The *Decameron*: A Critical Lexicon

Lessico Critico Decameroniano

Edited by
Pier Massimo Forni *and* Renzo Bragantini

English Edition edited by
Christopher Kleinhenz

Translated by
Michael Papio

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Sources

Costanzo Di Girolamo and Charmaine Lee

The study of the sources of a literary work like the *Decameron* is representative of a problem that has often been the object of scholarly criticism, especially at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This line of research seemed until recently to have irretrievably fallen into disfavor because of the exorbitance of its proponents, some of whom supported the theory of an oriental origin of the short story and wished to carry almost every western medieval tale back to its more or less probable eastern source. This sort of overemphasis, and the reaction to it, first among idealistic critics and then among structuralists in years closer to our own, caused scholars to ignore the subject's existence completely in all cases except those in which the relationship between the text and its source was patently obvious. Regarding the *Decameron*, most recent commentators take care to point out analogies and possible sources (including the oriental ones), even though they also usually tend to underscore the uncertainties or limits of such comparisons. This hesitation derives from the fact that it is often believed that an actual source implies an earlier *text*, upon which the author drew.

The patient work of scholars such as A. Collingwood Lee,[1] a good example of the "old school" approach to the matter who meticulously recorded the sources of every novella and their singular component parts, can now be recuperated and used as the essential starting point for considering the problem in a different way, starting from a widening of the concept of "source" itself and for incorporating it in a more inclusive methodological framework, namely that of intertextuality studies.[2] In fact, having recourse to the notion of intertextuality allows for distinctions to be made among the various relationships that may exist between one text and another. What can be referred to as the source relationship between two texts is in reality only one of various possible cases of intertextuality. Such a relationship, in fact, can be fully understood only if juxtaposed to other historically attested forms of intertextuality. These other forms range

[1] See Lee 1972, though first published in 1909.

[2] On the history of the question, see Segre 1984, 103–18.

from a superficial reworking of language, meter, rhyme and so on, to a translation that is more or less faithful to the original, from lengthening or shortening to more radical changes in style or narrative structure, from the imitation of a literary model to the reuse of the narrative material, of a theme or situation. In this last case, which more closely corresponds to the traditional idea of a source, it is not always possible to identify a derivative relationship between one text and another. This is especially true for medieval texts and, even more so, for narrative texts. Moreover, there may not be a textual relationship at all between two particular texts because an author may not be reusing or quoting merely an earlier text but an entire genre whose defining characteristics could be modified or parodied. If parody necessarily implies a "source"—a dialogic relationship with older texts—this source is not necessarily provided by a specific text, but may instead be derived from a whole body of texts or an entire genre, which is frequently the case for the *Decameron*, in which more than one literary tradition has been adapted and distorted, often comically, within the new form of the novella.

As a matter of fact, it has been possible to identify a direct, linear derivation from another text for very few of the novellas of the *Decameron*—in other words, for very few novellas has it been possible to identify a specific textual source.[3] For others, it has been pointed out that the story (the *fabula*) is identical to that of another, or of others, even if it is impossible to prove that Boccaccio had firsthand familiarity with it, or them. Because of the proliferation of multiple versions, moreover, it is difficult in any discussion of a source relationship to establish which precise version of a text was known by an author who reworks it. It goes without saying that the role of *auctoritas* was quite weak when it came to short narratives in the Middle Ages. Indeed, even when the chronology is clear, as in the case of Boccaccio vis-à-vis the literary traditions of antiquity, medieval Latin and Gallo-Romance, one can never be sure of the exact nature of the source that was consulted or of the way in which the author came into contact with it: whether he heard it recited, or read it on his own, for example, and if he had in fact read it, whether he had the work in front of him as he worked or depended on his memory. In this latter case, we may speak of a source tale and dispense with the need to track down the precise source text that is the basis of the novella.[4] For still other novellas, it may be possible to identify one or two of their themes that are present in earlier versions, whether source tales or source texts, without, however, finding a single source for the entire novella. This is the situation for the great majority of the *Decameron*'s tales, since its single narrative components and single themes are often attributable to source themes, which are in turn attributable to other source tales or source texts, providing these are not

[3] The novellas that have a certain textual source are 4.9, 5.6, 5.10, 7.2, 9.7 and very few others. See Branca's notes in Boccaccio 1992a.

[4] In the absence of a complete list of such instances, we may note the following as developments of source tales: 7.4–8, 9.2 and 10.8.

just examples of narrative commonplaces.[5] Nevertheless, the foregoing inventory does not account for those novellas that, though containing source themes and material that is analogous to the content of other texts (particularly certain types of other texts), have no tale source because their *fabula* has not been located in any known texts that preceded, or were contemporary to, Boccaccio. One may speak in these cases of genre sources whenever the novella in question makes positive or negative references (that is, following the canon or overturning it in whole or in part) not to a particular tale or text, but to a genre that predates the composition of the *Decameron*.[6]

These distinctions among the various types of sources are not ends in themselves, although they could probably be useful in the future to simplify debates about sources of specific tales. Instead, these categories help to establish suitable parameters of comparison between a novella (or one of its components) and its source, at least with regard to the way we are using the term here, including those cases where we may be dealing with every possible combination of different sources. In fact, it is the comparison, once again either positive or negative, of single novellas with their sources that allows us to perceive which innovations were introduced by Boccaccio. Yet these are not innovations that need to be recorded as evidence of Boccaccio's artistic originality because for him, as for all other medieval authors, being original was not an end in itself. However, they do help us to understand what Bédier called "the soul of the narrator and his public"[7] and to define the characteristics of the novella genre within the context of medieval narrative.

While examining this question in terms of intertextuality, we must remember that when a source is only partially used, "there is also a reference to those parts of the source that are *not* used, such that the more recent text refers in a way to earlier ones (which creates a kind of inference), as well as to their sense and their meaning in its organic totality (thereby integrating or creating an allusive chiaroscuro effect). Intertextual play consequently brings two texts together in ways that go beyond what they have in common. Indeed, the first one forms a kind of halo around the second."[8] Thus, the cultural context in which the source came into being and the way the author reinterprets it in his own work for a new audience must necessarily be taken into consideration.[9]

We shall now provide examples of Boccaccio's multifaceted source play and reuse of sources through the analysis of some of the *Decameron*'s novellas, beginning with that of Caterina and Ricciardo (5.4). Numerous scholars have

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[5] See, for example: 1.2 and 9; 2.3 and 8–10; 3.2–3, 6 and 8; 4.2 and 5; 5.4 and 8; 6.4 and 10; 7.7; 8.4 and 10; 9.3 and 10; 10.1, 4–5, 7, and 9–10.

[6] This is the case, as we shall explain, for 2.7 as well as for 2.4 and 6, and 5.1.

[7] Bédier 1893, 301. See also Picone 1989, 149.

[8] Segre 1984, 110. See also Delcorno 1986, 211.

[9] On this subject, see Bruni 1990, 14.

identified Marie de France's *lai* of *Laüstic* as the forerunner, but, as Branca notes, "the points of contact are rather tenuous and his tone and development are quite distinct."[10] It is precisely in the tenuous points of contact, the distinct tone and development that we can see Boccaccio's art of reusing sources.

Caterina, the daughter of Messer Lizio di Valbona, loves and is loved in return by Ricciardo Manardi, a family friend. The two of them decide how to spend the night together: they will meet on the terrace where Caterina will have moved her bed, with the excuse that she cannot sleep in the nighttime heat of May (the conventional month in which courtly love comes into bloom) and that she would instead like to sleep outside where she can hear the song of the nightingale (a bird that is also particularly common in that same medieval tradition). Caterina's plan is successful, despite her father's objections, except that the two youths who are overcome by sleep are surprised at dawn in an unmistakable position by Messer Lizio who runs then to his wife to tell her to come see how their daughter "was so fascinated by the nightingale that she has succeeded in waylaying it, and is holding it in her hand" (5.4.33: Boccaccio 1995, 397). Messer Lizio manages to contain his anger and, considering that Ricciardo is an excellent match, makes him agree, as soon as he awakens, to correct the situation by marrying his daughter, a solution that pleases everyone.

Now let us return to Marie de France's *lai*,[11] in which we are told of a woman, the wife of a jealous husband, who falls in love with the knight who lives in the castle next door. Their love is limited to shared glances from one window to the other, to chatting, to the exchange of gifts "quant plus ne poeient aver" 'since they were denied anything more' (v. 78). The lady manages to spend the nights by the window by telling her husband that she is listening to the nightingale's song. In a fit of jealousy, the husband has the nightingale caught and kills it in front of his wife by crushing it in his fist. The lady then sends the little bird's body to her lover, who forever after keeps it with him in a tiny golden coffin. As we said before, it is not possible to know whether Boccaccio drew directly, albeit freely, from Marie's *lai*, even though he had spent a long time in milieus that had profoundly assimilated the culture from the other side of the Alps, such as the Angevin court in Naples where he could have become familiar with the works of Marie de France.[12] At any rate, both texts portray a love hindered by roughly equivalent characters (the jealous husband in the *lai* and the girl's father in the novella), but such a situation is quite normal in narrative genres, although the necessarily restrained affair of Marie de France's two lovers is quite different from the happy and very fortunate relationship of Caterina and Ricciardo. The most evident feature that the two versions share is obviously the nightingale,

[10] In Boccaccio 1992a, 631.

[11] See Marie de France 1966, 120–25, and 1992, 256–65.

[12] See Bruni 1990, Delcorno Branca 1991 and especially Picone 1982 and 1991, as well as Rossi 1985.

which serves as the excuse for the meeting of the lovers in each text. Nevertheless, the nightingale—as we mentioned—was frequently used in a variety of fashions in courtly narrative and verse. In *Laüstic*, it is the symbol of a perfect love; in Boccaccio, however, it is clearly a sexual symbol.

Consequently, any analysis of the tale from a source-related point of view would be unable to confirm with certainty that *Laüstic* was the definitive source text or that it and the novella share a source tale. That said, there are some other observations to be made. First of all, the topos of the nightingale can be considered a source theme, as it appears often in courtly contexts. Additionally, the novella's initial situation, in which a love affair is hindered (by the stock characters of the daughter's father or the wife's husband) harkens back to a source genre that is amply represented in the *lai*. Next, we must point out the fact that Boccaccio has incorporated into the novella a quotation, so to speak, of another courtly source genre, the lyrical sub-genre of the *alba*, which subsequently became a common narrative theme. These sources, however, are parodied and deformed in our novella and twisted to suit a different purpose. The plot, initially courtly and potentially even tragic, actually undergoes a systematically light and comic development. The happy ending is decidedly contrary to the reader's expectations, especially after Boccaccio has put together all the elements of a catastrophic conclusion. The young couple (and presumably the reader) at first fear the worst, being well aware of the stereotypical plot, now overturned, of ancient courtly tales, but soon all ends well. The author's decision to recur to parody, to revisiting a high genre in a low way, is not intended simply to produce a comic result once the true sexual intentions of courtly love are revealed, as in certain parodic *fabliaux* such as the *Lai du Lecheor.*[13] It goes far beyond that. It serves to forestall the tragedy that would have ensued, had the plot continued to follow the courtly mode, in order to take us past the level of the *fabliau* and on to the middle level that is typical of the novella tradition. The same could be said for the topos of the nightingale, which is emptied of all courtly baggage and used instead with a ribald double entendre. Finally, it is significant that the *alba* is reversed: the first rays of the sun awake not the lovers, but rather the humdrum Messer Lizio. The initial courtly plot situation, the nightingale and the *alba* produce a precise chain of events (particularly inasmuch as the nightingale was associated in courtly lyric and narrative with the nocturnal rendezvous of lovers and with the topos of lovers separating at dawn) that makes it perfectly logical to suspect Boccaccio was playing with literary associations he knew well. These associations, moreover, surely point to the Angevin cultural milieu as well as to the Florence of his early years.

Far from an isolated case in the *Decameron*, the novella of Caterina and Ricciardo contains, as we have seen, a dense web of sources that are of precisely the

[13] See *Il falcone desiderato*, 124–31.

sort that makes it very difficult to identify specific source texts for the novellas. To add to the list of tales that feature courtly situations handled in an innovative way (with regard to stock elements and the usual expectations of readers), one need only think of the story that is often considered the most "courtly" of the entire book: the novella of Federigo degli Alberighi (5.9). This time, a noble knight squanders his fortune in an unsuccessful attempt to ingratiate himself with Monna Giovanna, the wife of a rich lord who dies, bequeathing his property to his young son. The boy falls gravely ill and asks his mother to persuade Federigo to give him his falcon, one of the few things of value that he still owns and likewise the last remaining evidence of his nobility. The woman decides to ask him for this gift, but Federigo, in order to receive her fittingly in his lowly abode, is forced to wring the bird's neck so as to be able to offer her something for lunch. Obviously, he is then unable to grant her request, but she nonetheless remains impressed by his magnanimity. The boy dies and his inheritance passes to his mother, whose brothers want her to remarry. Giovanna finally consents to their wishes but only on the condition that her new husband be poor Federigo. The story's ending is a happy one, also because, as the author informs us, Federigo then "managed his affairs more prudently" (5.9.43: Boccaccio 1995, 432). This tale is certainly not a parody, yet here too Boccaccio has reread the source genre in his own way. The courtly plot (which, indeed, could be that of a *lai*) is serious and potentially tragic, but he gives it a lighthearted ending. Although love is topped off with a wedding and the attainment or stabilization of a solid socio-economic position, as in the novella of Caterina and Ricciardo, the only tragic element here is the death of the boy, which is rapidly done away with and, one may even say, integrated into the plot line that leads to a happy conclusion.

The deviation from the typical courtly plot is possible thanks to a series of other processes that are put into motion in the source's rewriting and that have been summarized by Jauss, based upon Neuschäfer's work, as "the temporalizing and problematizing of the older [. . .] genres," accompanied by "narration in open tension ('if any tension'), and without any predecided significance," and by "localized space and time" with "individuated personae in social roles and conflicts."[14] The events narrated are therefore removed from the realm of exemplarity, which bore the universal message meant for the masses, as in the case of the *exemplum*, or for a specific class (the knightly class, for example), as in courtly literature, in order for them to appear as a singular occurrence.

This process has been admirably analyzed and studied, precisely by Neuschäfer in his investigation into the source of the novella of Guglielmo Guardastagno (4.9).[15] This time there is in fact a specific source text, whose names and places are maintained: namely, the *vida* of troubadour Guillem

[14] Jauss 1979, 221–22 and 229. Cf. Neuschäfer 1969 and Sempoux 1973.

[15] See Neuschäfer 1969, 33–43.

de Cabestany.[16] The tale hinges on the folkloristic theme of the eaten heart, reworked in courtly guise. Raimondo di Castel Rossiglione, a jealous husband, kills Guillem, the lover of his wife Soremonda, and serves her his heart at mealtime. When she realizes what she has eaten, she swears that she will never eat again and kills herself. The sad event is reported to the King of Aragon who punishes Raimondo and transforms the two lovers into courtly martyrs by establishing a yearly festival in their honor. Boccaccio's novella follows the Provençal version quite closely but importantly changes the protagonists' social station and eliminates the now superfluous "exemplary" ending. The characters of the *vida* are fixed and stereotypical right from the initial descriptions that completely drive their behavior. Raimondo is noble but evil; he is the model of the *gilos* of the courtly tradition and he will therefore necessarily behave in a way that is contrary to the rules of courtly comportment, which are instead embodied by Guillem and Soremonda. We are given no justification for their actions; however, given their qualities, it is in accordance with courtly ideology for them to become lovers and be commended by the public even though their relationship is adulterous. That this is true is confirmed in the epilogue by the reaction of the king who was identified (wrongly and anachronistically) as Alfonso II of Aragon, king and troubadour, and therefore an authority on the world upholding courtly love. In Boccaccio these stark oppositions lose crispness and the entire situation becomes less clear and rather more problematic. His characters are not stock figures from the outset. They possess both positive and negative qualities, and they change during the course of the tale. Their love affair comes about by chance, just as their discovery does. The two men are friends. The husband is not jealous by nature, but he will become so, which provides a clear justification for his actions, even without consideration of the courtly tradition. Now, we are not certain whether Rossiglione is wholly guilty or perhaps the lovers are somewhat to blame. Guglielmo falls "hopelessly" in love and he carries on "notwithstanding the bonds of friendship and brotherhood that united the two men" (4.9.6: Boccaccio 1995, 349). Moreover, the lovers behave "incautiously" (4.9.8: Boccaccio 1995, 433). All things considered, perhaps even Rossiglione should be pitied. He kills because he has been disappointed in love, not because he is anti-courtly, while his wife now blames herself. After he murders Guglielmo, Rossiglione has doubts about what he has done and, in fear of being punished, runs away, but the punishment does not take place. In this way, the *vida*'s ending has been eliminated; there is no exemplary vendetta and no celebration of the lovers as saints. Boccaccio says only that they were buried together in the castle's chapel. In comparison with the source, there is a diminished moral and didactic dimension, while the question of who is most guilty remains open and there is not even the slightest hint of an implicit judgment. Furthermore, just as for the *alba* in

[16] See Boutière and Schutz 1964, 530–55, and Liborio 1982, 167–81. On the topos of the eaten heart, see Rossi 1983a.

the novella of Caterina and Ricciardo, Boccaccio weaves into the principal plot two further motifs common to medieval narrative: the journey to participate in a joust (where the ambush unfolds) and the murder in the forest, which is more common in epic than in romance. The insertion of other motifs into the main source serves to blur the original outlines even more.

Let us return for a moment to the example with which we began, the tale of Caterina and Ricciardo. Its source, which we may for our current purposes identify with a story along the lines of the *Lai du Laüstic*, is very similar in inspiration to the *vida* of Gullem de Cabestany, inasmuch as the behavior of these characters is determined by courtly rules, such that the lovers are seen as the "good guys" of the tale, while the husband (a jealous boor) is anti-courtly and should be punished. In the novella of Caterina and Ricciardo, however, the lovers are young and unmarried, so there should be no real, logical obstacle to their relationship, including Caterina's father, provided that they respect the prevailing social norms. These youthful lovers have ceased to be simple, stock courtly characters and are members of two historically documented families in Romagna who must have been known to the audience. They find themselves involved in an affair in which, as we mentioned above, courtly themes are parodied by a technique that is comparable to some that we see in certain *fabliaux* that tend to displace the action downwards, that is to say, toward less privileged social environments. Indeed, the novella's setting is that of the bourgeois urban Manardi family and Messer Lizio, who however represents the new dominant social class. Thus, the injection of parody is not an end in itself; rather, it serves to move the action towards this new sociological reality. In other words, we have what Jauss dubbed a "historical concretization of place and time," an updating of the narration that is once again removed from the sphere of an exemplary past, typical of the *exemplum* or the courtly stories and *lais*, and projected towards an open present, in which two transgressive young people can still have hope in a happy future, and one that does not contemplate the passing of predetermined judgments.[17]

This process may be illustrated with another novella as well, the sixth of the Ninth Day, which deals with the nighttime meetings of Pinuccio, Adriano and Niccolosa. While we still cannot speak of source texts, we are at any rate in the presence of a source tale that is very well attested in medieval literature and in subsequent centuries. There are in fact three separate versions in the *fabliau* tradition: Jean Bodel's *Gombert et les deus clers* and two versions of *Le munier et les deus clers*. There is also a German version in the *Gesamtabenteuer*, an English version in Chaucer's *The Reeve's Tale* and, lastly, an elegant reworking in alexandrine verse by La Fontaine.[18] The story tells how two young men, overnight guests in a

[17] Jauss 1979, 229.

[18] See, respectively: Rossi 1992, 122–35; Rychner 1960, 2:152–60; *Gesamtabenteuer*, 3:43–82; Chaucer 1957, 56–60. On this group of tales, see also: Di Francia 1904 and 1907; Beidler 2002–05; Neuschäfer 1969, 28–29.

rural house, manage to take advantage of their host's daughter and wife, thanks to a series of bed-switches made possible by mistakes brought about by the placement of the crib of the host's young son in the darkened bedroom. One of the men gets into bed with the daughter and the other caused the wife to get into his by moving the crib, which the wife used to orient herself when she got up in the night. Finally, the first young man, similarly tricked by the moving crib, gets into the host's bed, thinking that he is lying next to his friend, and boasts about what he did with the girl directly to her father.

Unlike the sources mentioned above, in this case we do not have a courtly source, but rather something that already seems like a novella, as we shall see. All the versions we have listed here are set in the present and the action is often motivated (as in *Le munier et les deus clers* and Chaucer) by the fact that the protagonists, two poor students, have been robbed of their grain and their horse by a miller, thereby reinforcing the typically negative image of the miller in the Middle Ages. Boccaccio, whose version seems closest to that of Jean Bodel,[19] has completely done away with the miller and instead tells how one of the two protagonists had already loved the girl for some time, which gives a background to the action. Compared to the French versions, though, Boccaccio generally maintains the basic narrative pieces but empties them of all their secondary components, putting in their place others that serve to contextualize the action for his readers in modern time and space (the Mugnone river plain), just as he had done for the novella of Caterina and Ricciardo, and to provide at least some of the characters with names (Pinuccio, Adriano and Niccolosa). This technique creates the illusion of historical accuracy, which the generic characters of the *fabliaux* do not have. The first young man, now a city dweller, loves the host's daughter and leaves town precisely with the intention of sleeping with her, but it is completely by chance that his friend ends up in bed with the host's wife. She hears a noise and gets up to find out what has happened, while the young man also leaves the room. Finding the crib in his way, he moves it aside and in this way inadvertently draws the wife into his bed. The story continues as in the other versions to its conclusion, at which point Boccaccio goes a step further with respect to the other authors. As Almansi has noted, his protagonists exhaust all the possible sleeping arrangements, insofar as the wife, having discovered what happened during the night, gets into the daughter's bed, taking the crib with her.[20] Meanwhile, the second young man takes it upon himself to convince the host that his friend's tryst with the daughter was only a dream; and this he does with another motif from the *fabliaux*, the common ploy of making the jealous husband believe that he has dreamt it all. In this way, order is reestablished there where the *fabliau* had left disorder: the wife's quick wit saves her reputation, together with that of her daughter, and gets the two young men out of a sticky

[19] On this point, see Rossi 1983b, 58–60, and 1992, 21–22.

[20] Almansi 1975, 66–69.

situation. The potentially tragic ending implicit in the thorny situation is avoided because Boccaccio has no reason to punish the host since he is no longer a miller guilty of theft as in the other versions. If anything, the young men are now the guilty ones and everything has become more complicated than it was in the *fabliau*. In any event, the story has a happy ending and we even learn that "from then on, Pinuccio discovered other ways of consorting with Niccolosa" (9.6.33: Boccaccio 1995, 682), thus opening the prospect of a happy future.

As it has been progressively described, this work of revising sources and source texts (but especially, as we mentioned, of source tales, source themes and source genres) pertains more or less to all of the narrative material that Boccaccio reused, from the *exemplum* to elegiac comedy, to alexandrine romance and so on, and is not restricted only to Romance traditions. One need consider only two tales to see that this is true: those of Alibech and Alatiel.

With regard to the first (3.10), it has been observed by Paolella, and more recently by Meletinsky, that the novella recalls the structure of the lives of saints, and that of the life of St. Mary of Egypt in particular.[21] Obviously, we are dealing with the life of a saint turned upside down, since Alibech's journey goes from an initial mystic exaltation to the pleasures of the flesh and comes to a close in the normal life of a good wife. This is a clear inversion of the hagiographic progression that leads from a worldly life to sainthood. In the same way, Alatiel's story (2.7) has been described by Segre as a parody of alexandrine romance, whose structure (aside from the shorter length of the tale, which accentuates the perfunctory nature of its events) it follows perfectly.[22] In fact, being a tale of separation, the adventures take place in exotic locales and its conclusion features the homecoming of a person who was thought to be lost. However, unlike the wise heroines of alexandrine romance who manage despite everything to safeguard their virtue, Alatiel goes through just the opposite, even though she succeeds in convincing her father and fiancé that she is still a virgin. The novella's conclusion completely respects the rules of the source genre, but the reader knows full well that the story depicts the overturning of a virtual Byzantine romance.

The comparison of the tales of the *Decameron* to their sources, although we have considered only a very few here, reveals that the novella is a genre of synthesis that is open to a great variety of narrative material and literary traditions. Indeed, it even allows the possibility of reproducing, or pantomiming, other genres, often in the guise of parody, and never literally. In the examples to which we have thus far referred, characters, situations and themes recall texts or genres (in whole or in part) that have gone through adjustments, deformations, distortions or ironic (or even nonsensical) quotations, all obviously intended to

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[21] Paolella 1978 and Meletinsky 1993, 310–11.

[22] Segre 1974a, 145–52. Other instances of parody have been analyzed, for example, by Picone 1981 and 1982 in tales 7.7 and 6.4, respectively, and more generally by Meletinsky 1993, 310–13.

make it possible to reread the inherited contents and narrative forms that were already familiar to the *Decameron*'s audience, but this time in the light of new morals, new norms of behavior, and a new conception of the world. In addition to these novellas, however, there are others that seem to contradict this new worldview, such as the story of Ghismonda and Tancredi or the tale of Elisabetta and the pot of basil in the Fourth Day, as well as the aforementioned novella of Guglielmo Guardastagno. In these stories, conciliatory characters like Messer Lizio are substituted by homicidal brothers and fathers or husbands who tear out hearts. Nonetheless, these three novellas are tied together quite tightly by some similar motifs, not to mention by the general theme of the Day, in which are recounted tales of "those whose love ended unhappily" (3.Concl.6: Boccaccio 1995, 280). The Day's central motif would appear to be that of the eaten heart (or, at any rate, of the mutilated lover), which unfolds in a time and place far from those of the *brigata*. The Salerno of the Normans, Messina, and the Provence of the troubadours are all settings that isolate the tales and enclose them in a past that the author seems explicitly to conjure up. Both novella 4.9, told "according to the Provençals" (4.9.4: Boccaccio 1995, 349), and 4.5, which explains the origins of a popular song, are essentially quotations. The motif of the heart in a chalice recalls (perhaps in Boccaccio's mind as well) the head in the flowerpot as well as the eaten heart. Novella 4.5 basically functions as a *razo* of the song mentioned at its end, thus recalling the Provençal biographical genre,[23] and consequently the *vida* of the troubadour Guillem de Cabestany, source of 4.9. The intertextual relationships among these three tales in fact put them into a separate group of their own that is still linked in certain ways to an ideology of the past, from which Boccaccio wishes to distance himself by treating them as "quotations." It is worth repeating that in Boccaccio we see the tendency to avoid violent situations, which is quite evident for example in the fact that the entire Day dedicated to tragic subjects closes with a lighter novella, set precisely in the same Salerno of the Day's first tale, and with veiled criticisms of the excessive behaviors of 4.9. These stories, though, should be read in the larger context of the book as a whole, where they stand as negative examples, as is clear from Ghismonda's speech to Tancredi on the need to satisfy the demands of the "flesh." Yet even without regard to the corrections at which the readers of the *Decameron* should arrive on their own, there remains the fact that Boccaccio's novellas, as a genre, give the impression that they are an empty container, ready to be filled with just about anything.

A similar development of the short narrative genre, which is fundamental for all modern narrative, both short and long, had already got underway in Gallo-Romance and especially in the thirteenth-century French narrative tradition, that in many ways represents the generic "source" or antecedent closest

[23] See Bruni 1990, 328–29.

to the Italian novella, at least as far as form and content go. The two principal short narrative genres of Old French, the *lais* and the *fabliaux*, stand out with relative clarity between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, despite their identical metrical form (octosyllabic couplets) and similar length (both are short, as opposed to the longer romance genre). In fact, the *lai*, as defined by the poems of Marie de France and some anonymous texts, is an essentially serious and high genre, while the *fabliau* is established as a genre that is humorous and in a low style. Whatever the thematic ingredients were in the *lai* or the *fabliau*, their treatment in the hands of their respective authors was never characterized by a combinatory style, inasmuch as all the elements used by authors of *lais* were aimed at either serious or tragic ends, notwithstanding even the lighthearted (and potentially comic) components they might have encompassed, whereas the *fabliau* was exclusively oriented toward humor. Similarly, the high style of the *lai* involved characters and settings that were generally typical of higher social stations, while the *fabliau* contained socially lower characters and settings.

These distinctions between the two genres, however, must have begun to be attenuated rather early. Already in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, in fact, we begin to find *lais* that are less compact in their structure and that incorporate elements that are, so to speak, spurious. At the same time, some *fabliaux* begin to take on themes that are potentially courtly, yet the introduction of characters who are aristocratic or who speak in a sophisticated manner is meant to distort or parody the courtly genre. Consequently, we get texts (sometimes called *lais* and sometimes *fabliaux*) like the *Lai du Mantel mautaillié* or *Le chevalier qui fist les cons parler*,[24] which make generous use of material that was originally part of serious narratives. The dissolution of a neat division between the *lai* and the *fabliau*, together with the appearance of parodic writings, is an important factor in the prehistory of the novella, as well as of the modern novel. Indeed, it is parody that functions as a mechanism of rapprochement between these two major types.

The serious genre, the *lai*, was an expression of ideals and of values that may be traced back, albeit through a literary lens, to the feudal class. Like that same feudal class, the *lai* genre was closed in upon itself. Its opposite (or, if you like, its carnivalesque other side) was the comic genre of the *fabliau*, which was more dynamic and, in a certain sense, more modern.[25] It managed to absorb elements from the other genres that existed alongside it and to distort them for its own purposes. Indeed, it was the *fabliau*, even before the novella, that dovetailed disparate narrative traditions, from Ovid to the *exemplum* and to elegiac comedy and so on, including, of course, courtly narrative.[26] The greater vitality of this

[24] See *Il falcone desiderato*, 2–37 and 38–85.

[25] For the use of Bakhtin's ideas with reference to the *fabliaux*, see Lee 1976.

[26] Cf. the conclusions of Rossi 1976, 14.

genre was also due, we should remember, to its stylistic versatility, that is to say, to its adaptability to different audiences thanks to its multiple levels of meaning and, not infrequently, to different versions of a single basic text. As a result, the *fabliau* eventually contributed to the formation of cracks in the rigid canons of the more serious genre, which was more static and had therefore become almost anachronistic in a time of crisis and renewal in the romance tradition. Around the middle of the thirteenth century, the *lai* (in its strictest sense) disappears, leaving the field wide open for its rival genre, the *fabliau*, which had in the meanwhile succeeded in taking over some of the old genre's characteristics, even if in a modified state. The end result of this process, indifferently referred to sometimes as *lai* and sometimes as *fabliau* (or *dit* or *conte*), is consequently a mixed genre, neither serious nor comic, neither high nor low, that is distinguishable from romance only by length.[27]

In order to understand this phenomenon, we must also take into consideration the changing conditions in society and readership that lay behind them. A genre like the *lai*, as we have seen, is tied to feudal ideology, to a singular and monolithic ideology that conditions its message, which is directed solely at a class intent upon maintaining the status quo. In a comparable way, a genre like the *exemplum*, which was more universal vis-à-vis its ideal audience (the presence of a mixed audience is also reflected in the subjects that it treats), remains in any event linked to the ideology of the Church, which was just as interested in disallowing changes in the inherited power relationships and which shared this perspective (at least in the north of France) with the great feudal lords. The hegemony of these two groups began to feel threatened toward the end of the twelfth century by the appearance of a new bourgeois mercantile class, initially in the northeast of France (Picardy, Flanders and Champagne). Also linked with the birth of new urban centers was the new intellectual fervor widely known as the Twelfth-Century Renaissance, which reached its apex in the second half of that century and throughout the next in the foundation of universities where there was a flourishing of ideas that were not always in conformity with received orthodoxy. Thus, the old social order faced a crisis, together with its values, which were expressed in the lessons taught by *exempla* and courtly texts like the *lais*. It has often been noticed that in the *fabliaux*, a genre that seems to spread outward from Picardy and whose form (and name) come from the fable, there is no emphasis on "morals," insofar as the stories do not lead to moral lessons, or they espouse morals not actually illustrated in the tales or their "morals" are in reality "immoral." In other words, gone is the certainty of earlier times and everything is now open to debate in the new socio-cultural climate.[28] The changes that took place in the northeast of France in this period are comparable to those that later came about in the communes of Tuscany between the Due- and Trecento. By this, I do not mean to

[27] For a more detailed discussion of this evolution, see Lee 1981–83.

[28] See Schenk 1981.

say that there is continuity between the developments in France and Boccaccio's contemporary environment, but that the latter experienced changes that were similar to, and even more intense than, what had happened in the northeastern regions of France during the preceding century. Both these new situations are reflected in contemporary evolutions of the short narrative genre, which cast doubt on old certainties while bringing stories up to date and making them more problematic. The *fabliau*, which widened with regard to its content and points of reference, therefore represents a new genre source for the novella, first in the *Novellino* and then in the *Decameron*. This is the case not because the *fabliau* was born before the novella but because it drove the short narrative genre along a road that ran parallel to the one that the Italian genre would follow (and on which it would surpass the *fabliau*) as it developed in analogous historical and social conditions. Proof of this phenomenon is visible in the fact that when Boccaccio uses a *fabliau* as his source, as in 9.6 (the novella we discussed above), it appears to be less necessary to adjust or distort it in order to make it fit into the general system of the *Decameron*, as opposed to the courtly themes that are at the root of 4.9 and 5.4. Hence, it seems that Boccaccio's novella carries to extremes the gradual contamination and dissolution of the short narrative genres that had begun a century earlier in France. Nevertheless, unlike its French archetypes, the novella does not run its entire course in a symmetrical parody of now improbable ideals; rather, it succeeds in establishing itself as the short narrative genre par excellence precisely on account of its openness even to contradictory sources and because it incorporates a multiplicity of "voices" that come from a wide range of origins.[29]

The novella, as Boccaccio seems to have conceived it, brings with it another important innovation with regard to the Gallo-Romance tradition and even to the *Novellino*, whose original structure has been obscured by vicissitudes of the manuscript tradition—the frame tale. The frame tale is a characteristic trait of the oriental *exemplum* tradition, introduced into the western tradition by Latin translations of *exemplum* collections like the *Historia septem sapientium* or the *Liber Kalilae et Dimnae*, as well as by the success of works like the *Disciplina clericalis* of Petrus Alphonsi, a converted Jew and therefore still tied to oriental models. The western *exemplum* tradition, the great collections of Jacques de Vitry's *Sermones vulgares* or Stephen of Bourbon's *Tractatus de diversis materiis praedicabilibus*, did not supply links between their texts with a narrative frame tale, but instead organized the material thematically, as the anonymous author of the *Novellino* perhaps also did. The question arises, then, as to where the frame tale came from.[30] While it is certainly possible, or even probable, that Boccaccio was aware of earlier models, such as the *Historia septem sapientium* or the *Disciplina clericalis*, we must also not discount the hypothesis that the model upon

[29] See Delcorno 1986 and, more recently, Meletinsky 1993, 308–15.

[30] See Picone 1988a, who tends to prefer a source in the oriental *exemplum* collections, as well as Picone 1988b and Varvaro 1985.

which the *Decameron* was based could actually be found in Dante. In this regard, we would tend to agree with Luciano Rossi who believes that a source of this type is not the *Comedy*, but instead the *Vita nuova*.[31] In our opinion, it is the latter work's alternation between verse and prose which the *Decameron* follows in its own alternation between the discourse of the novellas and the discourse of the frame tale (as well as of the rubrics, responsibility for which is claimed in the Conclusion of the Author), and also the poems that conclude each Day, which act as a commentary to the tales. It would seem, then, that the *Vita nuova* was a much more important antecedent for Boccaccio than were the oriental sources, considering the influence that Dante had on all of his works.

The *Comedy* provided the model for other aspects of the *Decameron*, beginning with the number of novellas. The idea, for example, of giving to characters the names of people who really existed, a technique that brought his material up to date, seems to be related to the authentic characters of the *Comedy*. Many of the *Decameron*'s characters are also present in Dante's masterpiece, including the aforementioned Lizio da Valbona, who is cited together with a member of the Manardi family in *Purgatorio* 14.97. Even more relevant, though, is the function of the *Comedy* as a model for mixing different stylistic registers within a single work, which reflects different shades of lived reality. This is an aspect that Boccaccio explicitly underscores in the Conclusion of the Author.[32]

The different stylistic registers are not only present in the novellas, tied as they are, and as we have seen, to the influence of different sources, but also discernible in the frame tale dialogues. We find there the different voices of the individual narrators, each with his or her own personality, and each of these voices contributes to the direction in which the tales will travel. The lack of a precise moral in the stories, a subject we touched on above, ultimately makes the *Decameron* seem in some way like it contains contradictory moral messages. This impression also derives from the fact that the tales are told from the point of view of the various narrators of the frame tale who are very good at showing that "whenever you have a multitude of things you are bound to find differences of quality" (Concl.18: Boccaccio 1995, 800).[33] The *Decameron* puts on stage all the immense variety of the world, and in this sense it is obviously a "human comedy," as opposed to Dante's divine comedy;[34] but, like Dante, Boccaccio creates, to paraphrase Contini, the first polyglossia of literary genres to be set into motion by a modern author.[35]

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[31] See Rossi 1985, 17–18.

[32] See again Rossi 1976, 14, and 1985, 18. See also Bruni 1990, 289–302.

[33] The lack of a single point of view in the *Decameron* has been discussed by, among others, Mazzotta 1986, 264–68, and Bruni 1990, 273.

[34] Branca 1950, 29.

[35] See Contini 1970, 171.

The term "polyglossia" calls to mind "polyphony" or "heteroglossia," key concepts in the formation of the modern novel that were proposed by Bakhtin, who rightly notes that polyphony, the existence of distinct voices within a single text, is typical of the Renaissance, a period in which the writer began to portray himself and the multifaceted reality that surrounded him.[36] Thus, Bakhtin did not consider medieval romance to be polyphonic,[37] although he did recognize the presence of polyphony in many other medieval literary forms beyond that one genre, the *fabliau* being among them. One of the fundamental stages between the *fabliau* and the modern novel is the novella, a genre to which Shklovsky also attributed the origins of the novel.[38] Thus, we may surmise that Boccaccio was not only the last codifier of the novella, but also the author of the first modern Italian novel.

Let us here underline the term "author." Boccaccio is not simply a compiler of earlier texts, a fact that is obviously also due to the change in the cultural climate with respect to the period in which his medieval sources came into being. We are at this point nearly at the peak of Humanism, when the influence of classical culture again casts the author as the sole mind responsible for his work, whereas in the Middle Ages authors, often anonymous, deferred to the authorities of their sources, if not to God Himself. In any case, a slow change had taken place in such attitudes during the thirteenth century, when, on the one hand, Aristotelian commentaries on classical texts, based on the idea of the single author, enjoyed wide diffusion and, on the other, there was an appearance of pseudo-(auto)biographical texts, that led to an emphasis on the author behind the work.[39] These two tendencies fuse together in Italy in the works of Dante, a commentator on himself in the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio*, even before the *Comedy*. Following the Dantean model, at least in Italy, the figure of the author-compiler, or of the author who let his own work be rearranged (as was still the case, for example, for the anonymous author of the *Novellino*), was no longer conceivable. The presence of Boccaccio, the author of the *Decameron*, is therefore robust and evinced first and foremost in his abovementioned use of the frame tale. This frame, in addition to providing a place for commentary on the novellas, transforms a miscellaneous collection of stories into an integral work, indeed, into a book, just as Dante had earlier done for a miscellaneous group of sonnets and *canzoni* in the *Vita nuova*.[40]

The unity of the *Decameron* is even further reinforced by the stylistic treatment to which the various sources are subjected one after the other, as we have described here. It should be noted that Boccaccio tends to avoid potentially

[36] Bakhtin 1981, 259–422.

[37] On this subject, see Segre 1984, 61–84.

[38] Shklovsky 1976, 91–95.

[39] For the wider overview, see Huot 1987, Minnis 1984 and Lee 1993.

[40] See Picone 1992, 173–74.

dramatic situations, often bringing his novellas to a close with a clever gesture or quip, as in the novella of the crib (9.6), which we analyzed above. This characteristic was already present in the *Novellino*, which intended to preserve for posterity "some flowers of speech."[41] The comparison between the novellas of the *Novellino* and their sources confirms this tendency and justifies the new meaning of the word "novella," to which Boccaccio will also adhere. "Novella," writes Michelangelo Picone, "is the word spoken artistically: the transcription of the word that has brought the one who pronounced it to secular salvation and worldly affirmation."[42] The word, then, is the "bel parlare" 'fine speech' with which man, thanks to his ability to use it wisely, saves himself, just like the characters in the novellas. If the Tuscan short story writers' insistence on ready wit can be related, as it in fact often is, to Florence's new bourgeois mercantile culture,[43] then this new culture is also an integral part of the art of narrative. It is for this reason, as Picone again observes, that the entire Sixth Day of the *Decameron* is dedicated to "those who, on being provoked by some verbal pleasantry, have returned like for like, or who, by a prompt retort or shrewd manoeuvre, have avoided danger, discomfiture or ridicule" (5.Concl.3: Boccaccio 1995, 441) and that it opens with the novella of Madonna Oretta, in which the performance of the inept storyteller is cut short.[44] Fine speech, therefore, involves everyone: the characters in the novellas, the characters in the frame tale and, obviously, the author as well. The presence of the author is most clearly felt in his preoccupation with narrative style, a style that molds together sources from the most diverse origins, the multiple "voices" of the text, by rhetorically integrating them in such a way as to bring about the renewal of the short narrative genre. This is a process that frees the genre from its previously marginal status and turns it into something new: the novella. Proof of Boccaccio's preoccupation with his work's style is found in the fact that the autograph manuscript of the *Decameron* is still extant, together with some of Petrarch's. Their survival represents an absolutely new step forward in the manuscript tradition of Romance works and also in the way the role of the author was conceived, both by the writers themselves and by their audience. Boccaccio, as an author, can now be imitated and copied, but not compiled.

It is interesting, in closing, that, when Boccaccio is used as a model by other authors, his "open" novella seems to be subjected to a reverse transformation. It takes only a couple of examples to illustrate this phenomenon. Sercambi's novella 134 is based on *Decameron*'s 4.9, but not on the Provençal *vida*. Sercambi takes the side of the husband and approves of the killing of the wife and her lover, whereas the Provençal version condemns the husband, and Boccaccio, as we have

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41 *Novellino* 3.

42 Picone 1989, 131.

43 See, for example, Padoan 1964, 100–14.

44 Picone 1989, 141 and 151.

seen, remains neutral.[45] Even clearer is the case of the *Decameron*'s final tale, that of Griselda, which was immensely popular and was reworked numerous times in several languages. However, in Boccaccio's version, as Olsen explains, there are several gaps that the reader must fill, or that must be filled by those who rewrite it, including famous authors such as Petrarch, Sercambi and Chaucer: "the most efficient way to fill these gaps is to refer to figural representation or to insert such material into a genre that has strict constraints (*exempla*, lives of illustrious women, fables)."[46] Hence, the circle closes, and we return to where we began: the *exemplum* or the popular tale. The rewritings of the *Decameron*'s novellas often empty them of precisely those elements that characterized Boccaccio's own reworking of sources, the very thing that highlighted their innovative qualities.[47]

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[45] See Sercambi 1995, 1089–93.

[46] Olsen 1990, 264. See also Olsen 1988 and, again, Picone 1992.

[47] The following items pertinent to the topic of "Sources" have been added to the original essay: Alfano et al. 2012; Allen 2000; Cursi 2013; Lee 2010; Lee, 2013; and Picone 2008.

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(Lessico Critico Decameroniano)

Edited by
Pier Massimo Forni and Renzo Bragantini

English Edition edited by
Christopher Kleinhenz

Translated by
Michael Papio

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The *Decameron*: A Critical Lexicon

Lessico Critico Decameroniano

When originally published in 1995, the volume represented a major, new departure from the "normal" sort of scholarship on Boccaccio's masterpiece, and its unique approach and contents are still valid and valuable today. The seventeen original essays in the volume focus on providing a comprehensive view of the *Decameron* through the analysis of particular aspects, particular problem areas in the reading and interpretation of the work. Each essay offers a critical window on a defined topic (indicated by the headwords), and, when taken together, these individual essays intersect with, supplement, and reinforce one another, thus emphasizing the harmonious nature of the work as a whole and the importance of examining it through a variety of lenses. The newness of the volume also consists in its introduction of innovative exegetical approaches and the identification of previously unidentified sources and influences. While not providing an orderly reading of the *Decameron* as a more traditional series of day-by-day *lecturae* would do, the essays examine multiple *novelle* from various Days and from differing perspectives so as to provide an assemblage of comprehensive views on the text. For the English-language edition two new items have been added: an update to Vittore Branca's essay on the history of the text of the *Decameron* and a bibliographical overview of North-American studies on the *Decameron* and, more generally, on Boccaccio's life, works and influence.

Christopher Kleinhenz is the Carol Mason Kirk Professor Emeritus of Italian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he taught Italian literature of the Due- and Trecento, manuscript studies, and art and literature in medieval Italy for almost forty years (1968–2007). He has published extensively on Dante, Boccaccio, and other medieval Italian subjects. He served as President of the American Association of Teachers of Italian, the American Boccaccio Association, and the Medieval Association of the Midwest, and as Editor of *Dante Studies*. A Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, he has received numerous awards.

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Brother Cipolla in the Parish of Certaldo,
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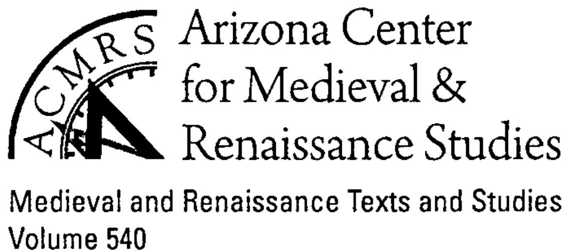

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