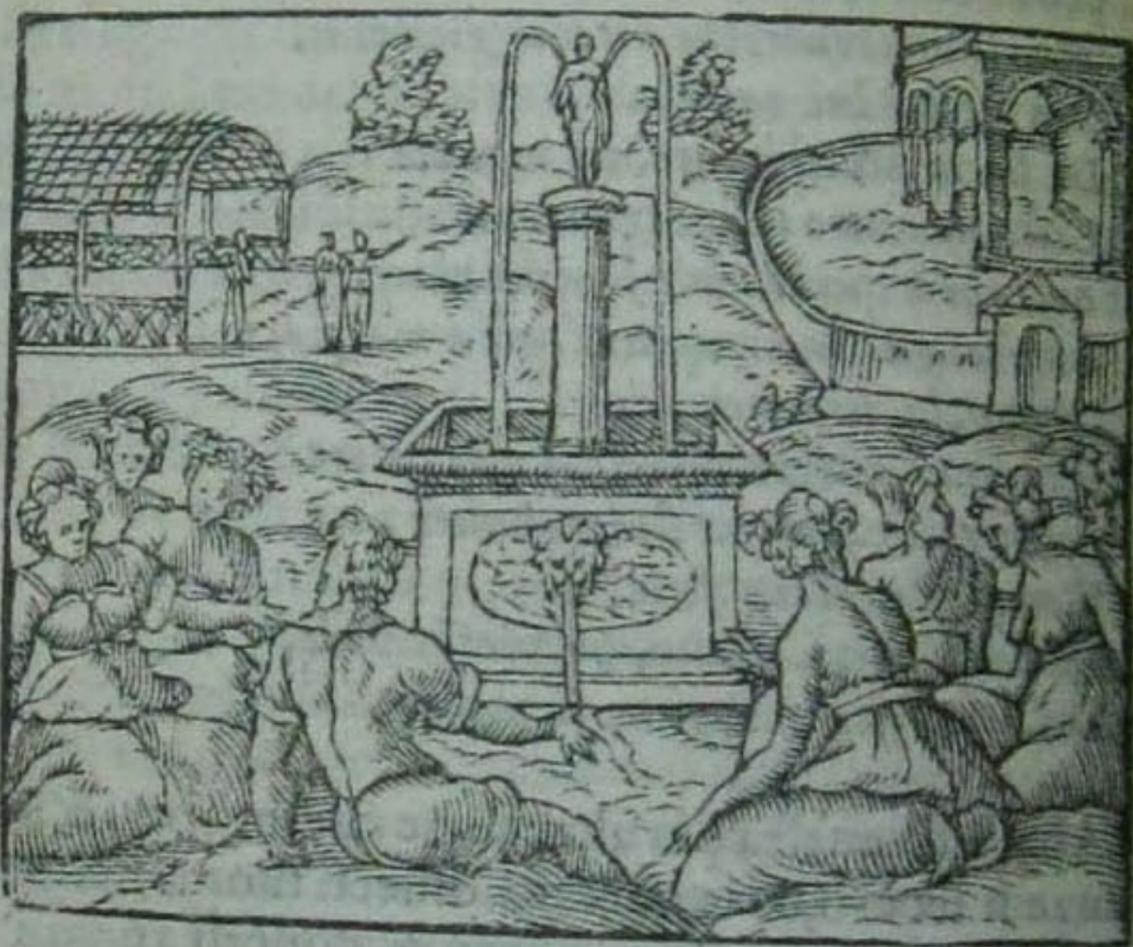


DEL DECAMERO.  
NE DI M. GIOVA. BOCCACCIO  
GIORNA-  
TA TERZA.

NELLA QUALE SI RAGIONA  
sotto il reggimento di Neifile, di chi alcuna cosa molto  
da lui desiderata con industria acquistasse, o la per-  
duta ricouerasse.



L'AVRORA gia di vermiglia comin-  
ciaua, appressandosi il Sole, a diuenir  
rancia: quando la Domenica la Reina  
leuata, & fatta tutta la sua compagnia  
leuare, & hauendo gia il Siniscalco  
gran pezzo dauanti mandato al luogo, doue andar  
doueano, assai delle cose opportune; & chi quiui  
preparasse quello, che bisognaua, veggendo gia la  
Reina

**Eroticizing Theology in Day Three  
and the Poetics of the *Decameron***

Critics have often noted the conjunction of *eros* and religion that characterizes Day Three of the *Decameron*. From its first tale of Masetto cavorting with nuns in a convent, producing “many monklets” (“assai monachin” *Dec.* 3.1.42), through the stories of Dom Felice, who achieves the paradise of orgasm with Frate Puccio’s wife while Puccio prays in penance (3.4), or the anonymous abbot, who constructs a fake Purgatory for Ferondo so he can sleep with Ferondo’s wife (3.8), to the final account of Alibech putting the devil back in hell by having sex with the hermit Rustico (3.10), the day’s storytelling mixes the secular and sacred (De Meijer 298-99; Ferroni 238-39; Usher, “Industria” 105).<sup>1</sup> This intermingling of sex and theology caused Renaissance editors to revise and censure these tales (Chiecchi and Troisio) and through the middle of the twentieth century the day’s stories were routinely omitted from anthologies. While some modern critics have seen these stories not as obscene but as expressions of a new ideology that reveal “un potente soffio di umanità” (Alicata 248), others have argued that even the day’s most challenging tale, that of Alibech and Rustico, teaches a moral lesson when read in the larger context of the *Decameron* and Boccaccio’s other works (Kirkham, “Love’s Labors Rewarded”) and that it may encode a lesson about salvation (Ruggiero). Yet another group of critics has moved away from the dichotomy of moral or immoral, interpreting the day’s mixture of *eros* and religion as parodic or, in the wake of Bakhtin, as “carnavalesque” (Fido 117-18; Muscetta 220; Grimaldi 63). This essay argues that the fusion of the erotic and religious that characterizes Day Three constitutes a central element in Boccaccio’s poetics in the *Decameron* itself, as expressed both in the (significantly contiguous with Day Three) Introduction to Day Four, where Boccaccio aligns himself with lyric poets who had explored the same issue of the relationship between *eros* and theology, and in the Author’s Conclusion, where the erotics of religious art are a central part of his defense of poetry. As this textual itinerary suggests, Boccaccio’s eroticization of theology in Day Three is part of an effort to

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from Boccaccio *Decameron* (ed. Branca), with references given in text to day, story, and *comma*. English translations are from Boccaccio *Decameron* (trans. Nichols), cited in text as Nichols followed by the page number.

theologize poetry by giving literature the same institutional status afforded to the disciplines of philosophy and theology.

Although the queen of the day, Neifile, initially portrays her rule as in keeping with the previous reigns (*Dec.* 2. Concl. 3), she establishes fundamental changes in the life of the *brigata* and its storytelling in terms of time, space, and theme that reinforce the day's fusion of erotic and religious discourses. Neifile's first innovation is to suspend storytelling on Friday, to honor Christ's crucifixion, and Saturday, for hygienic purposes and out of reverence for the Virgin Mary, before storytelling resumes on Sunday. In a work whose title, *Decameron*, enacts its own temporal expansion of the exegetical *Hexameron*, as the six days of creation (Stillinger, "The Place of the Title"), the significance of this temporal shift should not be underestimated. Boccaccio's decision to have Neifile suspend storytelling on the day of Venus, moreover, is surprising given that much of Boccaccio's earlier work, such as the *Ameto*, which has often been described as a mini-*Decameron*, is written under the aegis of Venus. Whereas Neifile, in her rationale for taking a break from storytelling, contrasts *orazioni* and *novelle* ("piú tosto a orazioni che a novelle vacassimo"; "we should devote ourselves to prayer [...] rather than storytelling" 2. Concl. 5; Nichols 154), the day's tales repeatedly mix the secular and the sacred: four of the day's stories (3.3, 3.6, 3.7, 3.10) conclude with prayers for sexual fulfillment and the conjunction of sex and prayer constitutes the plot of 3.4.

The idea of taking two days off has its own erotic resonance as well. In Dioneo's tale of Riccardo and Bartolomea (*Dec.* 2.10), which immediately precedes Neifile's organization of her reign and whose importance to the *Decameron* has been analyzed by Barolini ("Le parole son femmine"), the significance of *venerdì*, *sabato*, and *domenica* is the subject of marital tensions. Riccardo teaches his wife, Bartolomea, an elaborate calendar containing all of the days on which they cannot have sex: "[...] sopra questi aggiugnendo digiuni e quattro tempora e vigilie d'apostoli e di mille altri santi e venerdì e sabati e la domenica del Signore e la quaresima tutta, e certi punti della luna e altre eccezion molte [...]" ("To these he added days of fasting, and the Ember days in each quarter, and the vigils of the Apostles and of innumerable other saints, Fridays and Saturdays, the Sabbath which was sacred to the Lord, and all of Lent, and certain phases of the moon, and many other days" 2.10.9; Nichols 148). Bartolomea uses these same days of the week as part of her self-defense for remaining with her abductor, the pirate Paganino. She explains:

"E dicovi che se voi aveste tante feste fatte fare a' lavoratori che le vostre possessioni lavorano, quante faciavate fare a colui che il mio piccol campicello aveva a lavorare, voi non avreste mai ricolto granel di grano. Sommi abbattuta a costui, che ha voluto Idio sí come pietoso rguardatore della mia giovanezza, col quale io mi sto in questa camera, nella quale non si sa che cosa festa sia, dico di quelle feste che voi, piú divoto a Dio che a' servigi delle donne, cotante celebravate; né mai dentro a quello uscio entrò né sabato né venerdì né vigilia né quattro tempora né quaresima, ch'è cosí lunga, anzi di dí e di

notte ci si lavora e battecisi la lana; e poi che questa notte sonò mattutino, so bene come il fatto andò da una volta in sú.”

(*Dec.* 2.10.32-33)

“And I’m telling you now that, if you had given the workers in your fields as many holidays as you gave to the fellow whose job it was to work in my little field, you would not have reaped one ear of grain. By the will of God, Who looked with pity upon my youth, I came across this man with whom I share this room, where holy days are unknown. I mean that sort of holy days which you, more devoted to God than to the service of women, used to celebrate so religiously. And through that door there never comes a Sabbath or a Friday or a vigil or an Ember day, or Lent which lasts for such a long time: day and night the work never stops here and the shuttle’s moving in and out; as soon as matins rang today things started moving and went on and on.”)

(Nichols 152).

As these passages make clear, the meaning of the days of the week as appropriate for either abstaining from, or participating in, sexual activity constitutes the primary battleground of this failed marriage. In this context, it is worth noting that “inability to pay the conjugal debt was one of the very few licit reasons for the dissolution of a marriage” (Elliott 176), so Bartolomea’s complaint (in contrast to the more extravagant legal claims of Madonna Filippa in 6.7) may have some basis in the canon law that Boccaccio unhappily, if not perhaps unproductively, studied.<sup>2</sup> The historicity of her claims aside, Bartolomea neatly sums up the larger conflict when she describes Riccardo as “piú divoto a Dio che a’ servigi delle donne,” which conveys the conventional courtly conflict between love of God and love of ladies that is so often articulated in the earlier vernacular literary tradition. Bartolomea, moreover, makes quite clear what “service to ladies” means for her: it means working her “picciol campicello,” in a metaphor that will bear further fruit in the tale of Masetto, where he asserts, “‘Se voi mi mettete costà entro, io vi lavorerò sí l’orto che mai non vi fu cosí lavorato’” (“‘If you put me into that garden, I’ll work in it as no one has ever worked before’” *Dec.* 3.1.18; Nichols 162). If Riccardo and Bartolomea have competing ideas about the significance of individual days as due for devotion to God or service to ladies, Neifile’s calendric innovation brings together both *venerdì* and *domenica*, thus linking, willingly or not, service to ladies and devotion to God.

Neifile’s modification of the time of storytelling is matched by an equally meaningful change of space, moving the *brigata* to a different garden to avoid being come upon by “gente nuova” (“new people”).<sup>3</sup> This move has extraordinary consequences for the collection as a whole, since, while the *brigata* spends Friday and Saturday in the old garden, nine of the last ten days of

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the marriage debt, see Brundage; Payer. For Boccaccio’s career as canonist, see Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular* 135-85.

<sup>3</sup> Boccaccio’s use of the phrase does not seem to have any of the class implications that one finds in Dante (*Inferno* 16.73-75), but the question would be worth exploring further.

the journey, and all but one of the final eight days of storytelling, will be spent in this new garden, the exception being Dioneo's Day Seven, when stories are told in the Valley of the Ladies. This walled garden with its flourishing flora and engraved fountain both mixes the natural and the human ("non so se da natural vena o da artificiosa"; "whether from a natural spring or by some artificial means" Nichols 158) and continues the intermingling of sacred and secular:

Il veder questo giardino, il suo bello ordine, le piante e la fontana co' ruscelletti procedenti da quella tanto piacque a ciascuna donna e a' tre giovani, che tutti cominciarono a affermare che, se Paradiso si potesse in terra fare, non sapevano conoscere che altra forma che quella di quel giardino gli si potesse dare, né pensare, oltre a questo, qual bellezza gli si potesse agiugnere.

(3. Intro. 11)

(The sight of this garden, where all was so well arranged, with its plants and the fountain with the streamlets running from it, gave such pleasure to the ladies and the three young men that they were all moved to say that, if Paradise could be established on this earth, they did not see how it could be given any other form than this garden: they could not think of any beauty which it lacked.)

(Nichols 158)

This reference to Paradise has led critics to interpret the garden in light of the Garden of Eden and the tradition of the *locus amoenus*, exploring the precedents to be found particularly in the *Roman de la Rose* and Dante.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the source, to recall the earthly paradise is to introduce the problem of eros and desire. In *City of God*, for example, Augustine worries about whether there would have been sex in earthly paradise before the fall and speculates, by invoking medical examples from his own time, how the first people might have had intercourse without lust (623-30; Book 14, chapters 23-26). Dante's sojourn in the earthly Paradise in the final canti of *Purgatorio* is similarly replete with erotic imagery. In the day's tales, the storytellers will continue to explore the fusion of erotic and religious concerns that the garden already implies.

Neifile not only changes space and time, but also decides to constrain the day's theme:

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<sup>4</sup> On the *locus amoenus*, the *locus classicus* is Curtius 195-200. For some, Boccaccio uses the garden of Eden as symbolic image for its attempt to construct a new community (Gagliardi), for others it may even be a mini-Parnassus (Usher, "Industria" 102). On the significance of the mixing of natural and human elements, see Barberi Squarotti 39. For examinations of the frame garden in terms of these larger traditions and in comparison to the gardens in Boccaccio's earlier works, see Kern. For an examination of the frame gardens in the *Decameron*, compared both to the gardens of the *Ameto* and those found in the other stories of the collection, see Usher, "Frame and Novella Gardens." For analyses in terms of the *Roman de la Rose* and Dante, see Stillinger, "The Language of Gardens," and Mazzotta 105-10. For the connections between Boccaccio's gardens and the *Triumph of Death* fresco in Pisa, see Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel giardino* and "Gardens in Italian Literature" 24-25.

“[...] sí perché sarà ancora piú bello che un poco si restringa del novellare la licenzia e che sopra uno de’ molti fatti della fortuna si dica, e ho pensato che questo sarà: di chi alcuna cosa molto desiderata con industria acquistasse o la perduta recuperasse”

(*Dec.* 2. Concl. 9)

“[...] I consider it would be a good idea to restrict our freedom somewhat and to discuss only one of the many facets of Fortune. So this is the theme I propose: *Those who have by their own efforts acquired something they greatly desired or recovered something they had lost.*”

(Nichols 155)

It is significant that the author uses the same word *licenzia* in the Author’s Conclusion (3), where he worries that “[s]aranno per avventura alcune di voi che diranno che io abbia nello scriver queste novelle troppa licenzia usata, sí come fare alcuna volta dire alle donne e molte spesso ascoltare cose non assai convenienti né a dire né a ascoltare a oneste donne. La qual cosa io nego, per ciò che niuna sí disonesta n’è, che, con onesti vocaboli dicendola, si disdica a alcuno: il che qui mi pare assai convenevolmente bene aver fatto” (“There may possibly be some among you who will say that I have allowed myself too much licence in writing these tales, in making ladies say sometimes, and hear very often, things which are not suitable to be said or be told, provided the right language is used — and it seems to me that this is what I have done reasonably well”; Nichols 651). Neifile’s efforts to restrain freedom thus contrasts with the author’s own exercise of it and the experimentation within such restraint that one finds in the day’s storytellers as well.<sup>5</sup>

Filostrato’s tale of Masetto in the convent, the first story of the day, sets the tone for much of what follows by exploiting the erotic potential of Neifile’s modifications of space, time, and theme.<sup>6</sup> He not only transforms the *hortus conclusus* of the convent into the locus of sexual activity but also literalizes the mystical metaphor of the bride of Christ in such a way that when Masetto returns to his village he sees himself as having cuckolded Christ, “affermando che cosí trattava Cristo chi gli poneva le corna sopra ’l cappello” (“affirming that that was how Christ treated those who put horns on His crown” *Dec.* 3.1.43; Nichols 165). If prayers had marked the sacred for Neifile (“piú tosto a orazioni che a novelle vacassimo”), the nuns claim that their prayers, instead of their sexual desires, caused Masetto to regain his speech: “[...] con piacer di Masetto ordinarono che le genti circostanti credettero che, per le loro orazioni e per li meriti del santo in cui intitolato era il monistero, a Masetto, stato lungamente

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<sup>5</sup> Only two of the tales, *Dec.* 3.9 and 3.7, actually deal with recuperating instead of acquiring (Ferroni 237; Usher, “*Industria*” 107) and both feature characters who are disguised as pilgrims.

<sup>6</sup> An important precedent for Filostrato’s story is Dioneo’s first tale on Day One (1.4), where two monks are similarly overwhelmed by desire for a woman. Masetto’s use of the image of the *gallo* in his explanation to the abbess also recalls the Marchioness of 1.5, where *gallina* is also used to figure the relationship between sexes.

mutolo, la favella fosse restituita" ("[...] they decided, with Masetto's approval, that the people round about should be led to believe that, through their prayers and the merits of their titular saint, Masetto, after having been dumb so long, had had his speech restored" *Dec.* 3.1.41; Nichols 165).

Boccaccio gives order to his tales of discursive contamination by reversing the order of Dante's ascent by moving from the Paradise of Frate Puccio's orgasm in *Decameron* 3.4, through Ferondo's Purgatory in 3.8, and then concluding with Alibech's Hell in 3.10. The structural engagement with Dante in the day has been noted by many critics (Fido; Kirkham, "Love's Labors Rewarded"; Brownlee; Ascoli, "Boccaccio's Auerbach"). Elsewhere ("Boccaccio on Dante and Truth") I have argued that whereas in the tales of Frate Puccio and Alibech, Boccaccio gives otherworldly places an erotic significance, in the story of Ferondo Boccaccio challenges Dante's claim to truth. Boccaccio announces this broader purpose by having Laretta introduce the tale as "una verità che ha, troppo più che di quello che ella fu, di menzogna sembianza" ("a truth that has, more than was the case, the appearance of a lie" 3.8.3), thus adopting Dante's own description of Geryon from *Inferno* 16 as "quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna," which critics have seen as a definition of the *Commedia* itself (Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* 58-67).

Laretta's story details how a nameless abbot uses a potion to make Ferondo appear dead so he can bury him and then places him in a fake purgatory, where Ferondo is punished while the abbot sleeps with Ferondo's wife. The account of Ferondo's time in this artificial purgatory emphasizes the materiality of his thinking, but when he returns to the world, after his wife has become pregnant with the abbot's child, Ferondo seems transformed. Although the townspeople initially think that he is a ghost, their concerns are eventually alleviated and he begins to tell them stories about his otherworld journey:

Ma poi che la gente alquanto si fu rassicurata con lui e videro che egli era vivo, domandandolo di molte cose, quasi savio ritornato, a tutti rispondeva e diceva loro novelle dell'anime de' parenti loro, e faceva da se medesimo le più belle favole del mondo de' fatti del Purgatorio: e in pien popolo raccontò la rivelazione statagli fatta per la bocca del Ragnolo Braghiello avanti che risuscitasse.

(*Dec.* 3.8.74)

(When at last the people were somewhat reassured and could see that he really was alive, they started to ask him a lot of questions. Then he, like someone who had returned a wiser man than when he set out, answered them all and gave them news of the souls of their relatives and invented the finest stories in the world about what happened in Purgatory: when they were all gathered together, he even told them of the revelation which he had had, just before his resurrection, from the lips of the Gangel Abriel.)

(Nichols 218)

Ferondo's ability to inform his fellow townspeople about their relatives, of course, means that Ferondo has become a fabulist since his tales must be inventions. Whereas the story's rubric underlines Ferondo's status as a cuckold,

who “per suo nutrica un figliuolo dello abate nella moglie di lui generato” (“rears as his own a son begotten on his wife by the abbot” *Dec.* 3.8.1; Nichols 210), this fact is never explicitly mentioned in the story, which emphasizes instead Ferondo’s new found skill as storyteller.

The Dantean concerns of Lauretta’s story are further underlined by the content of two of Lauretta’s other tales, *Dec.* 1.8 and 9.8, which not only reuse Dantean characters but also appear in the eighth position of their respective days, with 9.8 being the 88<sup>th</sup> story of the collection as a whole. Lauretta is also, notably, Queen for Day 8. Boccaccio thus creates a pattern around Lauretta, Dante, and the number eight that evokes and contrasts with Dante’s obsessive concern with the number nine in the *Vita nuova*. If the particular target of Boccaccio’s story of Ferondo as the false prophet from a fake otherworld, whose tales of the beyond are believed by the city’s gullible citizens, is Dante’s claim to truth in the *Commedia*, the combination of eros and theology in both 3.8 and the day’s other tales may be understood as equally polemical, but addressed to the larger vernacular literary tradition to which Boccaccio joins himself in the Introduction to Day Four, which includes not only Dante, but also Guido Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia.

Boccaccio’s engagement with this tradition is particularly evident in Dioneo’s tale of Alibech and Rustico. While several critics have pointed to the patristic traditions that inform Boccaccio’s account (Storey; Grimaldi 84; Picone), I propose to situate it in the literary tradition that Boccaccio himself evokes in the Introduction to Day 4. When Boccaccio has Dioneo describe Alibech deciding how to serve God — “un dí ne domandò alcuno in che maniera e con meno impedimento a Dio si potesse *servire*” *Dec.* 3.10.5 (“one day she asked one of them about the best way to serve God” Nichols 227) — the phrase “*servire a Dio*,” which appears remarkably in eighteen of the tale’s thirty-five *commi*, not only recalls the Lives of the Fathers, but also echoes Giacomo da Lentini’s sonnet “Io m’aggio posto in core a Dio *servire*” (Ossola and Segre, 1:43-44). Giacomo’s sonnet is a classic expression of the courtly dilemma between love of God and love of lady because, although he wants to serve God and go to Paradise, he is unwilling to go without his lady: “Sanza mia donna non vi voria gire.” In the *terzine* he hastens to explain that he intends no obscene significance (“Ma no lo dico a tale intendimento, / perch’io peccato ci volesse fare”), but this *petitio principii* reveals both his own desires and the continuum that encompasses both earthly and heavenly desires, which would be fully exploited by later poets, like Guinizzelli and Dante (see Barolini, “Dante and the Lyric Past” 22). Whereas Dante theologizes Giacomo’s dilemma by joining love of God and love of his lady, Boccaccio returns to (and develops further) Giacomo’s suggestion of another significance to his aspirations for Paradise by erasing Giacomo’s negation. In other words, Boccaccio “lo dice a tale intendimento,” namely, he says it expressly, by making the idea of serving (*servire*) God as a metaphor for sexual intercourse into the plot of Alibech and

Rustico.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the relationship between the emergence of courtly love and the church or conventional religion — whether “an extension of religion, an escape from religion, [or] a rival religion,” to use C. S. Lewis’s concise parsing of possibilities (21-22) — Boccaccio’s erotic exploitation of theology is more explicit, extreme, and exuberant.<sup>8</sup> In Day 3 of the *Decameron* Boccaccio enters into conversation with this tradition by exploring another configuration that is neither the courtly conflict between love for God and love for lady, nor the theologized eros of Guinizelli and Dante, but an eroticization of theology.

While the eroticization of theology reaches its climax in the tale of Alibech and Rustico, even the three stories of the day that have no religious referent (*Dec.* 3.2, 3.5, 3.6) contribute to this scheme, highlighting the contamination by juxtaposing performances of courtly discourse. These stories bring into focus the secular tradition of courtly eros that is the natural point of comparison and derivation for Boccaccio’s contamination. The first of these tales is the second story of the day, which takes place at the king’s court, where a groom impersonates the king, steals silently into the royal chamber, and fulfills his desire to sleep with the queen. Although the king cleverly tries to mark him by cutting his hair, the groom cuts everyone’s hair to deceive the king once more. Still spoiling for revenge, the king realizes that he has no recourse:

Poi, veggendo che senza romore non poteva avere quel ch’egli cercava, disposto a non volere per piccola vendetta acquistar gran vergogna, con una sola parola d’amonirlo e di mostrargli che avveduto se ne fosse gli piacque; e a tutti rivolto disse: “Chi ’l fece nol faccia mai piú, e andatevi con Dio.”

(*Dec.* 3.2.30)

(Seeing that he could not find out what he wanted to know without a lot of fuss and bother, and not wishing to incur dishonour for the sake of a meagre revenge, he decided to issue one word of warning and show that the offence had been discovered. Speaking to them as a group he said: “The man who did it must not do it again. Now you can all go.”

(Nichols 169)

In an extraordinary recasting of the convention whereby the poet sang his poem with a *senhal* for his beloved, the king takes on the rhetorical register of the courtly lover who addresses to a large audience a coded message that is intended for only one of its members, the horse groom that cuckolded him. Just as the groom had impersonated the king, now the king’s speech imitates that of the courtly lover. In the fifth story of the day, critics have also noted the use of the

<sup>7</sup> The story of Alibech and Rustico also turns Alatiel’s cover story of religious exploration to mask sexual activity (*Dec.* 2.7) into its very plot. See Ferroni 247n15: “Il rapporto tra Alatiel della II 7 e Alibech, che non è pasato inosservato alla critica, è sottolineato anche dal rilievo finale del motto (si ricordi quello di Alatiel: ‘Bocca basciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna’, II 7 122).”

<sup>8</sup> For more on the relationship between courtly and mystical love, see Gilson 170-97 and Zambon 44.

courtly register as Zima not only plies the lady with amorous entreaties, but then responds impersonating her when she does not respond (Baratto 290; Forni 89-111). In the sixth story, other conventions of courtly tradition receive similar treatment, as Ricciardo adopts a screen lady so that he can seduce the woman he truly desires, Catella (Baratto 276). In light of the readings of the day in terms of gender (Wallace 41-48; Migiel, "Beyond Seduction"), it is interesting that in all three of these courtly tales (*Dec.* 3.2, 3.5, 3.6), the woman is largely silent: the queen does not speak in 3.2; the wife is commanded to be silent in 3.5 (although we hear her thoughts); and in 3.6 Catella remains silent to avoid giving herself away to her putative husband, who is really Ricciardo. It is notable, too, that although Ferroni argues that the lady takes on Zima's words (244), it is not his pleas but the lady's own thoughts, which anticipate remarks found in later stories (5.10), that finally persuade the woman to agree to his proposal. That Boccaccio is purposely deploying these courtly conventions of the *senhal*, the language of courtly seduction, and the screen lady seems reinforced by Dioneo's singing of the tale of *Dama del Vergiù* in the conclusion to the day, which, as Usher ("Industria" 104) notes, is the courtly tale par excellence.

The stories that do not contaminate the courtly and religious thus bring into relief the intermingling in the other stories, whose importance is underlined in the conclusion to the day where both 3.1 and 3.10 are recalled in the exchange between Neifile and Filostrato:

[...] conoscendo la reina che il termine della sua signoria era venuto, levatasi la laurea di capo, quella assai piacevolmente pose sopra la testa a Filostrato e disse: "Tosto ci avvedremo se i' lupo saprà meglio guidar le pecore, che le pecore abbiano i lupi guidati." Filostrato, udendo questo, disse ridendo: "Se mi fosse stato creduto, i lupi avrebbero alle pecore insegnato rimettere il diavolo in inferno, non peggio che Rustico facesse ad Alibech, e perciò non ne chiamate lupi, dove voi state pecore non siete; tuttavia, secondo che conceduto mi fia, io reggerò il regno commesso." A cui Neifile rispose: "Odi, Filostrato, voi avreste, volendo a noi insegnare, potuto apparar senno, come apparò Masetto da Lamporecchio dalle monache e riavere la favella a tale ora che l'ossa senza maestro avrebbero apparato a sufolare."

(*Dec.* 3. Concl.1-3)

([...] the Queen, since her reign was over, took the wreath of laurel from her own head and placed it upon Filostrato's, saying good-humouredly: "We shall soon see if the wolves can guide the sheep better than the sheep have guided the wolves." When he heard this, Filostrato said with a smile: "If anyone had listened to me, the wolves would have taught the sheep to put the Devil back into Hell, quite as well as Rustico taught Alibech — but don't call us wolves, since you have not been like sheep. Nevertheless, since I have been appointed, I shall rule the realm." To this Neifile replied: "Listen, Filostrato: if you had tried to teach us, you might have learnt some sense as Masetto of Lamporecchio did from the nuns, and got your voices back when your old bones were rattling like skeletons.")

(Nichols 231)

Like the woman in Zima's tale, Neifile uses ideas of others to express her own desires, in this case alluding to Filostrato's own story of Masetto (3.1).<sup>9</sup> Whereas in Neifile's tale of Gilette of Narbonne (3.9), she seemed to aim at redeeming the transgressions recounted in other stories, recasting topics, such as the bedtrick (3.2 and 3.6), pilgrim's disguise (3.7), and pregnancy (3.1 and 3.8), in the best possible light by having them take place to satisfy the marriage debt and restore a marriage bond, Neifile's exchange with Filostrato in the Conclusion to the Day suggests a far more desirous figure, as she uses his story to emphasize her own sexual desires.

Boccaccio's effort to give women a voice extends to the song that ends Day Three, where Lauretta, who shares a name with Petrarch's lady and the laurel crown that she signifies, according to Boccaccio's interpretation in the *De Vita Petracchi*, sings a ballata that gives rise to multiple interpretations: "[...] e ebbevi di quegli che intender vollono alla melanese, che fosse meglio un buon porco che una bella tosa; altri furono di più sublime e migliore e più vero intelletto, del quale al presente recitar non accade" ("Some interpreted it in the down-to-earth Milanese fashion, that a nice juicy pig was better than a gorgeous girl; others had their minds on higher and truer things, which we need not discuss now" *Dec.* 3. Concl. 18; Nichols 234). Lauretta's song thus gives rise to different interpretations, just as the first poem of the *Vita nuova* also does. While some offered a literalist reading ("alla milanese"), others conceived a more sophisticated interpretation, whose exact contours are never revealed. Some critics, beginning with Aldo Rossi, have argued that Lauretta may be singing as the personification of the laurel here.<sup>10</sup> This hypothesis points to the metapoetic concerns of the day, which are once more explored through an engagement with Dante.

The idea of the single text that is open to multiple interpretations is a central theme of the day as a whole. Just as King Agilulf in *Dec.* 3.2 addresses a remark that only one member of the court can understand, other tales explore the polysemy of language. Like 3.2, Filomena's tale about a lady who tricks a friar into acting as her go-between and unintentionally conveying information to the man she desires (3.3), uses the device of two audiences to dramatize the difficulties of interpreting language, but instead of the cleverness of the groom and the king, here the emphasis is on the stupidity of the mediator. The plot is thus about how language may encode different meanings for different audiences. Filomena then ends the tale with the first of the day's prayers to God for sexual satisfaction (3.3.55). Deligiorgis interprets Filomena's tale as a response to

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<sup>9</sup> For a different reading of this exchange, see Migiel, *A Rhetoric* 123-25, who argues that "figurative language about sexual intercourse remains the province of men in the *Decameron*" (125).

<sup>10</sup> For sometimes cautious endorsements of Aldo Rossi's view, see L. Rossi and Usher, "Industria."

Dioneo's rewriting of her earlier tale (2.9) in the final story of the previous day (2.10): "In her way Filomena has just told Dioneo that he did not listen to her story carefully. If Bernabò's wife had wanted a paramour she would have *enjoyed* getting one. She would not wait for some pirate to snatch her up" (57).

The metapoetic concerns of Day Three are underlined by the Introduction to Day 4, where Boccaccio continues to explore the theme of relationship between service to God and service to ladies found in *Decameron* 3.10 (and already suggested by 2.10), but moves the discussion of the distinction between the human and divine, terrestrial and celestial, in a metaliterary direction. Much has been written about Boccaccio's remarkable self-defense and several scholars (Marchesi 8) have noted how the story of Filippo Balducci and his son recasts the plot of 3.10. In the story of Filippo Balducci, his son marvels at the city of Florence and is then overwhelmed by his first sight of a group of women ("una brigata di belle giovani donne e ornate, che da un paio di nozze venieno" *Dec.* 4. Intro. 19; "a company of beautiful and finely dressed young ladies who were coming from a wedding" Nichols 237). Although his father tries to subdue his son's desires by calling them "mala cosa" (4. Intro. 21) and then "papere" (4. Intro. 23), the son will not be dissuaded, arguing that "[e]lle son piú belle che gli agnoli dipinti che voi m'avete piú volte mostrati" 4. Intro. 30 ("They are more beautiful than the painted angels which you have shown me so often" Nichols 238). For Filippo's son, then, there is no comparison between painted angels and real ladies.

Whereas the lesson Filippo learns in the Introduction to Day 4 is that changing the word for women (*mala cosa*, *papere*) does not quell his son's desire for them, in the Author's Conclusion Boccaccio entertains the different case that the same referent may be implied by multiple terms in everyday language. Having defended the *licenzia* of his tales, he asserts:

[...] dico che piú non si dee a me esser disdetto d'averle scritte, che generalmente si disdica agli uomini e alle donne di dir tutto di "foro" e "caviglia" e "mortaio" e "pestello" e "salsiccia" e "mortadello", e tutto pien di simiglianti cose.

(*Dec.* 3, Concl. of the Author 5)

([...] I declare that I should not be blamed for writing them any more than men and women in general should be blamed for saying all day and every day "hole" and "spindle" and "mortar" and "pestle" and "sausage" and "poloney" and a whole host of similar words.)

(Nichols 651-52)<sup>11</sup>

Having proposed the erotic potential of quotidian speech, Boccaccio then applies this interpretive polysemy to painting. He writes:

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<sup>11</sup> For the argument that Boccaccio's source here may be the *Roman de la Rose*, see L. Rossi, "Il paratesto decameroniano" 52-54 and "Il *Decameron* e il *Roman de la Rose*." For a lucid discussion of Jean in comparison with Alan of Lille, who has Nature argue that she will use pretty words to talk about bad things, see Minnis 122-28.

Sanza che alla mia penna non dee essere meno d'autorità conceduta che sia al pennello del dipintore, il quale senza alcuna riprensione, o almen giusta, lasciamo stare che egli faccia a san Michele ferire il serpente con la spada o con la lancia, e a san Giorgio il dragone dove gli piace, ma egli fa Cristo maschio ed Eva femina, e a Lui medesimo, che volle per la salute della umana generazione sopra la croce morire, quando con un chiovo e quando con due i piè gli conficca in quella.

(*Dec.* 3, Concl. of the Author 6)

(Indeed my pen should be granted no less freedom [*autorità*] than the painter's brush: he is not censured — not fairly at least — when he not merely depicts St Michael striking the serpent with his sword or lance or St George striking the dragon wherever he wants to, but shows Eve as a woman and Our Lord as a man, and even shows Him, Who was ready to die on the cross for the salvation of mankind, with His feet transfixed, sometimes by one nail and sometimes by two.)

(Nichols 652)

Boccaccio suggests that religious paintings could be interpreted erotically, where the swords, lances and nails would be parallel to the *salsiccia* and *mortadella* of everyday discourse.<sup>12</sup> Renaissance editors had particular trouble with this passage, omitting it altogether or changing examples from religious painting to classical mythology, as in Salviati's edition (Chiecchi and Troisio 157).<sup>13</sup> Instead of the contrast between *agnoli dipinti* and real women articulated by Filippo Balducci's son, the authorial figure in the *Decameron* emphasizes the erotic potential of both religious art and everyday experience.

Elsewhere I have argued that Boccaccio's use of the word *autorità* in this passage is particularly interesting, because it suggests the broader claims Boccaccio intends the passage to have (*Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature* 19-20). English translators have rendered *autorità* variously as "latitude" (McWilliam), "freedom" (Musa/Bondanella and Nichols), and "liberty" (Payne/Singleton), phrases which undoubtedly express what Boccaccio means, but not the oddity of his diction. Boccaccio usually uses *autorità* to refer to Plato or the Scriptures, but here instead of obedience or obeisance to an external power, the term that he uses to describe his artistic liberty or freedom also makes a claim for authority that comes from such self-determination and autonomy. In *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* Albert Ascoli

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert (57) suggests that Boccaccio may be thinking of actual frescoes, such as the one by Nardo di Cione in the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Also see Watson 43-64. Watson notes that the mention of Christ was sometimes changed to Adam and that the number of nails did constitute a change. Gilbert worries that the nails in the feet of Christ make him a woman, but as scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Dyan Elliot have shown, this characterization appears in late medieval religious thought. Instead of diminishing the presence of erotic themes, Boccaccio asserts that they are everywhere from the everyday to the divine.

<sup>13</sup> Boccaccio himself uses classical figures in a similar discussion of erotic paintings in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (14.6) that seems to reprise the treatment in the *Decameron*.

discusses how important both the word “autore” and the idea of authority are to Dante in his construction of himself, and Boccaccio seems to be exploring many of the same issues here. In other words, Boccaccio’s use of the word *autorità* in this passage with reference to his eroticizing of religious painting reveals the connection between these operations and the very idea of the literary field, which he goes on to describe in the paragraph that follows, noting that the tales were not told in “chiesa, scuola,” but in a “garden”:

Appresso assai ben si può cognoscere queste cose non nella chiesa, delle cui cose e con animi e con vocaboli onestissimi si convien dire, quantunque nelle sue istorie d'altramenti fatte, che le scritte da me, si truovino assai; né ancora nelle scuole de' filosofanti, dove l'onestà non meno che in altra par te è richesta, dette sono; né tra' cherici né tra' filosofi in alcun luogo, ma ne' giardini, in luogo di sollazzo, tra persone giovani, benché mature e non pieghevoli per novelle, in tempo nel quale andar con le brache in capo per iscampo di sé era alli piú onesti non disdicevole, dette sono.

(*Dec. Concl. 7*)

(It is worth stressing too that these stories were not told within the Church, whose affairs should be discussed in the purest state of mind and with the purest of words (despite the fact that her history contains no shortage of tales told in a worse fashion than mine), nor in the schools of philosophy where decency is required as much as it is elsewhere; no, they were not told among clerics or philosophers anywhere, but in gardens, in places of amusement for people who were young, yes, but mature and not easily corrupted by mere tales, in times when the purest of people saw nothing wrong in trying to save themselves by wearing breeches on their heads.)

(Nichols 652)

Boccaccio’s garden may be “a new literary space free from the didactic expectations of the schoolmen or the clergy” (Marcus 238; for a similar interpretation, see Thompson 156), but these apparent denials can also be read as attempts at association.

Boccaccio’s appeal to Scripture in the next paragraph confirms that the parallel is not only one of exclusion, but also association. He inquires:

Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son piú sante, piú degne, piú reverende, che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sí sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto.

(*Dec. Author’s Conclusion 11*)

(What books, what words, what letters are more holy, more worthy, more venerable than those in the Divine Scriptures? And yet there are many who, by interpreting them in a perverse manner, have drawn themselves and others to perdition.)

(Nichols 652)

In this passage Boccaccio argues that just as Scripture cannot be blamed for heretical ideas, Boccaccio’s literary texts are free from blame, which lies instead with its readers. In light of Boccaccio’s contrastive association of his garden

with the school and church, however, Boccaccio also seems to be arguing for the authority of his own art form as parallel to scripture. While Dante had claimed to share scriptural truth, for Boccaccio the shared ground is the use of figurative language. This connection between poetry and theology also appears in Petrarch's letter to his brother Gherardo (*Fam.* 10.4); but whereas Petrarch continues to exalt theology over poetry, Boccaccio exalts poetry. The further implication of Boccaccio's proposed parallel between the *Decameron* and Scripture is to argue for the authority of his own literary art, which does not necessarily have the same truth as Scripture, such as Dante endeavors to achieve in the *Commedia*, but that does share its polysemic possibilities. This shared use of figurative language in both literature (or poetry in Boccaccio's terminology) and Scripture leads Boccaccio to argue, in the wake of Petrarch's similar argument in *Fam.* 10.4, that poetry is theology (*Vita di Dante*, first redaction).

In the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* Boccaccio expands on this parallel adumbrated in the *Decameron* and declared in the *Vita di Dante* and points once again to the connection between poetry and Scripture, because of their shared use of figurative language:

They would cease to wonder that the poets call Jove, now god of heaven, now lightning, now an eagle, or a man, or whatever, if they had only reminded themselves that Holy Writ itself from time to time represents the one true God as sun, fire, lion, serpent, lamb, worm, or even a stone. Likewise our most venerable mother the Church is prefigured in the sacred books, sometimes as a woman clothed with the sun, or arrayed in varied garb, sometimes as a chariot, or a ship, or an ark, a house, a temple, and the like.

(*Genealogie* 14.14; Osgood 71)

In this passage, as in the *Vita di Dante* and *Esposizioni*, Boccaccio argues by analogy that if it is acceptable for Scripture to use figurative language to convey truth, it is allowed for poets to do the same.<sup>14</sup> Boccaccio's location of literature in contrast to philosophy and theology suggests what Boccaccio sees in it as sharing with those disciplines, even if he sees it as distinct from them. If Day Three is involved in eroticizing theology, the authorial interventions of the *Decameron* 4 Introduction and the Author's Conclusion suggest an effort to theologize literature, to grant an institutional status to the garden of storytelling that would be parallel to the churches of the theologians and the schools of the philosophers.

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<sup>14</sup> Dante makes a similar argument in *Vita nuova* 25 — that is, for poets writing in the vernacular to employ rhetorical figures — using classical poets instead of Scripture. (Boccaccio also discusses painting again in *Gen.* 14.6.)

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