciaiuoli, Bonaccorsi, Cavalcanti, and Verazzano among the early owners of manuscripts of the book.

5. For Luciano Rossi the offer to please the ladies must be understood “anche nell’accezione
a subversion of the patriarchal order, and indeed many of the stories, all of
which instruct ladies in “quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da
seguitar,” offer models of how women can and must protect themselves
from men, and how best to avoid trouble with men when circumventing
male authority.

Boccaccio solidifies his rhetorical exclusion of men in the first sentence
of the Introduction to Day I, where the narrator now addresses the grazio-
sissime donne to whom he has dedicated the book. From now on, any male
who reads the Decameron does so as an interloper, eavesdropping on a pri-
ivate conversation between Boccaccio and his female readers. It comes as
no surprise, then, given the degree of control that Boccaccio attributes to
men when it comes to women’s lives, that by the beginning of Day IV he
is reporting that very sort of intrusiveness and more, for men have not
only been reading his book but talking about it, and not saying nice things.
Thus he rises to his own defense. Underscoring his exclusive relationship
with women, he replies to his male critics through a conversation with the
[c]arissime donne and discrete donne who are his intended readers. While
the ostensible subject of the Day IV introduction is envy, here viewed ironi-
cally since Boccaccio claims to see no good reason for men to receive his
work with hostility, in fact the first paragraph contains gender markers
that suggest a more pointed retort. According to the author, the “‘mpetuoso
vento e ardente della ‘nvidia” would normally “percuotere . . . l’alte torri o
le più levate cime degli alberi” (IV.Intro.2); therefore he cannot understand
why his own work would be an object of envy, because “non solamente pe’
piani ma ancora per le profondissime valli mi sono ingegnato d’andare” (IV.
Intro.3). In other words, he has done nothing worthy of envy. Glossing this
remark, Boccaccio equates the alte torri to the high style of Latin writing,
and his frequenting of the valleys as the use of Florentine vernacular to
write in istilo umilissimo, not just a humble style, but the abjectly humble
style of the profondissime valli, a remark that in combination evokes the
low style of Dante’s Inferno. The metaphors certainly work as Boccaccio
explains them, but his gloss also draws attention away from the gendered

6. The metaphors come from Paradiso XVII.133–35: “Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
/ che le più alte cime più percuote; e ciò non fa d’onor poco argomento.” That Cacciaguida
then notes that Dante has traversed the monte (of Purgatory), and the valle dolorosa (of Hell)
进一步 associates Boccaccio’s own remark about the profondissime valli with Hell. On the vari-
ous Dantean intertexts of the Day IV self-defense see chapter 2 of Marchesi, who argues for a
triangular relationship between Boccaccio, Dante, and the Horace of the Satires.
nature of the metaphors themselves. One need only recall the many towers that populate the Decameron with phallic connotations, or the Valle delle Donne to which the seven ladies repair at the end of Day VI, to understand the sexualized nature of the imagery Boccaccio here adopts. Claiming that he has avoided the high towers for the deep valleys, Boccaccio actually reasserts a central point of the Decameron, first made in the Proem: that he has written the book for women, not men. The remark thus represents a first—and in truth definitive—defense against the salvos leveled against him: men have no business criticizing his stories because they should not be reading them in the first place.

Boccaccio then goes on to describe himself as attacked for five reasons, the first three of which concern the appropriateness of his relationship with his female readers. The attacks are carefully worded as concerns for Boccaccio himself: “onesta cosa non è che io tanto diletto prenda di piacervi e di consolarvi e . . . di commendarvi, come io fo”; “alla mia età non sta bene . . . a ragionar di donne o a compiacer loro”; “dicono che io farei più saviamente a starmi con le Muse in Parnaso che con queste ciance mescolarmi tra voi” (IV.Proem.5–6). Moreover, these detractors are clearly male; Boccaccio labels them alcuni, altri, molti, quegli. Boccaccio thus figures his

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7. I believe one may similarly gender the imagery with which Boccaccio describes the unpleasant reading of the plague story and what follows: “Questo orrido cominciamento vi fia non altramenti che a’camminanti una montagna aspra e erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia reposto” (I.Intro. 4). For Branca this passage evokes the dark wood and the mountain that Dante attempts to climb in Inferno I (Boccaccio medievale 34 ff.), but the analogy is imperfect. The montagna may in fact recall Dante’s colle (Inferno I.13), but there is no geographic equivalent in Dante to the “bellissimo piano e dilettevole” that lies nearby, to which one arrives after climbing and descending the mountain. It is explicitly not therefore the Earthly Paradise, which lies atop Mount Purgatory. Rather, it is a flat counterpart to the rise of the mountain, arguably the female space of the Decameron stories, which stand in juxtaposition to the tale of the Plague, here gendered as masculine. For more on the gendering of space in the Decameron see Psaki.

8. Whether Boccaccio’s first thirty stories did in fact circulate, drawing the criticism he reports, remains an open question. Scaglione asserts it as fact (102), without offering any substantial evidence; he cites a late remark by Petrarch (1373) about attacks on the book, though these could easily have come after the entire text issued, and not as a reaction to early circulation of the first three days. On the other hand Padoan (“Sulla genesi del Decameron”) furnishes compelling textual evidence in support of the early-circulation thesis, which one should not ignore. Still, Boccaccio’s defense, coming when it does and in the overall context of the rhetorical strategies Boccaccio is deploying, has a contrived quality that mitigates against Padoan’s argument (on the rhetorical and thematic value of the placement of the author’s self-defense see Fedi, “Il ‘regno’ di Filostrato”). Moreover, the idea relies on the assumption that Boccaccio wrote the Decameron in the order in which we read it. There is no proof for this assumption, and indeed it would appear to fly in the face of both modern and medieval practices (for the latter see, for example, the history of Petrarch’s composition of the Canzoniere as summarized in Fedi, Francesco Petrarca 61–67).
male detractors as expressing a concern for his well-being—for the fourth complaint he lists a concern that he would do “più discretamente a pensar donde io dovessi aver del pane” (IV.Proem.7)—that masks their true misogyny, though he takes care to expose the latter.

Boccaccio frames the list with hyperbolic rhetoric that does not appear to match the nature of the criticisms themselves. After listing his detractors’ objections, he returns to the metaphor of strong winds, though the word he now uses, soffiamenti, aligns those winds more closely with gossip through the allusion to a puff of breath.9 The soffiamenti, however, are then subsumed into a double gradatio that extends the attacks far beyond mere chatter: “da così fatti soffiamenti, da così atroci denti, da così aguti, valorose donne, mentre io ne’ vostri servigi milito, sono sopintinto, molestato, e infino nel vivo trafitto” (IV.Intro.9).10 The general situation he describes, along with the noun servigi and the verb militare, combine to conjure the image of Boccaccio as knight-errant, here heroically wounded in a duel with a male rival: friendship has ceded to something else entirely. The reference to his woundedness, “sono . . . infino nel vivo trafitto,” suggests the risk he is willing to take on behalf of women while also figuring himself through the imagery of penetration as subject to the same sort of attack from men as women are. Boccaccio now has renewed reason to identify with women: he can share with them the feeling of being the object of male hostility.

In both the Proem and the Introduction to Day IV, therefore, Boccaccio speaks not only on his own behalf but for the ladies with whom he now identifies. In his Day IV answer he avers that he will not waste much time on these objections, though he does offer a carefully crafted two-part defense, first, the half-tale of Filippo Balducci and his son, and second, a series of answers to the specific objections.11 Significantly, the two parts have different addressees. Boccaccio directs the Filippo Balducci tale “a’ miei assalitori” (IV.Intro.11), but after suspending the narrative, he carefully

9. Just a few pages from now Ghismonda will be telling Guiscardo, as she hands him her fatal love letter wrapped in a reed, “Fara’ne questa sera un soffione alla tua servente, col quale ella raccheda il fuoco” (IV.1.7).

10. There have been various efforts to specify the identity of these critics. For Marga Cotino-Jones the group is composed of “extreme moralists,” “middle aged ‘wise men,’” “would-be litterateurs,” materialists, and realists (Order from Chaos 6). I find less convincing Gregory Stone’s claim that “These detractors . . . are clearly recognizable as protohumanists, those who dictate that the writer should compose in the paternal rather than the maternal tongue, in Latin rather than in Italian” (67). It is frankly easy to identify these critics as protohumanists, knowing of the advent of humanism, of which Boccaccio would have been unaware. Moreover, the debate over Latin versus vernacular does not arise with humanism but informs the work of such rigorously late-medieval authors as Dante. For the present purposes I limit myself to the observation that Boccaccio insists that all his critics are men.

11. The self-defense belongs to the genre of epideictic rhetoric, as Tronci details (94–102).
redirects himself to the ladies: “Ma avere infino a qui detto della presente novella voglio che mi basti e a coloro rivolgermi alli quali l’ho raccontata. Dicono adunque alquanti de’ miei riprensori che io fo male, o giovani donne . . .” (IV.Intro.30). Claiming that he will now rivolge[si] at the tale’s addressees, he in fact does not, carefully speaking instead to the ladies in the second person and referring to the men always in the third person. Men who read these defenses once again read as outsiders. Moreover, by alternating the addressees—first women, then men, then women again—Boccaccio highlights the extraordinary nature of the Filippo Balducci tale, which joins the Proem as the only two parts of the Decameron not specifically written to women. The Day IV introduction thus actually collapses the discourse of the Proem, aimed at a broader audience including men, and the Introduction to Day I, in which the author first speaks directly to women.

The two extraordinary aspects of the Filippo Balducci tale—its unique set of addressees and its claimed suspension—may in fact be linked. The story’s willful brevity may reflect, through aposiopesis or interruption, a growing irritation on Boccaccio’s part with his cranky detractors. He seems not to want to provide the same narrative satisfaction to his male reader that he does to his legitimate female audience, so he offers a story about which he suggests there is more that he is withholding. If, as Rossi suggests, the gratification he seeks to provide to women extends to the sexual, then Boccaccio seems to want to consign men to the same narrative/sexual frustration that he experienced during his period of unrequited passion. The tale’s significance for men extends further, however. The principal analysis of the novella has converged on the idea that it demonstrates the power of nature. Giuseppe Mazzotta’s reading typifies this line; for him the tale asserts the principle of “the failure of the artifice to contain within its bounds Nature’s wondrous powers, as well as the failure of that educa-

12. “Stopping suddenly in midcourse—leaving a statement unfinished” (Lanham 15).
13. There are two lines of argument about the story, first that its unfinished nature represents false modesty on the part of its author, and second that by remaining unfinished the story assumes the status of exemplum. Branca advocates the former (“egli finge forse di considerarla monca e non rifinita per modestia,” 1199), while Giovanni Getto (30) and Raffaello Ramat propose the latter. Antonio D’Andrea rejects both readings in favor of a third, that the unfinished quality of the story serves to highlight its standing as a somewhat risqué apology for Boccaccio’s love for women: “l’apologo diventa un pretesto di malizioso divertimento alle loro [his critics’] spalle, nella complicità, nella tacita intesa fra l’autore e il suo uditorio femminile” (127). Federico Sanguineti offers yet another solution: “espressione di una passione che è del Boccaccio stesso, la novella resta interrotta perché l’autore può portarla a termine solo realizzando fino in fondo la propria vocazione poetica con l’intero Decameron” (144).
14. Rossi, “Il paratesto” 41. On a similar technique, though with a different purpose, see Daniel Javitch’s classic essay on the Orlando furioso.
tion, imparted by the father, which attempts to repress the natural compulsions of sexuality” (133).

True enough, though such a reading does not complete the message delivered to the male readers. The latter concerns not simply the power of nature but the power of art as well. The father has not really failed in educating his son; rather, he has inadvertently succeeded. The tale itself, a parody of the medieval eremitic tradition (Delcorno, “Modelli agiografici” 350–45), offers a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of male aversion to women, in that the protagonist, despite having had a rewarding marriage, upon his wife’s death spurns all future intercourse, sexual or otherwise, with the opposite sex, and attempts to instill an aversion to women in his son. The story rests on a series of dichotomies: life with women versus life without women; the lay life versus the monastic life; culture versus nature; as well as a contrast between Filippo’s choice of an all-male community and the ladies’ decision to integrate their community with men. His wife dead, he follows her into a sort of living death, devoting himself to God and to his son in a rustic monastic existence outside of the city: “rimaso solo, del tutto si dispose di non volere più essere al mondo ma di darsi al servigio di Dio e il simigliante fare del suo piccol figliuolo” (IV.Intro.15). The ambiguous syntax admits two possible readings of “il simigliante fare”: Filippo does the same either by compelling his son to live in the service of God or by giving himself over to his son. Both possibilities play out in the story itself, where the father undertakes to educate the boy in religion, thus promoting his own dedication to God while serving his son’s needs.

Upon returning to Florence one day with his young son in tow, the father learns an unexpected lesson in the power of nature: “senti incontanente più aver di forza la natura che il suo ingegno” (IV.Intro.29). The phrase underscores not the nature/culture dichotomy, which will appear elsewhere, but a new opposition between the power of nature and the rage to order, here identified with the father’s *ingegno*. At this point the tale finds its common ground with the *Decameron* Proem, which similarly highlights the patriarchal desire for control. As a response to Boccaccio’s *assalitori*, however, the tale extends the critique of the will to control to the censorious efforts of the (male) critics who wish to control him. Filippo impersonates those critical male readers who are eager to isolate themselves from the reality of desire and its attendant consequences. In the young boy,

15. See also Scaglione 101–13, which details the tale’s many sources; Sanguineti; D’Andrea; Fedi, “Il ‘regno’ di Filostrato”; and Virgulti. Best takes the tale in a different direction.

16. For Marchesi *ingegno* is synonymous not with *cultura* in opposition to *natura*, but rather with *industria*, and in this case the father’s pedagogical efforts. For his reading of the *novella*, which similarly focuses on the problem of the father’s pedagogy, see *Stratigrafie decameroniane* 51–56.
on the other hand, one may identify Boccaccio himself, who must endure the misogynist critiques of powerful men but who is finally too captivated by women’s beauty to resist them or to succumb to the misogynist norms that would hognie him.\textsuperscript{17} The tale itself, as Mazzotta argues (133), demonstrates the futility of such repressive efforts.

While narratively incomplete—we never learn what Filippo Balducci does next—the story remains a central philosophical statement of the \textit{Decameron}, specifically as a parody of medieval nominalism. Filippo Balducci exposes what Mazzotta calls his “naive nominalism” when he refuses to use the word \textit{femina} to identify the women his son is seeing: “Il padre, per non destare nel concupiscibile appetito del giovane alcuno inchinevole disiderio men che utile, non le volle nominare per lo proprio nome, cioè femine, ma disse: ‘Elle si chiamano papere’” (IV.Intro.23). Unlike Dante, who claims that “Nomina sunt consequentia rerum” (\textit{Vita nuova} xiii.4), Filippo thinks that “Res sunt consequentia nominum,” in other words, that the word \textit{femine} itself carries an erotic power independent of the object to which it refers, so that by dislodging the object from its name one can effectively remove the object from the erotic sphere.\textsuperscript{18} The story, however, suggests that eroticism inheres in the object and not in language, as the boy’s reaction proves: “Maravigliosa cosa a udir! Colui che mai più alcuna veduta non avea, non curatosi de’ palagi, non del bue, non del cavallo, non dell’asino, non de’ denari né d’altra cosa che veduta avesse, subitamente disse: ‘Padre mio, io vi priego che voi faciate che io abbia una di quelle papere’” (IV.Intro.24). So the story remarks on the futility of censorship. Filippo thinks he can stem his son’s desire by playing with language, but he fails.\textsuperscript{19}

If, as I have suggested, Filippo represents Boccaccio’s critics and the boy Boccaccio himself, then the story demonstrates the foolishness of the

\textsuperscript{17} Federico Sanguineti likewise links the Balducci boy to Boccaccio, principally through autobiographical material found in the \textit{Genealogia deorum gentilium}.

\textsuperscript{18} For Marcus, in fact, the tale “is less about a boy’s sexual awakening than his father’s lesson in fiction-making” (\textit{An Allegory of Form} 51). Best argues that “The father changes the name of the women to \textit{papere} in order to shield his son not merely from desiring the women, but from the danger of female sexuality.” She also points out that Filippo’s choice of \textit{papera}, which refers metaphorically to ‘a stupid, awkward woman,’ reinforces the feminine presence in the text with comic effect. Filippo’s particular choice of name in this instance demonstrates the ineffectiveness of discursive repression, and specifically repression of ‘dangerous’ material” (158–59).

\textsuperscript{19} As Tronci puts it, “Filippo Balducci è . . . convinto che i nomi siano \textit{substantia rerum} e siano dotati di caratteri universali e astratti; il sano empirismo del figlio, che collega il nome all’esperienza e lo priva, perciò, di valore conoscitivo universale, smentirà le convinzioni del padre” (98).
book’s critics in thinking that their own censorship would work. Herein then lies Boccaccio’s paradoxical rationale for writing the *Decameron*: in a sense, it has already been written. He affirms as much in the Introduction to Day I, where he figures himself as a mere transcriptionist: “sì come io poi da persona degna di fede sentii” (I.Intro.49). The book does not claim to set forth an ideology; rather, it simply records empirical reality, the same reality that Boccaccio records in the exchange between Tindaro and Licisca at the beginning of the sixth day. That some might find that reality to be too erotically charged is finally their problem, for as Boccaccio reminds his female readers in the Conclusion, “Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sana-mente parola” (Conc.11): the subjectivity of reading trumps any claims a book might make.

I argued above that Dante would be a key player here, and he is, not simply in Boccaccio’s parody of his nominalism but also in the comprehensive parody of the *Vita nuova* that subtends the Filippo Balducci tale. The son’s discovery of women in fact conflates two encounter scenes featuring Dante and Beatrice. The first takes place when Dante, by now almost 18, meets Beatrice as she strolls along a Florentine street with two female friends. Dante summons the courage to look at her, and she responds with her famous greeting. The later meeting, in chapter XIV, occurs after Beatrice has withdrawn her saluto out of pique with Dante, and it involves a chance encounter at a wedding celebration. Near collapse after sensing her presence, Dante pretends to study a fresco that decorates the walls of the house he is visiting. Elements from both scenes appear in the son’s discovery of women. He first sees them on the street in a group of “belle giovani donne e ornate, che da un paio di nozze venieno” (iv.intro.20). Moreover, as Dante had sought refuge in a fresco, so too does Filippo’s son make recourse to art as a means to express his wonder at what he has just seen: “elle son più belle che gli agnoli dipinti che voi m’avete più volte mostrati. Deh! Se vi cal di me, fate che noi ce ne meniamo una colà sù di queste papere, e io le darò beccare” (iv.intro.20, 28). As the punch line makes clear, any attempt to read this encounter in the lofty key of the *Vita nuova* will not stand up: attempts to sublimate desire in intellection run up hard against an erotic impulse having its roots in nature, not culture.21

20. Curiously, the question of censorship enters into only one of the five accusations against him that Boccaccio details: “Altri, più maturamente mostrando di voler dire, hanno detto che alla mia età non sta bene l’andare dietro a queste cose, cioè a ragionar di donne o a compiacer loro” (I.Intro.6; italics mine). As the tale demonstrates, however, Boccaccio perceives his critics’ overall thrust as aimed at getting him to change the subject.

21. Michelangelo Picone sums it up: “In effetti, alla donna-demonio deprecata dal modello orientale, e alla donna-angelo esaltata da Dante, l’autore del Centonovelle sostituisce la donna-donna, nella sua identità sociale e psicologica, ma anche nella sua diversità affettiva e
That is not the only point, however, and by no means does culture lie outside the mix. Filippo’s isolation, which sequesters him from literature’s function as mediator of erotic desire that is foundational both to the Decameron and to the story told in the Vita nuova,22 is not complete: for he has been studying art. The object of his study, the agnoli dipinti, is what Maria Corti calls an ipersegno or hypersign.23 It is an especially complex type of hypersign because its referents lie both within and beyond Filippo’s discourse. In the ongoing context of the story the son’s invocation of painted angels suggests the inevitability of culture, even in the most isolated settings; most significantly, it denotes how culture mediates even our relationship with God. In this context the father’s efforts to educate his son have inadvertently succeeded, for without realizing it he has taught the boy an appreciation of aesthetics. The son has focused on the paintings less for what they signify, angels, than as aesthetic objects: in effect, their transcendental signification is irrelevant, as he uses them as a basis of comparison with the beauty of women. His father had insisted on an education in divinity: “... sommamente si guardava di non ragionare, là dove egli fosse, d’alcuna temporal cosa né di lasciar negli alcuna vedere, acciò che esse da così fatto servigio nol traessero, ma sempre della gloria di vita eterna e di Dio e de’ santi gli ragionava, nulla altro che sante orazioni insegnando-gli” (IV.Intro.15). In showing his son the agnoli dipinti Filippo would have insisted on their divinity; they were not a temporal cosa. But the son clearly understood them, as paintings, to be a temporal cosa, artifacts rather than true angels, signifying the world of man-made things.

Outside the story, the affiliation of angels with women necessarily recalls the notion of the donna-angelo, which Louise George Clubb has defined as “the most foreign to Boccaccio’s thinking” of the many Stilnovist sessuale” (“Il macrotesto” 25). Delcorno observes: “L’amémimia, la deliberata rimozione del passato, e soprattutto dei legami affettivi, si tramuta nel divieto di ogni cognizione della società; la ‘vita angelica,’ che si raggiunge con una dolorosa lotta contro le tentazioni del demonio, si riduce ad un insipido baloccarsi con gli ‘agnoli dipinti’ nella cella” (“Modelli agiografici” 353–54).

22. Here I would distinguish the Vita nuova qua text from the story it tells. Literature functions to mediate erotic desire in the experience of the young Dante in that he writes poetry as his story unfolds. Only ex post facto, and specifically in the encounter of the pilgrim Dante with Paolo and Francesca in Inferno V, does he realize that the book itself, the Vita nuova in its combination of prose narrative and poetry, could function to mediate someone else’s erotic desire.

23. “La denominazione di ipersegno, che qui si assume per l’opera d’arte in prospettiva semiotologica, nasce dal fatto che l’opera può produrre un grado altissimo di informazione proprio in quanto in essa si potenzia il complesso, come tale, dei segni che la costituiscono ...” (Principi 121).
concepts he had inherited. If the *Vita nuova*, and the *Stil novo* more generally, attempted to rationalize love for women by identifying them as the embodiment of angels, this story makes a joke of such an association by flipping it. No longer is the angelic the standard for female beauty, for female beauty transcends the angelic, at least as far as Filippo’s son can imagine thanks to his study of paintings. These metaliterary considerations, which simultaneously locate art as a mediator for our understanding of the divine and as inadequate in the face of nature, collide in the highly combustible space of the unfinished tale. The contradictions resolve themselves in their affirmation of the centrality of art, a point that paradoxically completes the argument that the tale celebrates the power of nature. The tale establishes art as the touchstone, the point of reference, for our understanding both of God and of nature. We do not understand art through God or nature; rather we understand God and nature through art. This anthropocentric view of the universe finds resonance elsewhere in the *Decameron*, as I shall detail later.

In addressing the specific objections leveled against him, Boccaccio recurs not to the lessons of the Filippo Balducci tale, which he leaves to his readers to divine, but rather to metaphors of wind, which he uses to suggest both the vacuousness of the critiques and the way they inadvertently give him greater credibility with women. So completely in fact does he discount his male readers that in his final authorial statement, the “Conclusione dell’autore,” he addresses himself to female readers who might voice objections. Having recommitted himself to the ladies at the end of the Day IV introduction ("E se mai con tutta la mia forza a dovervi in cosa alcuna compiacere mi disposi, ora più che mai mi vi disporrò," IV.Intro.41), he now worries that he may not entirely have succeeded. Using the same rhetorical strategy undertaken in the Introduction to Day IV, he first speaks to the ladies in the second person, “Nobilissime giovani” (Conc.1), then reverts to the third person when anticipating objections from his female readers: “Saranno per avventura alcune di voi che diranno” (Conc.3); “Saranno similmente di quelle che diranno qui” (Conc.16), and so forth. Unlike the testy male readers, however, these women, even if not entirely happy with the product, are entitled to read the *Decameron*. They thus receive a more respectful hearing: there is no gesture of exclusion, but rather serious engagement with his interlocutors.

A comparison of the objections raised by the two groups exposes telling differences. In the Introduction to Day IV Boccaccio cites five objec-

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24. See Clubb (191), who locates Boccaccio’s parody of the courtly love tradition and *stilnovismo* in the tale of Frate Alberto and Lisetta (IV.2). See also Marcus, “The Sweet New Style Reconsidered,” for a treatment of this problem in the *Decameron*. 
tions from the men: first, that he likes the ladies too much, and that taking
so much pleasure in pleasing, consoling, and worse, commending ladies is
indecent ("una cosa non è," IV.Intro.5); second, that he is not acting his
age; third, that the Muses on Parnassus would make wiser company than
the ladies whom he chooses to frequent; fourth, that he would do well to
think about how to earn some money rather than pursue idle chatter; and
finally, that the stories as he tells them are factually inaccurate. The female
readers, on the other hand, might object first that he has been too licentious
in writing the stories; second, that some of the tales could easily have been
left out; third, that some of the stories are too long; fourth, that the tales
are sometimes too frivolous for a writer of Boccaccio’s merit; and finally,
that Boccaccio has spoken with a poisoned tongue by telling the truth about
friars. Of these, only the fourth approaches any of the objections raised by
the men, specifically that he is not acting his age. Overall, the male read-
ers are represented as engaging in *ad hominem* attacks against Boccaccio,
often with an indirect assault on women, while the female readers emerge
as much more interested in a conversation about the nature and content of
the tales themselves, regardless of their factual accuracy.

With regard to the question of his seriousness, after first thanking the
ladies for their concern about his reputation, Boccaccio offers his final and
enduring self-image: "Io confesso d’esser pesato e molte volte de’ miei di
essere stato; e per ciò, parlando a quelle che pesato non m’hanno, affermo
che io non son grave, anzi son io sì lieve, che sto a galla nell’acqua . . ."
(Conc.23). The statement puns on the projected objection that the light-
hearted nature of the tales “non convenirsì a un uomo pesato e grave”
(Conc.22). It also recalls the earlier metaphor Boccaccio had used to char-
acterize himself, that of dust, and the two function in similar ways. The
comparison to dust is paradoxically a metaphor of triumph: sometimes it
remains obstinately on the ground, despite the wind; at other times it rises
above the heads of men and the symbols of their power, and if it drops it can
don only as far as its place of departure, the ground itself. In other words,
Boccaccio can only rise or remain essentially in place on the wind of his
critics; he can never suffer true abasement.

These three components—the Proem, the Introduction to Day IV, and the Author’s Conclusion—together enact the first level of exclusion/inclusion interplay in the *Decameron*. They project a fantasy of safety and
security, where men can suffer disappointment in love but reward women
rather than abjure them; where an author can insulate himself from his
male critics; and where women read, and read critically, challenging their
author and earning a respectful reply. At the same time, however, Boccaccio
exposes the negative consequences of the same safety to which men may
claim recourse when they lock women in their rooms: boredom, loneliness, a sense of suffocation. Yet these women risk further suffering by somehow procuring reading material to which their jailers, the record shows, would object. In this way the author creates another frame beyond the so-called frame tale of plague and flight. It intersects with the latter in two significant ways: first, by asserting that women can actively participate in the literary conversation, and second, by projecting the risks that women might run by venturing to chat, thus reciprocating his gesture of friendship. While the frame tale itself will show women reconstructing the world to suit their interests and concerns, they cannot avoid all dangers.

The Organization of the *Brigata*

Proof of the omnipresence of danger comes in a form that adds another layer of irony to the *Decameron*: mankind’s betrayal by nature, the same element that Boccaccio had so extolled in his author’s statements. The plague that afflicts Florence in 1348 wields its destructive force not only against humans (and animals), but also by extension against human institutions, whose collapse Boccaccio details in the Introduction to Day I. In the face of a double peril, disease and social disarray, the ten young people who will recount the book’s 100 tales flee the sick city, but always keep an eye on it. Glancing over their collective shoulder, they organize themselves in a way that reflects and comments on the world they have left, and that appears to offer new possibilities for those very women whose status Boccaccio so laments in the Proem. Boccaccio himself notes that “in tanta afflizione e miseria della nostra città era la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane” (I.Intro.23), so it is not surprising that as one of its first tasks the *brigata* restores some sense of legal order.

The group’s effort at restoration reflects both the generalized disorder of Florentine society and their own disordered initial structure. The seven women come together, as Stillinger underscores, in an “initial chance meeting” (“Place of the Title” 31), with only tangential common traits: beyond displaying the religious devotion that leads them to the church, they are “savia ciascuna e di sangue nobile e bella di forma e ornate di costume e di

25. Pier Massimo Forni offers a brilliant intuition about the relationship between the plague and storytelling, casting the former in a therapeutic context: “By killing fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands [the oppressors of women Boccaccio names in the Proem], the plague occasions the idyllic retreat of the *brigata*, allowing the female readers to imagine an alternative world unencumbered by relentless figures of authority” (“Therapy and Prophylaxis in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*” 161).
The order of outsiders

• leggiadra onestà.” Each of these is, however, an individual quality, not a unifying one, and the ties that do bind them are various, suggesting that they do not already constitute a formal group of any sort: “tutte l’una all’altra o per amistà o per vicinanza o per parentado congiunte” (I.Intro.49). Their group identity will eventually emerge in two phases, first when Pampinea furnishes the rationale that unites them—the need to survive—and later, when Dioneo presses for the elucidation of principles that will inform both their governance and their storytelling. In these two phases they personify two of Aristotle’s three types of friendship. By recognizing a practical motive for staying together, they establish a utilitarian friendship, and later, when affirming that the purpose of their sojourn is to live together festevolmente, they form a friendship based on pleasure. Both types are, by Aristotle’s analysis, imperfect, in contrast with friendship that is based in the good. Both are also common among adolescents and the young, and markedly transitory: “... these friendships are friendships incidentally; for the one loved is not loved by reference to the person he is but to the fact that in the one case he provides some good and in the other some pleasure. Such friendships, then, are easily dissolved, if the parties become different...” (1156a15; Rowe trans. 211).

Indeed, the Decameron offers no evidence that the group’s friendship progresses beyond these limits to something more enduring. In the last sentence of the brigata narrative, the group returns to Florence and dissolves into its old life, coming apart in the reverse order of its formation: “... i tre giovani, lasciate le sette donne in Santa maria Novella, donde con loro partiti s’erano, da esse accommiatatosi, a’ loro altri piaceri attesero, e esse, quando tempo lor parve, se ne tornarono alle lor case” (X.Conc.16). Having returned to the scene of death and disease, the ten young people appear to pick up where they left off.26 The three young men attend to their altri piaceri, suggesting retroactively the role that pleasure has played in structuring their experience, while the young women return home, a place marked most recently by death, abandonment, and abject loneliness. While we often note the fiabesque quality of the Day X stories we perhaps overlook that the entire book has a fablelike quality, that the harmony conjured among its ten protagonists, so rooted in history, is also wholly removed from it, and that the book’s insistent marking of time serves as a mask for the almost complete ablation of real time.

In its fade to black the Decameron thus reminds its readers of the group’s wholly incidental nature, its initial formlessness. That formlessness also

26. For Joseph Gibaldi the return to the church completes “the cyclical movement of the archetypal adventure: separation-initiation-return” (354).
offers unanticipated advantages, as the group coalesces with no prior sense of identity and therefore no preconceived notion of governance. While the group surely borrows from extant models, there is no one governmental model to which it refers, either civic or religious. Thus the women in particular pay lip service to entrenched ideologies, most notably regarding the need for male leadership, while simultaneously flouting them.

Their first decision, to flee and reorganize themselves elsewhere, recalls a solution already practiced within the confines of Florence, that of segregation, voluntary confinement, and moderate living. While frightened Florentines shut themselves in their homes, however, in the countryside the ten live principally in the open air, as if in silent defiance of the urban conventions they have come to see as unhealthy. Moreover, unlike those who remain in Florence, who either delude themselves into thinking that they still have a functioning government or do not care, the ten young people intuit the need to codify their relationship with both a new constitution and a series of statutes. Distancing themselves from the city, they appear to recognize that they no longer live under Florentine law, and their social organization reflects more than simply the survival instinct that drove their Florentine counterparts to seclude themselves and to live in moderation.

Arriving at the first villa, the *brigata* formulates its constitution, what Joseph Gibaldi has called a “democratic autocracy” (352), complete with a Kelsenian basic norm. Dioneo unintentionally gives voice to the basic norm when he tells the ladies that “o voi a sollazzare e a ridere e a cantare con meco insieme vi disponete (tanto, dico, quanto alla vostra dignità s’appartiene), o voi mi licenziate che io per li miei pensier mi ritorni e steami nella città tribolata” (I.Intro.93). The sentence itself discloses a concept of male–female relations that was not entirely clear when the group first gathered in Santa Maria Novella. Dioneo acknowledges the ladies’ authority over him, because they can grant him license to leave, if not physically then mentally, but he also implies that by agreeing to their plan he is indebted them to him: they must join him in merrymaking. This conception of dual roles is consistent with Pampinea’s statement, appar-

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27. The exact nature of Dioneo’s threat is unclear. While some have translated this passage to indicate his intention physically to return to Florence, it is equally possible that he means to say that unless they endeavor to entertain him he will have no choice but to brood about Florence. If this interpretation is correct, then the storytelling itself enacts yet another irony, as many of the stories do in fact return the *brigata* metaphorically to Florence.

28. As Alessandro Duranti points out, Dioneo’s request is typical of his status as an outsider within the group: “Fino dal suo esordio è chiaro che Dioneo pensa alla brigata non nell’ordine della decina, ma come a un composto, provvisorio e di non facile mantenimento, di nove più uno” (6). While Duranti does not pause to consider the implications of Dioneo’s arithmetic, they are nonetheless evident.
ently out of earshot of the men, that “la fortuna . . . hacci davanti posti discreti giovani e valorosi, li quali volentieri e guida e servidor ne saranno” (I.Intro.80), though her remark hardly has the binding quality implied in Dioneo’s. Pampinea borrows from the courtly love lexicon (servidor) to suggest that the men will have the same sort of status as the courtly lover, being both the servant who submits to the lady’s will and the guide, as all men ultimately have authority over women. The actual invitation she extends to the men is less explicit: “pregogli per parte di tutte che con puro e fratellevole animo a tener lor compagnia si dovessero disporre” (I.Intro.87). Whereas her earlier position had been wholly hierarchical, now Pampinea could not be more ideologically egalitarian. She appeals to the men’s pure and brotherly disposition or affection, to keep the ladies company, literally to break bread with them. The shift from a vertical to a horizontal rhetoric would appear to be politically motivated: Pampinea neither wants to offend the men by suggesting that the ladies will govern nor wants the men to think that they will rule over the ladies. She also appears to want to clarify the exact nature of the company they will share: it will be fraternal, and therefore not erotic.

Upon hearing Dioneo’s ultimatum, Pampinea converts it into the basic norm on which the constitution will rest: “Dioneo, ottimamente parli: festevolmente viver si vuole, né altra cagione dalle tristizie ci ha fatte fuggire. Ma per ciò che le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare, io, che cominciatrice fui de’ ragionamenti da’ quali questa così bella compagnia è stata fatta, pensando al continuar della nostra letizia, estimo che di necessità sia convenire esser tra noi” (I.Intro.94–95). Pampinea demonstrates here again her extraordinary political skills. The narrator describes her as “non d’altra maniera che se similmente tutti i suoi [pensieri] avesse da sé cacciati” (I.Intro.94): she appears to abandon all thoughts of her own in order to affirm Dioneo’s. She then concurs with him, that they fled Florence in order to live festevolmente: before he had arrived in the church she had in fact argued that by fleeing to the country they could find “quella festa, quella allegrezza, quello piacere . . . senza trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione” (I.Intro.65). At the same time, however, she makes

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29. Dioneo himself in fact reverses Pampinea’s claim that men will act as guida when he tells the ladies that “il vostro senno più che il nostro avvedimento ci ha qui guidati” (I.Intro.92; italics mine).
30. Each in fact is linked amorously to one of the three ladies (I.Intro.78).
31. According to Zingarelli the noun compagno comes from the medieval Latin companion, a compound of cum, with, and panis, bread.
32. On this crucial sentence see Kirkham 7–12. Mazzotta interprets “ragione” here as “restraint, rather than as an abstract rationality which would conform either to the order of nature, which in reality is sheer chaos, or to the order of the garden to which they move, for
a subtle and curious distinction: “né altra cagione dalle tristizie ci ha fatte fuggire.” She speaks only for the ladies, not for the men. She may technically be correct, since all we know from the narrative is that she “loro [to the men] la lor [the ladies’] disposizione fé manifesta” (I.Intro.87). In other words, Pampinea may have told the men of the ladies’ plan to leave the city, neglecting to mention their resolve to have fun at their destination, in which case she cannot fairly speak for any festive intentions on the part of the men in coming to the place. Supporting such an interpretation is Dioneo’s remark that “io non so quello che de’ vostri pensieri voi v’intendete di fare” (I.Intro 93). In any event, the exchange, while enacting the sort of compact that appears to satisfy the desires of both parties, in fact installs a certain gender-based tension: Dioneo demands compensatory pleasure for his companionship, whereas Pampinea tries to return to the question of the ladies’ pleasure.

Rather than dwell on any potential disharmony between her and Dioneo, Pampinea continues seamlessly along the rhetorical path she has laid out. She emphasizes the egalitarian notion of compagnia that had informed the original invitation, while simultaneously reverting to a hierarchical sense of order. The group needs modo, which Branca glosses as “ordine e misura” (999), in order to endure, and Pampinea claims the right to establish that modo by virtue of the fact that she had first opened the discussion that led to the present moment. Her assertion of authority here is significant: after all, she could just as easily defer to Dioneo, asking him how he would propose to organize the group and its time. She appears finally to be only secondarily interested in the pleasure or the authority of the men. Despite her earlier notion that the men could be the ladies’ guida, in fact she has no real intention to defer to them.

Pampinea’s concept of governance does however enable a compromise between her egalitarian and hierarchical impulses. On the one hand she acknowledges the need for a “principale, il quale noi e onoriamo e ubidiamo come maggiore,” charged to arrange things so that all can lietamente vivere (I.Intro.96). On the other she proposes the sharing of this duty, so that each day at vespers the monarch will appoint a successor who “secondo il suo arbitrio, del tempo che la sua signoria dee bastare, del luogo e del modo nel quale a vivere abbiamo ordini e disponga” (I.Intro.96). Thus she again balances notions of pleasure and discipline along with egalitarian and hierarchical impulses. Having concurred with Dioneo about happy living, she also argues that the group’s happiness can endure only within a framework
of governance. While she acknowledges that there is pleasure in ruling, she also sees how the burdens of office can finally dilute one’s pleasure, hence the rotation. Finally, she assumes that the rulers will be both men and women, as indicated by a somewhat belabored insistence on colui and colei, him and her, when discussing the question of succession.

Pampinea’s constitution wins quick and unanimous consent, as does her election as queen. There follow in quick order several provisions that emanate from the constitutional principles. Filomena weaves a laurel crown that will endure as the symbol of authority, passed from ruler to ruler. Pampinea then issues a series of statutes pertaining to the group’s daily life. In a continuation of the pas de deux that has been her interaction with Dioneo up until now, she first appoints Parmeno, Dioneo’s manservant, as her steward.33 Her language throughout remains consistent: she refers to “la nostra compagnia” and invokes the values of ordine and piacere, as well as the need to live “senza vergogna” (I.Intro.98). Elsewhere her lexicon borders on the legalistic: she uses the verb constituire in her appointment of Parmeno, and she names Chimera and Stratilia “al governo delle camere delle donne” (I.Intro.101). She concludes with a statute intended to put in force the basic norm: “E ciascun generalmente, per quanto egli avrà cara la nostra grazia, vogliamo e comandiamo che si guardi, dove che egli vada, onde che egli torni, che che egli oda o vegga, niuna novella altra che lieta ci rechi di fuori” (I.Intro.101). The sentence has unforeseen consequences, as we shall see in the fourth day, because it apparently conflicts with Pampinea’s earlier constitutional provision that each ruler will have the power (“il suo arbitrio”) to determine “del luogo e del modo del quale a vivere abbiamo ordini e disponga” (I.Intro.96). To the extent that this norm extends from the basic norm “festevinmente viver si vuole,” it would appear that the arbitrio to which Pampinea refers is circumscribed by the normative notion that life be festive. Her second statute, cited above, may in fact extend only to the length of her rule: just as each new ruler will determine a new theme for the next day’s narration, so too is it not clear that the other provisions made by previous rulers carry over into future days. This ambiguity in Pampinea’s legal order, the only apparent one, will provoke the constitutional crisis of Day IV.

33. While Dioneo has traditionally been coupled amorously with Fiammetta (Decameron ed. Branca 997), I would not overlook the tension between Dioneo and Pampinea as suggesting a possible relationship between them. Kirkham prefers to see Panfilo as Pampinea’s allegorical complement (Prudence and Reason) and even goes so far as to suggest that they may be two of the relatives among the group to which the narrator alludes (166), but a triangulation of Pampinea’s prudence with Panfilo’s reason and Dioneo’s concupiscence nuance Pampinea’s character in intriguing ways.
Superficially, then, the new constitution bears all the marks of positive law, and its elaboration by a woman would appear to detach it from any natural law moorings. However, while emphasizing women’s pleasure, using her rhetorical skills to consolidate her own leadership, and proposing a constitution that will empower women, Pampinea in fact cleverly engages natural law principles. Elissa’s remark that “Veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo e senza l’ordine loro rade volte riesce alcuna nostra opera a laudevole fine” (I.Intro 76), with its Pauline echoes, repeats a basic corollary of natural law theory that genders the order of the universe as male. Natural law theorists such as Aquinas and Dante repeatedly affirm the patrilinear order of the universe. In *On Kingship* 1.1, Aquinas writes: “And so we refer to those who rule perfect communities, that is, cities or provinces, as kings in the fullest sense. And we call those who rule households fathers of families, not kings, although fathers are analogous to kings, and we for that reason sometimes call kings fathers of their peoples” (*On Law, Morality, and Politics* 207). Dante elaborates a similar hierarchy in *Monarchy*: “Again, every son is in a good (indeed, ideal) state when he follows in the footsteps of a perfect father, insofar as his own nature allows. Mankind is the son of heaven, which is quite perfect in all its working; for man and the sun generate man, as we read in the second book of the *Physics*. Therefore mankind is in its ideal state when it follows the footsteps of heaven, insofar as its nature allows” (13).34 Both authors predicate their argument on the assumption that God is male, no doubt encouraged by the statement in Genesis 1:27 that “God created man in His own image.”35 In asserting her own leadership and in seizing authority Pampinea therefore appears to challenge basic assumptions about the ordering of the universe, as well as to endanger the status of her little monarchy. To read such a move simply as consistent with the “world turned upside down” theme of the *Decameron* skirts some of the richer implications of Pampinea’s effort.

Indeed, Pampinea shows herself to be quite a creative reader of natural law theory. In the *Summa*, Question 91, Aquinas discusses the relationship between three types of law, eternal, natural, and human. Natural law is

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34. “Item, bene et optime se habet omnis filius cum vestigial perfectis patris, in quantum propria natura mermitcis, ymitatur. Humanum genus filius est celi, quod est perfectissimum in omni opera suo: generat enim homo hominem et sol, iuxta secundum De natura auditu. Ergo optime se habet humanum genus cum vestigia celi, in quantum propria natura permissitcis, ymitatur” (I.ix). The Latin noun *genus* is neutral, so the masculine attribution, *filius*, is deliberate.

35. Alter translates the entire verse as follows: “And God created the human in his image, / in the image of God He created him, / male and female He created them.” He further points out that “In the middle clause of this verse, ‘him,’ as in the Hebrew, is grammatically but not anatomically masculine” (19n.). It seems unlikely that medieval commentators would have perceived this subtle distinction.
for Aquinas human participation in eternal law: “Among them [all things] intelligent creatures are ranked under divine Providence the more nobly because they take part in Providence by their own providing for themselves and others. Thus they join in and make their own the Eternal Reason through which they have their natural aptitudes for their due activity and purpose. Now this sharing in the Eternal Law by intelligent creatures is what we call ‘natural law’” (ST 1a2æ. 91, 2). Natural law, Aquinas continues, is the reflected light of eternal law, literally imprinted on men. God’s law is thus made visible in a way that allows rational creatures to perceive it: one can almost discern Plato’s allegory of the cave behind Aquinas’s discourse. For Pampinea to know natural law, in other words, for her to share in the eternal law, would appear therefore to depend on whether one can count her among rational creatures. Filomena would appear not to, for she argues that “non ce n’ha niuna sì fanciulla, che non possa ben conoscere come le femine sien ragionate insieme e senza la provedenza d’alcuno uomo si sappiano regolare” (I.Intro.74). She also describes women in terms that make them antithetical to reason: “Noi siamo mobili, riottose, sospettose, pusillanime e paurose” (I.Intro.75). And yet her very logic furnishes its own loophole in her insistence on the “provedenza d’alcuno uomo.” Seeing women as fundamentally irrational, Filomena insists that they need men, the rational creatures, to lead them, thus furthering the hierarchical order imposed from above. Her language would appear to make that claim, but the noun provedenza has divine associations, as Aquinas suggests above. One wonders therefore whether Filomena’s remark about the need for “la provedenza d’alcuno uomo” cannot be satisfied by following divine providence, God being after all male and Christ himself having been a man, as long as one can prove that women are capable of being rational creatures.

Boccaccio seems to think so, for the logic of Pampinea’s arguments, and her ability to elaborate the group’s constitution, suggests that she is sublimely rational. At the beginning of her speech to the assembled women in Santa Maria Novella, she recalls the oft-repeated assertion that “a niuna persona fa ingiuria chi onestamente usa la sua ragione,” and she continues by arguing that “Natural ragione è, di ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere” (I.Intro.53). As an example of that point she cites killing in self-defense, and she casts her own proposal for the group’s survival against this extreme: “E se questo concedono le leggi, nelle sollecitudini delle quali è il ben vivere d’ogni mortale, quanto maggiormente, senza offesa d’alcuno, è a noi e a qualunque altro onesto

36. See for example Paradiso XI.28–30: “La provedenza, che govern ail mondo / con quel consiglio nel quale ogni aspetto / creato è vinto prìa che vada al fondo. . . .”
alla conservazione della nostra vita prendere quegli rimedii che noi possiamo?” (I.Intro.54). Her argument thus rests on an understanding of the general purpose of a legal order as set forth, for example, by Aquinas in the *Summa*: “the chief and main concern of law properly so called is the plan for the common good” (*ST* 1a2æ. 90, 3).\(^{37}\) As well, her insistence that the group’s activities in the country not “trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione” (I.Intro.65) marks her as someone for whom engagement with reason is tantamount.\(^{38}\)

Moreover, Pampinea engages with a specific type of reason, practical reason, an extension of natural law that for Aquinas gives rise to human law: “. . . law is a dictate of the practical reason. Now the processes of the theoretic and practical reasons are parallel; both, we have held, start from certain principles and come to certain conclusions. . . . also from natural law precepts as from common and indemonstrable principles the human reason comes down to making more specific arrangements. . . . called ‘human laws.’ . . . The practical reason is concerned with things to be done, which are individual and contingent, not with the necessary things that are the concern of the theoretic reason” (*ST* 1a2æ. 91, 3).\(^{39}\) There is no question but that Pampinea concerns herself with practical matters: her speech in Santa Maria Novella, her outline of the constitution, and her first statutes all share a practical, contingent orientation. Now, one may argue that her reason in fact diverges from natural law because she does not follow “general and indemonstrable principles” in insisting on festevolmente viver. However, her claim that survival is paramount certainly follows such a first principle, and in general her proposals conform to Aquinas’s own definition of law as oriented to the common good. The sequence of events, in which Pampinea first proposes escape from the ruined city as clearly to the common good—both to avoid its dangers and corruption and to enjoy the pleasure the women deserve—and then carefully articulates the principle of festevolmente viver as serving the purposes of the whole group, reflects her intention, as a lawgiver, to act in the best interests of all, as natural law dictates.

Pampinea thus reveals herself to be well versed in natural law theory;

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\(^{37}\) Aquinas derives his argument from Aristotle, citing *Ethics* V.1: “we call just the things that create and preserve happiness and its parts for the citizen community” (1129b18–19; Rowe trans. 159).

\(^{38}\) Kirkham traces the origins and implications of this statement through Dante and Aquinas, the latter of whom is foundational for much of my argument—while identifying Pampinea as the personification of Prudence (*The Sign of Reason* 7–12).

\(^{39}\) Pampinea’s ability to deploy practical reason is consistent with her figuration as Prudence, whose purpose, as Kirkham summarizes it from Aquinas, “is to perfect the rational power of the soul” (*The Sign of Reason* 150).
her own ideas extend from and capitalize on it as she envisions a new society for her friends. In assigning this role to a woman, Boccaccio executes a careful coup. The world of the brigata does not reject the predicates of the world of men; rather it affirms them. It is in her understanding of law and of the theory that subsumes it that Pampinea realizes the full force of her leadership and becomes such a compelling figure. She does not lead the group outside of male structures; rather, she shows how they can now deploy previously established structures and principles to their own profit. Her legerdemain does not come free of charge, however, for her rhetoric of inclusion and practical marginalization of men will lead to various efforts by Filostrato, Dioneo, and Panfilo to right the balance when they assume power.

Enter the Eavesdropper

Cognizant that the rhetorical exclusion of men from the world of the book does not equate to the exclusion of men from the world, Boccaccio assigns a specific place to men, at all three textual levels: they are eavesdroppers. Boccaccio’s male critics, consigned to a state of unrequited desire because he never concludes the story of Filippo Balducci, and who must listen in as a third party as Boccaccio answers them through the ladies, are forced to eavesdrop. So, too, in a sense, are the three young men who accompany the seven ladies outside of town. Invited because the women doubt their ability to survive without men, as an audience to the storytelling they remain at the margins. Boccaccio makes this clear by having every narrator, in introducing his or her story, specifically address the women: the men are present and listen, but they remain secondary. Perhaps their own sense of living at the edges of this narrative world will inform the sorts of reactions we witness when they are finally in charge.

Complementary to the role of the three brigata males listening at the sidelines is the figure of the eavesdropper that Boccaccio inserts into his tales at critical moments. The first eavesdroppers of the hundred stories are the little-noted pair of Florentine brothers who offer housing to Ser Ciappelletto, and the Pratese Ciappelletto himself. The latter is in fact, among other things, the first affirmed eavesdropper of the Decameron, overhearing the two brothers’ worried conversation as he languishes on his deathbed: “Ser Ciappelletto, il quale, come dicemmo, presso giacea là dove costoro così ragionavano, avendo l’udire sottile, sì come le più volte veggiamo aver gli’inferv, udì ciò che costoro di lui dicevano . . .” (i.1.27). In addition, therefore, to being a great raconteur and liar, Ciappelletto is a gifted listener,
though this particular endowment carries an extraordinary price tag: terminal illness. He can also muster the sort of generosity—offering to commit yet another sin against God (“Io ho, vivendo, tante ingiurie fatte a Domene-dio, che, per farnegli io una ora in su la mia morte, né più né meno ne farà,” I.1.28) in order to spare his hosts any difficulty at his death—that nuances his character in suggestive and comic ways.40 The healthy Florentine brothers listen more intentionally: “Li due fratelli, li quali dubitavan forte non ser Ciappelletto gl’inganasse, s’eran posti appresso a un tavolato, il quale la camera dove ser Ciappelletto giaceva dividea da un’altra, e ascoltando leg-giermente udivano e intendevano ciò che ser Ciappelletto al frate diceva; e aveano alcuna volta si gran voglia di ridere, udendo le cose le quali egli confessava d’aver fatte, che quasi scoppiavano” (I.1.78). In the notes to his edition Branca glosses the adverb leggermente as facilmente or comoda-mente (1013n.9): the brothers strive to hear well because they distrust their houseguest. They quickly discover that they have nothing to fear and indeed marvel at his shamelessness in the face of death. While the tavolato or partition behind which they hide functions within the economy of the narrative to further their purpose of spying, it also marks their exclusion from the narrative proper, their status as audience rather than participant.

In his essay on the tale of Bergamino (I.7), Michelangelo Picone notes that “the curtain of the Decameron rises on Paris” (“The Tale of Bergamino” 164). In Ciappelletto as “a Tuscan transplanted to Paris” and Abraham the Jew who goes from Paris to Rome, Picone intuits “a passage, a real translatio studii, of the art of the tale from its land of origin, France, to its new home, Italy” (165). I would supplement this observation with another one: that Boccaccio asserts, through the figures of Ciappelletto and the two Florentine brothers, that the best listeners, and by extension the best reception of the narrative tradition, are Tuscan. One cannot help therefore but see behind the tavolato of this narrative an allusion to Boccaccio himself, as one supremely gifted not only to hear but to transform narrative models and narrative content into the tales of the Decameron. Beyond that, however, his Tuscan trio serves to establish the theme of overhearing and eavesdropping that will recur elsewhere in the book. As well, they associate these activities with men.

40. While Boccaccio thus assigns to Ciappelletto a multitude of sins, he explicitly denies that he is a traitor to benefactors, the very worst kind of sinner according to Dante. Panfilo’s claim that he was “il piggiore uomo forse che mai nascesse” (I.1.15) appears therefore to be somewhat hyperbolic, and the forse an important qualifier. It is convenient for Branca to read Cepparello as a Judas figure, as it squares with his thesis of the overall direction of the Decameron (Boccaccio medievale 18), but his analysis fails to take note of these significant qualifiers. For another critique of Branca’s claim, see Almansi, The Writer as Liar 37–38.
Indeed, the second great eavesdropper of the *Decameron*, one who embodies not just the relegation of the male to the borders of women’s lives but also the power of men to chasten autonomous women, is Tancredi, prince of Salerno. It is no coincidence that the tale of Tancredi, who eavesdrops so transparently (to us) and sinisterly, enters the narrative scene immediately after Boccaccio answers his male critics: the prince’s blatant eavesdropping serves to signal us about a broader male activity spread across the pages of the book. Boccaccio’s critics share, after all, the same misogynist ideology used to rationalize the forced enclosure of women. While Tancredi’s daughter Ghismonda may enjoy the right to come and go as she pleases, or at the very least has discovered the means to escape her own enclosure, by entering her room at will Tancredi shows how misogynist ideology denies women not only their freedom but also their privacy.

In one of the *Decameron*’s most unsettling scenes, Tancredi enters Ghismonda’s bedroom, an activity that is in itself not unusual: “Era usato Tancredi di venirsene alcuna volta tutto solo nella camera della figliuola e quivi con lei dimorare e ragionare alquanto e poi partirsì” (IV.1.16).41 Unbeknownst to Tancredi, the bedroom itself has just acquired new meaning as Ghismonda’s private space. The paragraph in which he enters the room follows quickly upon the lengthy exposition of how Guiscardo gains access to the *grotta* where Ghismonda meets him in order to steal into her room, where they have sex. The father’s customary visits, *tutto solo*, thus assume a new, disturbing quality, as Tancredi enters not merely his daughter’s bedroom but the space that she has assigned for her sexual activity.42 Not finding her there, he resolves to remain: “Il quale un giorno dietro mangiare là giù venutone, essendo la donna, la quale Ghismonda aveva nome, in un suo giardino con tutte le sue damigelle, in quella senza essere stato da alcuno

41. This scene, along with other elements of the story, has contributed to a critical tradition that focuses on Tancredi’s incestuous desire for his daughter. Alberto Moravia suggests as much, as does Mario Baratto (*Realiù e stile* 185). Almansi developed the notion into a full essay in *The Writer as Liar* (133–57), and Marcus takes it up in her essay on the story, which appears in *An Allegory of Form*. Mazzotta casts the tale, along with that of Filippo Balducci and his son, under the umbrella of “the relationship between the laws of passion and the power of political authority” (136), while Picone at once accepts the incest theme and dismisses it, arguing that “non arriva a spiegarci il perché della ripresa del registro tragico—invece di quello comico—nella trattazione della tematica della *fol’amor romanza*” (“L’amoroso sangue” 121), a question that his analysis seeks to answer. Finally, one should not ignore Jordan’s essay on this story, which refreshingly refuses to heroicize Ghismonda. It is Jordan’s quite brilliant intuition that “Ghismonda, true to the incest motif which lies at the heart of the tale, makes her father the agent of her own seduction” by blaming Tancredi’s esteem for Guiscardo for her own love for the valet (106).

42. It bears insistence here that Ghismonda could, after all, have had sex with Guiscardo in the *grotta* where they meet. The *Decameron* does not lack for scenes of sexual activity in unusual or uncomfortable places.
veduto o sentito entratosene, non volendo lei torre dal suo diletto, trovando le finestre della camera chiuse e le cortine del letto abbattute, a piè di quello in un canto sopra un carello si pose a sedere; e appoggiato il capo al letto e tirata sopra sé la cortina, quasi come se studiosamente si fosse nascosto, quivi s’adormentò” (IV.1.17). Here we have another one of the great Decameron sentences whose narrative illogic demands careful parsing. Tancredi appears to know that Ghismonda will not be in her room when he enters it, or at the very least he learns where she is while in the room, observing her in the garden with her ladies. If he knew before entering, then his decision to come there at this time becomes highly suspect; if he learns it while there, then one may at most charitably attribute his decision to stay to the fact that the room, all closed up, invited a nap. Clearly he does not interpret all the signs of closure—the windows and the curtains—as indications that he should leave. Either way, he opts not to interrupt her fun in the garden, but he likewise does not opt to return later. Moreover, his unobserved entry has a suspicious air, one that the narrator, Fiammetta, will reinforce with her remark “quasi come se studiosamente si fosse nascosto,” which itself creates a curious distance between narrator and subject: who better than Fiammetta would know Tancredi’s motives? The curtain behind which he hides here replaces the tavolato used by the Florentine brothers, again separating the observer from the action he will witness. Unlike the brothers, however, Tancredi does not understand that by wrapping himself in the curtain he is excluding himself from the ensuing action. He does not perceive what we recognize to be his own marginalization.

Tancredi awakens to find Ghismonda and Guiscardo in the bed, having sex: “Tancredi si svegliò e sentì e vide ciò che Guiscardo e la figliuola facevano” (IV.1.18). What he hears and sees is indeed the story itself, as it unfolds; the tale thus effects a sort of surreal redoubling in which a character in the story is also a reader of the story.43 Rather than reveal his presence, he opts to stay hidden: “prima gli volle sgridare, poi prese partito di tacersi e di starsi nascoso, s’egli potesse, per potere più cautamente fare e con minor sua vergogna quello che già gli era caduto nell’animo di dover fare” (IV.1.19). He begins at once to plan, developing a counternarrative to the one he has just witnessed and reasserting the link between listening and emplotment that Boccaccio had already suggested when Ciappelletto overheard the Florentine brothers’ fretting and hatched a plan to rescue them.

43. Mazzotta makes a very good point: “More substantively, as Tancredi sees unseen the two lovers playing and cavorting together, there is both an assertion and an ironic reversal of the omniscient perspective he enjoys in the court. His present viewpoint gives him a knowledge that effectively sanctions his power; it also reveals to him the existence of an unsuspected world, the world of a passion he represses” (140).
Tancredi also significantly advances the role and the power of the eavesdropper beyond the limits first assigned to it. Ciappelletto’s eavesdropping leads to a successful offer of assistance to his hapless Florentine hosts, sparing them the scandal of having a man die in their home outside of the orders of the Church. Their eavesdropping results simply in their wonder at Ciappelletto’s fearlessness and ability to fabricate lies. Tancredi, however, has absolute power over his daughter and her lover, as he quickly demonstrates by having Guiscardo imprisoned and murdered, and by confronting Ghismonda about his perceived betrayal by her. The very embodiment of law, Tancredi demonstrates through his actions the power of law to discipline activities that it deems transgressive, though Boccaccio significantly complicates matters by locating the transgression somewhere between sex outside of marriage and the betrayal of incestuous desire. Positioned right after Boccaccio’s self-defense in the Introduction to Day IV, the tale reasserts the tension between the marginalization of men in the world of the Decameron and the fact that men, when marginalized, will react to reassert their power.

A variant of the eavesdropper, the spy, marks the pages of Days IV and V. Like Tancredi, Lisabetta’s brother in IV.5 inadvertently witnesses her sexual congress, and likewise resolves to take action at a later moment: “E in questo continuando e avendo insieme assai di buon tempo e di piacere, non seppero sì segretamente fare, che una notte, andando Lisabetta là dove Lorenzo dormiva, che il maggior de’ fratelli, senza accorgersene ella, non se ne accorgesse. Il quale, per ciò che savio giovane era, quantunque molto noioso gli fosse a ciò sapere, pur mosso da più onesto consiglio, senza far motto o dir cosa alcuna, varie cose fra se rivolgendosi intorno a questo fatto, infino alla mattina seguente trapassò” (IV.5.6). Significantly, the oldest of the brothers discovers the tryst: as natural leader of the family, he will then guide the discussion of possible remedies. Likewise significant is Boccaccio’s use of the verb trapassare, which here, according to Branca (1232n8), stands simply as a synonym for passare, but with a prefix that associates the verb with sinful trespass (Kirkham, The Sign of Reason 8), nuancing the brother’s overnight deliberations negatively. The tale’s denouement, which sees the brothers fleeing Messina, confirms that they have overstepped.

Espionage in Day V leads instead beyond the crisis to a resolution satisfactory to all. In V.4, Caterina’s father discovers that she has spent the night with her boyfriend, Ricciardo, on the balcony of their home: “E andato oltre pianamente levò alto la sargia della quale il letto era fasciato, e Ricciardo e lei vide ignudi e iscoperti dormire abbracciati nella guisa di sopra mostrata . . .” (V.4.32). The scene establishes this father, messer Lizio, as a foil to Tancredi: both violate the sanctity of their daughter’s sexual space, in
both cases marked by drapery, but messer Lizio responds to his discovery with the sort of calm deliberation that facilitates a happy ending. It helps of course that Ricciardo is, as Lizio says, “gentile uomo e ricco giovane,” whereas Guiscardo, Ghismonda’s lover, was Tancredi’s page and therefore socially inappropriate for his daughter. So too does the father’s emotional investment in his daughter differ in each case, and Lizio’s is clearly not pathological. In V.7, Messer Amerigo makes a similar inadvertent discovery, when he chances upon his daughter’s childbirth scene, evidence of prior sexually activity. The girl’s mother had deliberately concealed her daughter, “per celare il difetto della figliaola a una lor possessione ne la mandò” (V.7.23), but the father’s unexpected arrival underscores the ineluctable nature of male authority. The girl and her child survive only because the boyfriend turns out to be the son of a nobleman, and therefore of marriage-able stock.

One final case of eavesdropping resembles that of Tancredi in that the eavesdropper involuntarily witnesses the events. In the final story of Day V, that of Pietro di Vinciolo, the protagonist returns home early from dinner at his friend Ercolano’s house, upsetting his wife’s plan to dine with and enjoy the company of her new lover. She has hidden him, much as Ghismonda had hidden her relationship with Guiscardo: “non avendo accorgimento di mandarlo o di farlo nascondere in altra parte, essendo una sua loggetta vicina alla camera nella quale cenavano, sotto una cesta da polli che v’era il fece ricoverare e gittovvi suso un pannaccio d’un saccone che fatto aveva il dì votare . . .” (V.10.28). The young man can thus listen in on the conversation between Pietro and his wife. He is not however the most important eavesdropper in the tale, as Boccaccio’s source, Apuleius, makes clear.44 In Apuleius the ass, Lucius, tells the story, boasting of his position as eavesdropper: “I was congratulating myself less on being freed from my labors than on the fact that, my eyes being now uncovered, I had an uninterrupted view of all this woman’s carryings-on” (159). He also prides himself in furthering the action, specifically in order to avenge the wife’s infidelity: “As I was going by I saw the man’s fingers sticking out from under the edge of the trough, which was rather too narrow for him; and treading sideways on them as hard as I could I ground them to a pulp” (162). In Boccaccio’s reworking of the tale the ass does not narrate, so we cannot know his opinion of the goings-on with Pietro’s wife; nor does his

44. For a thorough review of Boccaccio’s reworking of the source material in Apuleius, see Sanguineti White, Boccaccio e Apuleio. A number of other critics have addressed this tale; see my own discussion in chapter III for a thorough review.
trampling of the lover’s fingers appear to be deliberate: “tanto fu la sua
ventura, o sciagura che vogliam dire, che questo asino ve gli pose sù piede,
laonde egli, grandissimo dolor sentendo, mise un grande strido” (V.10.49).
Here the two narratives diverge significantly, for while the miller in Apule-
leius punishes the lover with rape and flogging, and his wife with divorce,
Pietro seizes on an opportunity, motivated by his own homoerotic desire, to
effect a reconciliation between the three parties.

In the ménage à trois solution described in the story’s final paragraph,
Pietro gets to realize the very transgressive desire—here sodomitic rather
than incestuous—whose fulfillment was denied to Tancredi. Men who
respect women’s desire rather than suppress it, who are willing to accom-
modate it, to integrate it into the legal order, earn unique rewards. Unlike
the Florentine brothers and Tancredi, Pietro explicitly uncovers the lover
in hiding, breaking down the artificial wall that divides the eavesdropping
audience from the action and bringing the eavesdropper into the action:
“Pietro, non men lieto d’averlo trovato che la sua donna dolente, presolo per
mano con seco nel menò nella camera nella quale la donna con la maggior
paura del mondo l’aspettava” (V.10.53).

The story thus replicates the order of events in the tale of Tancredi
and Ghismonda: the eavesdropper happens upon an ongoing narrative and
decides to enter into it. The antenarrative, that of Ercolano and his wife,
somewhat obscures the resemblance, but it also facilitates Pietro’s own
recognition of what is happening when he finds the proverbial fox in the
henhouse. Another important commonplace, one that serves to point both
stories beyond themselves, is the verbosity of the female characters. Ghis-
monda; Pietro’s wife; and the old woman who assists the wife in finding a
lover all deliver lengthy defenses of the sexual freedom of women, whose
directness contrasts with the rather more circumspect voices of the Deca-
meron’s female narrators. And in presenting male protagonists who stumble
upon narrative and enter it—as the ass Lucius had done in Apuleius—the
stories allude to the status of the three men who have accompanied the
ladies, themselves stumbling upon an ongoing narrative, the ladies’ decision
making, and, once invited, entering it. However, while the brigata’s constit-
tution puts something of a rein on the men, the men in the stories suffer no
such limits and are free to act as they please. Tancredi chooses to act against
women, while Pietro discovers a way to accommodate his wife.

More broadly, these stories call attention to how the Decameron works,
to the way in which characters can stand both outside and inside of narra-
tive at the same time. This positioning reflects the status of the ten young
people, themselves characters in a story who in turn recount stories, just as
Pietro does when he comes home and tells his wife what happened at Ercolano’s. Pietro’s story also gives comic closure to the troubling narrative arc that opens with the tale of Tancredi and reaches over both Days IV and V, as well as to the figuration of eavesdropping as elaborated in the book’s first half. Like Boccaccio’s male critics, the eavesdropper reserves the right not only to witness narrative but to mix into it, crossing the barrier figured by the screen, the wall, the curtain. In crossing over, presumably to safeguard his own interests against the transgressors of his norms, the eavesdropper thus becomes himself a transgressor, violating the space reserved to women that the *Decameron* delimits.

One final story from the first half of the book, that of Nastagio degli Onesti, fully plumbs this dynamic. Indeed, if there were any doubt that Boccaccio wants to explore the issue of men as narrative audience, this tale allays it. The scene that Nastagio witnesses, calqued from Dante, has a transparently metanarrative aspect, replicating the infernal hunt scene in Dante’s wood of the suicides. It also establishes a different sort of relationship between audience and narrative than the one first installed with Tancredi. In this case Nastagio does not have a prior history with the characters in the scene he witnesses, and his position as outsider becomes patent when he attempts to intervene to help the victimized girl: “Ma il cavaliere che questo vide gli gridò di lontano: ‘Nastagio, non t’impacciare, lascia fare a’ cani e a me quello che questa malvagia femina ha meritato’” (V.8.19). Unaware that Nastagio feels “ultimamente compassione della sventurata donna” (V.8.17), the knight comically misinterprets his motives, thinking that the young man intends to join the punitive pursuit. The misunderstanding underscores Nastagio’s distance from the narrative—he does not read it properly, seeing the girl as victim rather than as sinner—as does the narrator’s remark that the knight calls out to Nastagio “da lontano.” The scene evidences none of the proximity or intimacy of the other scenes in which we find witnesses or eavesdroppers, but there is one important common aspect: Nastagio reads the scene self-interestedly. Though denied the right to intervene in the infernal hunt, he trespasses nonetheless, turning something that is expressly none of his business into his business.

In each of the tales over Days IV and V, exposure has implications for one or another female character, and the degree of danger depends uniquely on the power and the anger of the male witness. In the case of Nastagio and the girl who will become his wife, the nature of her fate is ambiguous. On the one hand, she avoids the torments to which the girl in the infernal scene is subject, which is good, while on the other she finds herself marrying a

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45. See my essay “The Patriarch’s Pleasure and the Frametale Crisis: *Decameron* IV–V.”
man in whom she had had little interest: “Le quali [opere], quantunque grandissime, belle e laudevoli fossero, non solamente non gli gioavano, anzi pareva che gli nocessero, tanto cruda e dura e salvatica gli si mostrava la giovvinetta amata, forse per la sua singular bellezza o per la sua nobiltà si altiera e disdegnosa divenuta, che né egli né cosa che gli piacesse le piaceva” (V.8.6). One wonders what he sees in her, so fully do their desires not correspond. Undaunted, however, Nastagio presses his case and wins the girl, not by inspiring her affection but by shocking her with fear: “E tanta fu la paura che di questo le nacque, che, acciò che questo a lei non avvenisse, prima tempo non si vide, il quale quella medesima sera prestato le fu, che ella, avendo l’odio in amor tramutato, una sua fida cameriera segretamente a Nastagio mandò, la quale da parte di lei il pregò che gli dovesse piacere d’andare a lei, per ciò che ella era presta di far tutto ciò che fosse piacer di lui” (V.8.41). Such a conversion to reciprocity may reasonably happen in a tale where characters witness a scene from Hell, but it does not ring with verisimilitude. Relying on her survival instinct, the girl finds the correct rhetorical approach to Nastagio, which suffices for him. The narrator, Filomena, is perhaps less willing to swallow all of this, commenting that once the two were married “con lei più tempo [Nastagio] lietamente visse” (V.8.44). Branca’s claim that by using a hendecasyllable here Boccaccio “fa svanire il bagliore sinistro della caccia infernale e lo trasfigura in una rosea luce di fiaba” (1304) overlooks a bigger point, that Nastagio has exploited narrative to achieve his purpose.

Filomena’s role in making such a point should not in the end surprise us. She is, after all, the perfect echo of Pampinea herself, repeating in the introduction to another important story about the reading experience, VI.1, the very words Pampinea had used in her introduction to I.10.46 It makes sense that such a statement about men as readers should come from someone other than Pampinea, for she is clearly far too diplomatic in her relations with men to broach the question. The Nastagio story thus stands as a thematically important tale, a meta-novella, though it does not appear in a particularly marked place as do the others. Boccaccio locates it as close to the end of Day V as possible, but he must still accommodate Fiammetta’s story, with the ninth slot by now regularly going to the ruler, and of course Dioneo’s. Along with Boccaccio himself, Filomena asks whether men can be trusted as readers, whether they can be sympathetic enough to women to be fair in their appraisal of women’s texts. The answer here is equivocal, since Nastagio does not transfer his sympathy for the woman in the infernal

46. Stewart’s essay “La novella di Madonna Oretta e le due parti del Decameron” is particularly good on the relationship between these two stories and how they unlock some of the Decameron’s organizing principles.
hunt to the woman he is hunting in a different sort of infernal way. In the end only Pietro di Vinciolo emerges as one whose sympathy for women’s suffering we may analogize to Boccaccio’s own.

The theme of eavesdropping will return in the second half of the Decameron, most notably in the episode of the Valle delle Donne and in some stories of the tenth day. In general eavesdropping is a man’s job, and it alludes to the ubiquity of the threat of punishment, which will be applied against transgressors of norms. In the end safety is contingent not upon secrecy, but rather upon the benevolence or vengefulness of those who are authorized to apply the sanction.

The Widow and the Scholar

I now turn to one final story, significant to the present discussion because it combines revenge narrative with issues of male power over women. The Decameron’s longest tale, the tale of the widow and the scholar, stands out also for its overt misogyny; as Millicent Marcus points out, it “sounds a dischordant note” when measured against the book’s philogyny (“Misogyny as Misreading” 23). Startling too is Boccaccio’s choice of a narrator: Pampinea, who better than anyone has given the lie to misogynist commonplaces through her words and actions. And yet the choice of Pampinea ties this novella to the larger issues of revenge that lurk within the pages of the Decameron. She herself distinguishes the tale from those that precede it, pointing out that “Noi abbiamo per più novellette dette riso molto delle beffe state fatte, delle quali niuna vendetta esserne stata fatta s’è raccontato” (viii.7.3). The sentence announces both the length of the story she is about to tell—the others are novellette, after all, not just smaller but somehow pettier—as well as a thematic shift away from derisive laughter at what she calls l’arte of the practical joke and onto the more serious terri-

47. Genre questions trail this story. For Almansi it “almost amounts to a short novel, with a proportional enrichment in the psychology of the characters” (The Writer as Liar 92). Picone, on the other hand, calls it “una Erziehungsnovelle, una novella di formazione, o meglio di riformazione, nel corso della quale il protagonista recupera, per non più perderlo, il tesoro conoscitivo che possedeva all’inizio” (“L’arte della beffa” 221). The story has two principal critical traditions, sometimes intertwined: the first posits an autobiographical origin and links the story to the Corbaccio; the second examines it in the broader context of medieval misogynistic literature. See Branca’s footnote to the story for a bibliography of both (1430), updated by Picone (“L’arte della beffa” 220n.).

48. Durling argues that Boccaccio gives this novella to Pampinea as part of a generalized argument about the passage of time: Pampinea, the oldest of the group, tells the Decameron’s longest story, whose primary action takes place over two long nights (“A Long Day in the Sun” 269).
tory of the *vendetta*. Pampinea also avers an explicitly practical purpose for her story: “E questo udire non sarà senza utilità di voi, per ciò che meglio di beffare altrui vi guarderete, e farete gran senno” (VIII.7.3). In other words, laughter comes easily in the world of the *beffa*, which is the world of *arte*, but in the world of the *brigata* danger attends the *beffa*, and the ladies would do well to remember that. The message would appear to be a corrective not just to the tales of the eighth day but also to those of the seventh, whose intelligent female protagonists successfully play practical jokes on their easily duped husbands.\(^49\) It thus also serves as a caution that one must judge carefully when choosing the object of a *beffa*, because an alert male may choose to wreak his revenge. As well, in urging the women here to learn how to distinguish themselves from other women, Pampinea echoes a remark she made in introducing her very first story, that the ladies learn how “per voi non si possa quello proverbio intendere che comunemente si dice per tutto, cioè che le femine in ogni cosa sempre pigliano il peggio.” She wants them specifically to show themselves to be “per eccellenza di costume separate dall’altre” (I.10.8). Her concern that women not validate misogynist discourse by their actions may inform her choice of the story of the widow, who does just that.

Various elements in the story serve to increase its resonance both with the female members of the *brigata* and with the readers of the *Decameron*. Pampinea locates the story in a Florence of “non sono ancora molti anni passati” (VIII.7.4), and she describes her protagonist, Madonna Elena, as young, of good birth, and widowed. The six other young women can readily identify with these qualities, since they are similarly young, of good birth, and have suffered recent losses if not outright widowhood. In a nod to the extradiegetic audience she evokes the narrative vector to which the *Decameron* had first alluded by having the young scholar, Rinieri, return

\(^49\) Picone in fact casts the seventh-day *beffe* in a different tradition from this one: the former are *engaños* in the tradition of the *Libro dei sette savi*, while the latter is rather an example of *chastoiement*, “avvertimento” or “istruzione,” found in Pietro Alfano’s *Disciplina clericalis* (“L’arte della beffa” 223). He points out that the scholar denies that his *beffa* is a *vendetta*, calling it instead “gastigamento, in quanto la vendetta dee trapassare l’offesa, e questo non v’aggiungerà” (VIII.7.87). The argument opens up the difficult problem of authorial intentions. Rinieri may deny that his *beffa* is a *vendetta*, but given the rhetorical aspects of his denial, one wonders whether he is being sincere with either himself or his audience. Moreover, Pampinea, who reads the tale as a woman, repeatedly labels his actions a *vendetta*, as does Rinieri himself. One would suspect that Elena, who clearly lacks access to the philosophical substrate on which Rinieri presumably draws, would agree. While I do not deny Picone’s point, I would simply argue that the tale itself suggests other interpretations of what Rinieri does, and that a full reading of the tale would undertake to accommodate both of them. Cottino-Jones, for example, makes such an effort, and convincingly (*Order from Chaos* 147–53), as does Durling (“A Long Day in the Sun”).
to Florence from Paris. This time, however, Rinieri appears to bring back from Paris not a narrative corpus but a certain philosophical training, and above all expectations conditioned by the theory of courtly love. Elena in fact has her maid communicate secretly to Rinieri that “io amo molto più lui che egli non ama me, ma che a me si convien di guardar l’onestà mia, sì che io con l’altre donne possa andare a fronte scoperta: di che egli se così savio è come si dice, mi dee molto più cara avere” (VIII.7.12). Her rationale is consistent with the courtly love code, and her appeal to him, “se così savio è come si dice,” attaches his understanding of her position to the knowledge he has presumably acquired in Paris while engaging the same sort of rhetorical sleight-of-hand that Pampinea had used in managing Dioneo. He signals his understanding of her message by passively accepting her explanation and continuing to play the courtly love game, sending her letters and gifts, while she holds him off.

When Elena undertakes to complete her self-appointed mission, to “[prendere] un apolin per lo naso,” she does so by clearly relegating Rinieri to the outside, making a gesture of exclusion that he will finally understand to be just that. In doing so she shows herself to be far less adept at managing men than, say, Pampinea herself. On the night she finally invites him to join her, she confines Rinieri to a freezing courtyard—specifically a corte, which allusively mocks his courtly love values—all the while pleading, in a claim consistent with her stated desire to protect her onestà, that she cannot let him in because her brother has dropped by and will not leave. His marginalization is so complete that, like many of the men of the seventh day, he is within range to eavesdrop on his beloved’s lovemaking but never sees or hears anything that would clue him in. By daybreak Rinieri has seen through her rhetoric: “accorgendosi d’esser beffato” (VIII.7.39) he ruminates over how to avenge himself: “seco gran cose e varie volgendo a trovar modo alla vendetta, la quale ora molto più desiderava che prima d’esser con la donna non avea disiato” (VIII.7.40). The extent of his vendetta, which will unfold in the following pages, confirms Pampinea’s own lament that Elena “non sapeva ben . . . che cosa è mettere in aia con gli scolari” (VIII.7.13). Even more ominous is the fact that no amount of erst-

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50. For Marcus “the allusion to Paris . . . has a meta-literary meaning. . . . Thus, by giving Rinieri an education in Paris, and not in Bologna or Padua, Boccaccio immediately brings to mind the French cult of courtly love which was so important a part of his own aesthetic formation” (“Misogyny as Misreading” 28). France assumes metaliterary status elsewhere in the Decameron as well, as detailed above.

51. Mazzotta identifies Elena as a strumpet: “a figure who at first disrupts the game of courtly love; who later is an emblem of free play, never allowing herself to be won, offering and denying herself, perverse and gullible, always herself by feigning, and whom the scholar fails to possess but succeeds in punishing” (44).
while attraction to the lady can deter Rinieri from his newly appointed task of avenging himself. In other words, the ladies err if they assume that men will refrain from harming them simply because they see women as objects of desire.

The threat posed by Rinieri redoubles because, “sì come savio,” as Pampinea describes him, “sapeva niuna altra cosa le minacce essere che arme del minacciato” (VIII.7.42). In other words, Rinieri understands that to disclose his anger will simply give Elena an opportunity to guard against it, and so he holds his tongue. In this way he turns out to be a much more clever adversary than Elena had expected, and in her naïveté she demonstrates why women should avoid provoking men as she does. By the second half of the story, in fact, Pampinea is calling Elena “la donna poco savia” (VIII.7.48), in direct contrast to the savio Rinieri. When the two meet to discuss Elena’s new predicament, that her lover has abandoned her and she needs Rinieri’s necromantic assistance to win him back, at first she strangely does not even recall her nasty history with him: “non ricordandosi ella che lui quasi alla morte condotto avesse” (VIII.7.51). Now he appears to be the more astute rhetorician, assuring her that he had learned necromancy in Paris, but that while he had forsworn it out of respect for God he would willingly practice it now out of love for her, even at the risk of eternal damnation. He thus positions himself as the patient lover that he had been before, ready to make the necessary sacrifices for his beloved, and given this consistency and her own forgetfulness she has no reason to disbelieve him. He then sets her up for her punishment by explaining that she will have to undertake the necromancy herself, with his training.

The features of Rinieri’s revenge are well known, as is their eye-for-an-eye correspondence to what he suffered at her hands: he froze, she cooks; he was confined to a courtyard, stationed below her view, she is locked above him in a tower, a symbol of his power, and so forth. When she begins to suspect Rinieri she continues vainly to condescend to him in her own mind:

52. For Picone Rinieri’s newly acquired wisdom equates to a return to love of Philosophy, which excludes love for a mortal woman (222). For Marcus, on the other hand, Rinieri is anything but savio, as she argues that he misreads just about every text he has ever touched.

53. Almansi (The Writer as Liar 95–98) has written helpful pages on how the contrappasso functions in this tale. Marcus argues that Rinieri’s subscription to “the equal-but-opposite school of punishment” violates the principles of the contrappasso: “The latter, which involves a literalization of the metaphors associated with the sins themselves . . . betokens a serious meditation on the nature of sinful acts and renders those lessons accessible to human cognition through the concrete language of poetry. Rinieri’s justice, on the other hand, is no deep moral commentary on the nature of Elena’s crime, but a superficial, intellectually elegant reversal of his own suffering at her hands” (“Misogyny as Misreading” 36–37). For Durling “the revenge is directed as much at the widow’s mind as at her body: it is meant to be a lesson in the nature of time, as well as of life in the body, which is subject to time” (“A Long Day in the Sun” 270).
“Io temo che costui non m’abbia voluta dare una notte chente io diedi a lui; ma se per ciò questo m’ha fatto, mal s’è saputo vendicare, ché questa non è stata lunga per lo terzo che fu la sua . . .” (VIII.7.70). Then her concerns increase, going exactly to the question of her onestà that she had invoked as a false reason for not accommodating Rinieri in the first place. In other words, what she fears is the very sort of shameful marginalization to which, in her way, she subjected Rinieri, and to which in its own way the Decameron has subjected men. In her subsequent pleas to him she acknowledges that he has “ben di me vendicato,” begging him to cease the “vendetta della ingiuria la quale io ti feci” (VIII.7.77–78) and not to steal her honor, which she could not reacquire. She concludes her plea: “Non voler le tue forze contro a una femina essercitare: niuna gloria è a una aquila l’aver vinta una colomba; dunque, per l’amor di Dio e per onor di te, t’incresca di me” (VIII.7.79). Apparently unwilling to admit that he has outsmarted her, she refers instead to his forze, describing Rinieri, the man, as the stronger, predatory bird. She thus affirms the physical inequities that govern relations between men and women, even though in this case they apply only indirectly. Rinieri has been wounded in his sense of gender superiority, so he must outmatch her to reestablish order.

At this point the tale takes a crucial turn, devolving into a series of exchanges between Rinieri and Elena. Pampinea takes care to point out that Rinieri has the choice to end Elena’s suffering before it advances: “Lo scolare, con fiero animo seco la ricevuta ingiuria rivolgendo e veggendo piagnere e pregare, a un’ora aveva piacere e noia nell’animo: piacere della vendetta la quale più che altra cosa disiderata avea, e noia sentiva movendolo la umanità sua a compassion della misera; ma pur, non potendo la umanità vincere la fierezza dell’appetito, rispose . . .” (VIII.7.80). We all know that “Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti”; in evoking his incipit to the Decameron Boccaccio sets a clear distance between himself and the protagonist of this tale. At the same time, however, he uses the tale, and Pampinea, to issue a stern reminder to women that not all men who get hurt in love can turn the other cheek or recover as Boccaccio did. At tale’s end Elena, having recovered from her injuries, “da indi innanzi e di beffare e d’amare si guardarò saviamente” (VIII.7.148); she appears to have acquired the wisdom she lacked early on. She also renounces love: the experience has changed her so profoundly that she will no longer participate in the dynamic of desire that led to this awful outcome. He, on the other hand, “parendogli avere assai intera vendetta, lieto senza altro dirne se ne passò” (VIII.7.148). He gains a happy outcome, and is apparently capable of moving forward into the future unencumbered by the sorrow and humiliation
that her *beffa* provoked in him, because he had trumped her efforts.

Posner’s analysis of revenge, and in particular of harm, is helpful for understanding the dynamic at work here:

The problem [with retaliation] is that if you are “rational man,” you will realize that the harm is a “sunk cost”—an irretrievable bygone. No matter how much harm you do to the aggressor, the harm you have suffered will not be undone. In fact whatever the dangers or other burdens you take on in order to retaliate will increase the cost to you of the initial aggression; they will be a secondary cost incurred in a futile effort to avoid the primary cost—which having already been incurred, can no longer be prevented. Knowing that you are “rational man,” the aggressor will be all the more likely to attack you. He will realize that you may well decide not to retaliate, and this realization will lower his expected costs of aggression. (27)

If Elena undertook the sort of analysis that Posner describes, she likely concluded that Rinieri, thanks to his Paris education, was a “rational man,” and would therefore, thanks to his own subscription to courtly love values, be unlikely to retaliate against her. She may also have felt insulated from danger, thanks to her wealth and position. Of course she errs badly in assuming that Rinieri is a “rational man” just because he has studied in Paris—as Boccaccio has already demonstrated in the tale of Cimone (V.1), education and reason do not go hand in hand. Further proof that Rinieri is not rational comes in his satisfaction at the end of the tale. Despite his ability to undertake the cold, superficially rational calculations that lead to his successful revenge, he does not understand the concept of a sunk cost, and that what he has lost he will never retrieve. So while Boccaccio can describe men as capable of acts of revenge against women, by no means does he applaud their vengefulness.

Indeed, as Posner points out, the story conforms to a typical pattern of revenge literature in another way: the reader’s initial great sympathy for the revenger cools as the vengeance happens (39). Two factors contribute here to this response. First, Rinieri’s counter-*beffa* disproportionately exceeds its model, Elena’s *beffa*. Her suffering lasts much longer than does Rinieri’s and involves greater public humiliation, and a philogynist audi-

54. Posner posits self-protection as a means to avoid retaliation in the first place, noting however that “self-protection can be extremely costly—indeed, impossible for one who lacks the wealth necessary to surround himself with a wall and most, trusty guards, and so forth” (27).
ence cannot help but be disturbed by her victimization. Moreover, the tale involves collateral damage, specifically in the person of Elena’s maid, who suffers a broken thigh while trying to rescue her lady. The question of the maid’s liability is not a frivolous one, because it demonstrates the contingencies of power that govern hierarchical systems of authority. One may deem the maid culpable because Rinieri had trusted her in revealing to her his love for Elena, and she had apparently agreed to help him out: “[Rinieri] s’accontò con la fante di lei e il suo amor le scoperse e la pregò che con la sua donna operasse sì, che la grazia di lei potesse avere. La fante promise largamente e alla sua donna il raccontò” (VIII.7.11–12). Rinieri errs, however, in assuming that the cause of love trumps the maid’s primary duty to her employer, who concocts a lying response that the maid then reports to Rinieri: “La fante, trovatolo, fece quello che dalla donna sua le fu imposto” (VIII.7.13). Rinieri clearly never recognizes this relation, because at the tale’s end, when he hears that the maid has suffered a broken thigh, “parendogli avere assai intera vendetta, lieto senza altro dirne se ne passò” (VIII.7.148). Clearly his desire for revenge extends to the maid, even though we as readers can see her as caught between these two protagonists and therefore not a fair object of cruelty.

Pampinea concludes the tale by warning her audience against undertaking beffe: “E per ciò guardatevi, donne, dal beffare, e gli scolari specialmente” (VIII.7.149). Her tale thus seeks, like revenge itself, to restore order, specifically the threatened order of caution that should govern women’s relations with men. As the personification of Prudence, she alerts the ladies not to “trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione” in laughing about beffe, not to allow their own Schadenfreude at seeing men undone carry them too close to the superbia that would lead to their own fall, or that would make them somehow blind to men’s capacity for vengefulness, as Elena had been.

The risk for women, the tale suggests, is in fact twofold: the clear danger of male retribution in the form of real physical harm, and the greater danger that women by their actions become fodder for the sort of misogynist literature that this story exemplifies. Rinieri himself makes that threat clear: “E dove tutti [i laccioli] mancati mi fossero, non mi fuggiva la penna, con la quale tante e sì fatte cose di te scritte avrei e in sì fatta maniera, che, avendole tu risapute, ché l’avresti, avresti il di mille volte disiderato di mai

55. The ladies come to a remarkably fair judgment of the story: “Gravi e noiosi erano stati i casi d’Elena a ascoltare alle donne, ma per ciò che in parte giustamente avvenutigli gli estimavano, con più moderata compassione gli avean trapassati, quantunque rigido e constante fieramente, anzi crudele, reputassero lo scolare” (VIII.8.2). Their hearts do not go out to Elena quite as much as they otherwise might, especially given their judgment that Rinieri is cruel.
non esser nata. Le forze della penna son troppo maggiori che coloro non estimano che quelle con conoscimento provate non hanno” (VIII.7.99). His statement about the power of the pen anticipates the sort of logorrhea that characterizes the misogynist diatribes of the Corbaccio. It reads almost as a retort to Guiscardo’s statement to Tancredi that “Amor può troppo più che né voi né io possiamo,” but with none of its succinctness. In any event Rinieri proves prescient, for Elena becomes precisely what he threatens, a textual locus, as made explicit in Pampinea’s description of her cooked flesh as burned parchment: “tutta la cotta pelle le s’aprisse e ischiantasse, come veggiamo avvenire d’una carta di pecora abrusciata se altri la tira” (VIII.7.114).56 Indeed, by the end of her ordeal her body is so transformed that it resembles “non corpo umano ma più tosto un cepperello inarsciato” (VIII.7.140). It is hard to see Boccaccio’s choice of the noun cepperello, particularly in a story that links France and Tuscany, as anything but deliberate. The reference to Ser Ciappelletto through his given name, Cepparello, may be the final key to disentangling the tale’s misogyny. Elena’s body transcends itself, becoming thanks to Rinieri a site of misogynist inspiration and discourse.57 And yet it is also marked, as a cepperello/Cepparello, as a site of fictions and lies. The prevagination is not limited to the lies she herself weaves in her false courtship of Rinieri; it extends as well to the lies about her that Rinieri purveys through his hyperbolic vendetta. The truth surely lies somewhere in between, just as the truth about women lies somewhere between their self-transcendence as a Stilnovist donna-angelo and as a misogynist donna-diavolo.

This tale thus demonstrates in nuce the connection between a man’s sense of being slighted and his desire for revenge, a revenge that extends into literature. As I have suggested above, men repeatedly suffer slights in the pages of the Decameron. Boccaccio himself excludes them as readers and then mocks their criticism of what he has written. Pampinea invites men into the club she is forming, but then refuses to cede to them in formulating a plan for governance. Many of the tales’ female characters undertake similar tactics of exclusion. At the same time, we see more or less overt forms of retaliation: the male readers of the Decameron lambaste Boccaccio.

56. Migiel has discerned the same subtext in these statements, while taking them in a different direction, as part of a discourse about “how misogyny is fuelled by letters” (58), which she traces in a number of Decameron stories.

57. Durling’s reminder that the etymon of Cepparello’s name, ceppo, refers to “trunk, the old stock, the old Adam” (Boccaccio on Interpretation” 287) further helps illuminate the remark here. Elena becomes, through her association with Adam, an exemplary fallen woman. If Rinieri’s transgression consists in “raising himself up to be like God,” as Durling argues (“A Long Day in the Sun” 274), then one may read the story in terms of Rinieri’s perverse effort to redeem not just a fallen woman but fallen woman in general.
for what he has written, and male characters in the stories undertake to avenge the offenses they have suffered.

One remaining question concerns the extent to which the three male members of the *brigata* will seek to avenge any perceived slights. The principal insult, I would argue, lies in Pampinea’s failure to put into action the superiority of men to which her female companions give voice. In other words, the ladies offend the men by not ceding full power to them, by insisting that women can share power within the *brigata* as equal partners. To the extent that revenge, whether subtle or overt, always seeks to restore order, the men will do so by using their rule to reclaim male power and consequence. The inversion of power that informs the *Decameron’s* order of outsiders rankles, and in showing how men attempt to reassert their authority Boccaccio gives us a clear and thorough picture of the order of the world.
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