Gerhard Regn

The *Incipit* of the *Decameron*: Textual Margins as an Index of Epochal Change

The paratextual complex, having first become central thanks to structuralism,¹ has acquired new importance in the setting of contemporary currents of post-structuralist literary criticism. From the perspective of New Historicism,² paratexts are espoused as true indicators of a new way of understanding the literary text. New perspectives on literature can be obtained – so goes the hypothesis – only by abandoning the idea of unity and coherency within the literary text (structured around a central theme) in order to direct attention instead to its open, incomplete, resistant, peripheral and marginal dimensions.³ Marginality itself is thus transformed into a poetological concept, whose potential seems able to reveal itself in a particularly marked manner, thanks to the study of the textual margins.

It is without doubt that the poststructuralist approach has provided stimulating results in the study of literature, and especially that of the medieval and premodern eras. However, unlike its staunchest supporters, I do not think it is possible to generalize this approach by rendering it a universal method, applicable in every context. Indeed, this methodology becomes particularly ineffective where authors have given their works a clear conceptual structure, in which unifying criteria such as composition, coherency and unity play a fundamental role. This is particularly true for investigations into paratexts.

Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is one of these cases, and furthermore a case of great historic potential. In Boccaccio’s work the possibilities inherent within postmedieval storytelling are exemplarily visible: evident in the calculated game that contributes to the creation of narrative coherency is the path toward a modelization

---

¹ As we know, the investigation of the paratextual complex has received renewed and, from there forward, systematic interest thanks to Genette’s volume on this argument. See Gérard Genet ette: *Seuils*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1987.

² On New Historicism see Harold Aram Veeser: *The New Historicism Reader*. New York and London: Routledge 1994.

³ Regarding the textual theory of New Historicism see Greenblatt’s programmatic statement, which notes in particular the aspect of textual margins: “I propose […] to look less at the presumed center of the literary domain than at its borders, to try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text. The cost of the shift in attention will be the satisfying illusion of a ‘whole reading.’” Stephen Greenblatt: *Shakespearian Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1988, p. 4.
of reality typical of the early modern era, which takes into account that which is incalculable; that is, the contingency of the world, precisely through the instruments of compositional calculation. The most effective key for accessing this compositional structure can be found in the very margins of the Certaldese’s text: it is the rubric of the incipit which contains the titulus of the work.

In the Decameron, the opening words of the text do not in fact have the task of attracting the reader’s attention to the marginal; rather, they have the function of opening a breach toward the center, and therefore toward the work in its totality which, as we know, is not a simple anthology of novelle without structure but a carefully constructed book. This thesis, however, is plausible only if the rubric of the incipit, which I maintain to be a programmatic reference to the work as a whole, can be traced directly to the author: he would have been quite concerned that his work, going against the practices of the medieval varietas, would have a stable textual facies. While cases of marked textual variation are attested for the Decameron as well, even within Boccaccio’s direct circle, Boccaccio himself (just

---

4 For Boccaccio, contingency has vast theological and philosophical resonances: the concept implies that the legibility of the ‘book’ of divine creation, as guaranteed by scholastic thought, begins to fail; instead of revealing itself as the indubious product of the potentia ordinata, the world presents itself as a kind of radical contingency that mirrors the omnipotence of a God no longer rationally knowable. The consequence of this situation is the increasing self-affirmation of human reason. For this widely studied notion, see above all Hans Blumenberg: Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung. 2 Auflage. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1983.

5 As we can see, unlike that of Branca’s Boccaccio medievale (Firenze: Sansoni 1981), my argument derives from the hypothesis of a Boccaccio who, even if closely tied to the culture of the Middle Ages, opens up new conceptual horizons with his Centonovelle. I will limit myself to highlighting the development of an autonomous rationality unfettered from religious norms, which stimulates mankind to orient itself, using its own resources, in a world experienced in large part as contingent (see also note 4). This concept is realized in the decision of the brigata to replace God’s space (the church of Santa Maria Novella) with human space (the ‘palace’ outside of Florence; see X Intr. 3). The Decameron does not ‘stand alongside’ the Commedia – as Branca would like it to do – by completing it as a “commedia dell’uomo” rappresentata attraverso i paradigmi canonici alla visione cristiana e scolastica della vita” [‘human comedy’ depicted through paradigms canonical to the Christian and scholastic vision of life; p. 29]. Rather, it is positioned most decidedly after Dante’s “poema sacro” (Par. XV, 1): the ‘after’ here is not merely a temporal indicator but signifies a true epochal turning point.

6 On the concept of the variant as a constitutive factor of medieval textuality, see Bernard Cerquiglini: Eloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1989; Marina Brownlee/Kevin Brownlee et al.: The New Medievalism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1991; Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet: Conceiving the Text in the Middle Ages. In: R. Howard Bloch/Alison Calhoun et al. (eds.): Rethinking the New Medievalism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2014, p. 151–161; Stephen G. Nichols: From Parchment to Cyberspace. Medieval Literature in the Digital Age. New York: Peter Lang 2016, p. 107–142.
like Petrarch) moves within a conceptual panorama that views the author as sovereign of his own text: it therefore becomes fundamental for this type of author to ensure that the transmission of his work occurs in a way most faithful to the original textual facies. This is particularly true for those parts of the text – such as the paratexts – most subject to alterations according to the medieval conception of variation and therefore most often redacted by the copyist and not stemming from the author himself. Therefore, I will attempt to show firstly that the incipit of the Decameron is authored by Boccaccio, in order to demonstrate how this marginal portion of the text serves to underscore quite markedly the intentio auctoris, with the aim of controlling the reception of the work right from the start.

1 The Tradition of the Text

According to the critical edition published by Vittore Branca, the rubric of the Decameron’s incipit is worded as such:

Comincia il libro chiamato Decameron cognominato prencipe Galeotto, nel quale si contengono cento novelle in dieci di dette da sette donne e da tre giovani uomini. (Proemio 1)

[Beginneth here the book called Decameron, otherwise Prince Galeotto, wherein are contained one hundred novels told in ten days by seven ladies and three young men.]

The Branca edition is based primarily on an autograph codex of the Decameron now held at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin: the renowned Hamilton 90. This manuscript presents a serious hitch with respect to this study: the beginning of the work, up to a part of the introduction of the narrative frame, is not in fact an autograph of Boccaccio, but a later addition in a different hand. Notwithstanding

7 Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron. Edizione critica secondo l’autografo hamiltoniano per cura di Vittore Branca, Firenze: Presso l’Accademia della Crusca 1976. It is quoted here from the edition prepared by Branca for the Nuova Universale Einaudi: Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron. Edited by Vittore Branca. Torino: Einaudi 2004. All English translations taken, with minor alterations, from Giovanni Boccaccio: The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio Faithfully Translated by James M. Rigg. 2 vols. London: The Navarre Society 1903.

8 See Vittore Branca: Tradizione delle opere di Giovanni Boccaccio. Vol. 2: Un secondo elenco di manoscritti e studi sul testo del “Decameron” con due appendici. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 1991, p. 215. For a list of the most important studies dedicated to the Berlin codex, see Marco Cursi: Il Decameron: scritture, scriventi, lettori. Storia di un testo. Roma: Viella 2007, p. 163–164. Even though the conclusory formula of the text, which is attributable to Boccaccio’s own hand, contains both title and subtitle – that is, ‘Decameron’ and ‘prince Galeotto’ – it makes no mention of the narrators, their gender or their number.
this difficulty, it is possible to consider the above-cited *incipit* as authorial: it is allowed in the first place by the stemmatic reconstruction of the rather complex textual tradition (we know of at least sixty codices dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). It is also allowed by a direct witness, the codex *Parigino It. 482*, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris. As Branca has demonstrated, this manuscript, most certainly completed before 1359, contains the copy of a redaction of the *Decameron* that precedes the one dated to the 1370s and transcribed from the *Hamilton* codex. The copyist was, as the codex itself indicates, Giovanni d’Agnolo Capponi, descendent of an important family of Florentine merchants with close ties to Boccaccio. But what is more, even if the eighteen well-known illustrations in pen and bistre which Ciardi Duprè attributed to the hand of Boccaccio himself were not – as Battaglia Ricci has recently claimed – ascribable to the Certaldese, the codex’s close proximity to Boccaccio remains without doubt. Marco Cursi’s extremely detailed paleographic investigations corroborate Branca’s hypothesis that the *Parigino It. 482* was written with all probability at Boccaccio’s desk and therefore under his very eyes. The codex created by Capponi is not only “la più antica testimonianza del *Decameron* a noi nota [e] tratta direttamente da un autografo di Boccaccio ormai perduto” [the oldest witness of the *Decameron* known to us and taken directly from an autograph by Boccaccio now lost], but is also closest to the author of the *Centonovelle* – and

9 For the textual tradition see Cursi: *Il Decameron*, p. 31–36.
10 This proximity is not only of a spatial nature (Boccaccio and the Capponi lived in the same neighborhood, Santo Stefano), but above all of a social one: “I Capponi erano una nota famiglia di lanaioli, legata nell’arte di Calimala con i Bardi e quindi con i Boccacci, loro collaboratori; inoltre, come il Boccaccio, erano consiglieri per le opere d’arte e i lavori edilizi della Compagnia di Or San Michele” [The Capponi were a renowned family of wool merchants, connected through the Calimala guild to the Bardi family and therefore to the Boccacci, their associates; furthermore, just like Boccaccio, they were advisors for the art commissions and building projects of the Compagnia di Or San Michele.], Cursi: *Il Decameron*, p. 32, n. 100. For further information on the biography of Giovanni Capponi see ibid.
11 For the illustrated *Decameron* see Giovanni Boccaccio: *Decameron con le illustrazioni dell’autore e di grandi artisti fra Tre e Quattrocento*. Edited by Vittore Branca. Firenze: Le Lettere 1999.
12 Maria Grazia Ciardi Duprè dal Pogetto: Corpus dei disegni e cod. Parigino It. 482. In: Maria Grazia Ciardi Duprè/Vittore Branca: Boccaccio visualizzato dal Boccaccio. *Studi sul Boccaccio* 22 (1994), p. 197–225. The drawings play a decisive role in the dating of the codex.
13 See Lucia Battaglia Ricci: *Scrivere un libro di novelle: Giovanni Boccaccio autore, lettore, editore*. Ravenna: Longo Editore 2013, p. 62–96.
14 See Cursi: *Il Decameron*, p. 33, where he argues – albeit with some amount of caution – in favor of Branca’s hypothesis that the *Parigino It. 482* was “prodotto all’interno del suo [i.e. Boccaccio] scrittoio” [produced at his writing desk.]
15 Lucia Battaglia Ricci: *Scrivere un libro di novelle*, p. 60. This opinion is correct, if one considers complete versions of the *Decameron*; if one also includes the fragmentary witnesses, the prize
not only in a spatial sense, given that the copyist attempts to respect his antigraph even “al limite dell’imitazione grafica” [to the point of graphic imitation,]\(^{16}\)
All of this confers to the text transcribed in Capponi’s manuscript an authority similar to that of an actual authorial redaction. The most decisive point for us is that the *Decameron* of the *Parigino It. 482* contains an *incipit* substantially identical to that of Branca’s critical edition,\(^{17}\) and to which we can therefore attribute with the highest probability an authorial status.

### 2 The Parody of Creation

‘*Prencipe Galeotto*’ is the work’s second name, and therefore its subtitle; its actual name is ‘*Decameron.*’ The latter is a neologism constructed analogously to forms like ‘*Hexaemeron*’ and, as noted, means ‘in ten days.’ Unlike its subtitle, the principal title does not speak to the content of this collection of *novelle*. Instead, it refers exclusively to the temporal aspect of their production.

It is useful to remember this point, because it is this lack of description which permits us to better interpret a textual detail of the Introduction to the Fourth Day, likewise a part of the complex paratextual structure of the *Centonovelle* which would otherwise be difficult to understand. Here, in the third paragraph, the author notes how his “novelette [...] in fiorentin volgare e in prosa” [little stories [...] in the vulgar Florentine, and in prose; *IV Intr. 3*] are a work “sine titulo” [without title; *IV Intr. 3*]: one can comprehend this affirmation, both unique and in apparent contrast to the *incipit*, by considering more closely the possible implications of the expression. Coming to our aid is Boccaccio’s commentary to Dante’s *Commedia*. Here, in fact, it becomes clear that the expression “*sine titulo*” is utilized for those works that do not have a cohesive subject matter, as occurs in the majority of collected poems or in anthologies of *novelle* with widely varied content.\(^{18}\) Thus they are macrotexts made up of microtexts, each different from the others and legible individually: in this sense Petrarch’s *Rerum vulgarium* for oldest goes to the so-called *frammento magliabechiano* (which contains the *novella* IX 10 and the conclusions of days I–IX). For the problems with dating the codices in question, see Cursi: *Il Decameron*, p. 21–36.

\(^{16}\) Cursi: *Il Decameron*, p. 33.

\(^{17}\) In the *Hamilton 90* the rubric of the *incipit* ends with “Proemio,” therefore introducing generically the author’s preface; in *Parigino It. 482* we instead read: “Proemio di Giovanni Boccaccio autore;” see Cursi: *Il Decameron*, p. 218.

\(^{18}\) Referring to Ovid, Boccaccio declares: “Appresso, ne compose uno [scil. libro], partito in tre, il quale alcun chiamano *Liber amorum*, altri il chiamano *Sine titulo*: e può l’un titolo e l’altro avere,
fragmenta would be considered a work without title. When inserted into this tradition, ‘Decameron’ becomes merely a formal denomination; or rather, it is an improper title, so to speak, which gives no information on the content of the stories narrated within. Nevertheless, it possesses a strong sense of intertextual reference.

The reference in question is, quite obviously, to the biblical Genesis, and therefore to the creation of the world in six days by the hand of God; or better, to the enormous quantity of commentaries on Genesis circulating in the Middle Ages, the most celebrated of which was the Hexameron of Ambrose. With its title the Decameron refers to the story of creation, and does so by making use of the possibilities that parody, in the medieval sense of the term, can offer. Boccaccio’s parody does not allow itself to be reduced to a mere comic counterpoint which, with the intention of amusing its public, would seek to ridicule its serious hypotexts. It instead attempts to create a new vision of the world which goes beyond the limits marked by medieval religious thought. By imitating the work of God, Boccaccio wishes to demonstrate the possibilities of human creation, above all in a specific context such as that of the chaos caused by the plague of 1348. An extremely formal sign of the serious setting for this Boccaccian parody is the fact that for his Centonovelle our author has adopted—through the complex and hierarchically organized system of dividing the text per ciò che d’alcuna altra cosa non parla che di suoi innamoramenti […]; e puossi dire similemente Sine titulo, per ciò che d’alcuna materia continuata, dalla quale si possa intitolare, favella, ma alquanti versi d’una e alquanti d’un’altra, e così possiam dire di pezi, dicendo, procede.” [Later he composed a book, divided into three parts, which some call Liber amorum, others call it Sine titulo: and it can have either title, because it speaks of nothing other than his many enamorments; (…) and one could also call it Sine titulo, because it does not talk about a continuous subject matter, by which it can be titled, but rather some verses on one thing and some on another, and thus we can say its telling proceeds piecemeal]. The passage, which Branca cites without bibliographic information in his commentary on the Decameron edited for Nuova Universale Einaudi (p. 460, n.1), can be found in Lezione 13 on Canto IV, esp. litt., § 119. See Giovanni Boccaccio: Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio. Edited by Vittore Branca. Vol. 7/8: Esposizioni sopra la “Commedia”. Edited by Giorgio Padoan: Milano: Mondadori 1965, p. 200.

19 For the parodical dimension of the Decameron see Luciano Rossi: Ironia e parodia nel “Decameron.” Da Ciappelletto a Griselda. In: La novella italiana. Atti del Convegno di Caprarola (19–24. 9. 1988). Roma: Salerno Editrice 1988 (Biblioteca di Filologia e critica, 3), p. 385–398, with reference to the links between the Decameron and the Ambrosian model.

20 In this sense Rossi also speaks of the “‘re-creation’ of the world;” see Luciano Rossi: Il para-testo decameroniano: Cimento d’armonia e d’invenzione. In: Introduzione al “Decameron”. Edited by Michelangelo Picone / Margherita Mesirca. Firenze: Franco Cesati Editore 2004 (Lectura Boccaccii Turicensis), p. 35–54: p. 37.
and of the capital headings – the precise style of the erudite treatise which would be read by “fruitori esperti dei libri universitari” [expert users of university textbooks].21 The subtle reference to the treatise form serves to imbue the Decameron with a status above that of literature for pure entertainment. Its principal function, however, is the establishment of the parodical structure as such, the basis of which, as noted above, is the relationship that Boccaccio institutes between his book of novelle and the Hexameron with its various commentaries by medieval scholars. Regarding the specific case of the system of division and capital headings, the parodic façade is very subtle, almost hidden. Most of the time, however, the parodical traits are clearly visible and easy to locate. Divine creation occurs through the logos, through the word: in the biblical Genesis ‘to speak’ and ‘to create’ are considered two sides of the same coin.22 Similarly the words, and more precisely the words of the novelle, are the instrument with which the narrators of the “lieta brigata” (I Intr. 103) recreate the world: a world quite contrary to that of chaotic Florence devastated by the plague. Their author, obviously, is not God, but instead are the human beings (predominantly women) who create an existential space well suited to them by means of cultured and sociable conversation.

Divine creation takes place over six days, to which is added a seventh day of repose for the creator. Our parody of Genesis also recognizes the principle of the rest day, but it is striking in that its repose does not coincide with the day of our Lord. Sunday is a day of storytelling, as if it were just like any other weekday and not a day of rest: a day of work, therefore, in the creation of our Decameron-Genesis, in which one continues to weave the fabric of order that the narration creates. Nevertheless, even the brigata has its day of repose from the efforts of narration-creation. One could therefore object that the lack of Sunday observance has no strong argumentative value, seeing that in one way or another – with the rest day on Friday – compensation is offered for the lack of respect for Sunday, and not the least in consideration of the fact that the explanation given for the choice of Friday as the day of pause is of a religious nature: Friday is the day of the crucifixion and is reserved for prayer “a onor di Dio” [in honor of God; II Concl. 5] and not for storytelling. The religious argument, however, has a rather supplementary character, given that the primary motivation for resting regards

21 See Lucia Battaglia Ricci: Edizioni d’autore, copie di lavoro, interventi di autoesegesi: testimonianze trecentesche. In: Guido Baldassarri (ed.): Di mano propria. Gli autografi dei letterati italiani. Roma: Salerno 2010, p. 123–157: p. 139, with reference to the pertinent studies of Patrizia Rafti, Teresa Nocita, and Francesca Malagnini.

22 One should recall, alongside the prologue of the Gospel of John, the seriality of the “dixit” which Genesis uses to signify the creational act of God.
the particular victuals to be consumed on this day of abstinence;\textsuperscript{23} but above all – and it is this that renders the religious motivation even less clear – the Friday pause is mirrored uniquely when the narrations are likewise interrupted for the entire next day, Saturday. The motivations, here, are predominantly worldly in nature:\textsuperscript{26} Saturday is not only another day of abstinence, but is above all dedicated to “wellness,” and therefore to care for the physical body. Thus the repetition of the day of repose also serves to accentuate the element of parody.

The very duration of the creation as a whole is therefore doubled: in the \textit{Decameron} the narrators tell stories for a total period of two weeks,\textsuperscript{25} in contrast to the single week narrated in \textit{Genesis}. In the time span of creation – a span that, as Dioneo makes clear in the conclusion of the last day, theoretically could have been further elongated\textsuperscript{26} – the divine \textit{ordo} of creation is dissolved and an entirely human structure takes its place. The ten days of storytelling, of which the \textit{incipit} speaks, are therefore not an expression of divine perfection, as the number could lead one to believe, but should be understood in parodical terms.

3 Contingency and Order

But how does one arrive, within the logic of the literary fiction, at the number ten, which in the \textit{mare magnum} of medieval numerology can easily be traced to perfection, and above all divine perfection? By which paths? The response to this question is: by happenstance. And it is happenstance that pushes the parodical game even further along.

\textsuperscript{23} Therefore: if one does not eat well, neither can one work/narrate. Formal signs of this supplementary character are the \textit{dispositio} and the syntax: the reference to the passion of Christ is introduced only after the thematization of food to be consumed, and moreover with a “senza che” that underscores the secondary value of the adopted religious argument: “senza che il venerdì, avendo riguardo che in esso Colui che per la nostra vita morì sostenne passione, è degno di riv- erenza” [to say nothing of the reverence in which Friday is meet to be held, seeing that’twas on that day that He who died for us bore His passion; II \textit{Concl.} 5].

\textsuperscript{24} In this case as well, the religious theme – the “reverenza della Vergine” [reverence of the Virgin; II \textit{Concl.} 6] is of a supplementary nature.

\textsuperscript{25} The storytelling begins on Wednesday and ends two Tuesdays later; see I \textit{Intr.} 40 e X \textit{Concl.} 3: at the end of the tenth day Dioneo announces their departure on the following day with reference to the two weeks they passed in holiday: “domani saranno quindici di […] uscimmo di Firenze” [Now, to-morrow, as you know,’twill be fifteen days since (...) we took our departure from Florence.]

\textsuperscript{26} The decision (which Dioneo decreed in his role as king) to end the storytelling is due not to necessity, but rather to simple convenience: continuing might lead to boredom; see X \textit{Concl.} 6.
Seven young ladies (the number is mentioned in the *incipit*) meet on a Tuesday of the year 1348, after Mass in the church of Santa Maria Novella. They meet *either* because they are friends *or* because they are related *or* only as neighbors.\(^{27}\) The paratactic structure formed by the repetition of the conjunction “either/or” functions as an indicator of a potentially serial casualness by which the group comes together, and which is confirmed by the arrival of three young men who will complete the *lieta brigata*: while the ladies are discussing the option of escaping a Florence infested with plague, suddenly – and with no explanation provided by the author – three young men (this number is specified in the *incipit* as well), of an equal social status to that of the women, enter the church, and after some indecision the ladies finally choose them as suitable companions for their endeavor. Here as well the syntax underscores the casual aspect of the happenings and does so through the adverbial locution “e ecco” [and see here] which connotes an unforeseen, or even unforeseeable moment: “Mentre tralle donne erano così fatti ragionamenti, e ecco entrare nella chiesa tre giovani [...]” [While the ladies were thus conversing, see here there came into the church three young men (…); I Intr. 78].

Governing the formation of the *lieta brigata*, therefore, is this principle of casualness which, as noted, will also play a primary role in the world of the narrative tales. Seven and three make ten. Boccaccio chooses to work with numbers that have a connotation of perfection and sacredness in the medieval symbolic order, but as we have seen, he does so in such a way that this metaphysical dimension can be identified primarily as the pure product of chance. However, it is a chance that men can use to their advantage and for their own purposes. And this is exactly what the narrators of the *lieta brigata* do: moving from the number ten, established quite casually, they then realize a numerical order that is consistent, clear and harmonious in and of itself – ten days for ten novelle and likewise ten storytellers. But it is not only the fictitious figures who, from this casual beginning, come to constitute a numerically coherent and well-structured order. The author himself does the same when he subdivides ten days into three plus seven, numbers already given in relation to the men (three) and the women (seven) – here I obviously refer to the structural caesura marked by the second proemio after the third day, a caesura that sheds light once again on the process of repetition linked to parodical intention.

Albeit casual within the narrative fiction, the numbers three, seven and ten become the basis of an order that signifies perfection. This order, however, no longer has religious meaning, but is essentially of an aesthetic nature, and owes its

\(^{27}\)”Si ritrovarono sette giovani donne tutte l’una a l’altra o per amistà o per vicinanza o per parentado congiunte” [There were found seven young ladies (...) all were connected either by blood or at least as friends or neighbours; I Intr. 49].
raison d’être to a human decision: the decision to have a numerology with strong metaphysical implications become a mere element of the free play of póiesis. This shift becomes clear if one considers another detail of the Decameron’s structure.

In what is a true repetition of the beginning – the Introduction to the Fourth Day – the author once again takes the floor in order to illustrate his poetics. Presented in this context is the wonderful story of the donne-papere: farmer Filippo Balducci tries to protect his son, just come of age, from the power of feminine beauty, and in the end is defeated heartily (and to the reader’s great delight) in his attempt to oppose the course of nature. The author rightly defines this anecdote as a “novella” (IV Intr. 30), and of little worth are Neuschäfer’s strident efforts to demonstrate that it is not, in fact, a novella, but rather a traditional exemplum: in other words, another story, encased in one of the Decameron’s proems. How should we interpret this fact? Boccaccio wishes to create movement within the established numerology linked to the perfect numbers three, seven, ten, and one hundred, thus causing them to waver a bit. If in fact we consider the Introduction to the Fourth Day as an integral part of the work, the total number of novelle in the Decameron becomes one hundred and one, and the narrators eleven. This complex composition allows Boccaccio to instill doubt within the reader that the total of one hundred novelle and ten narrators is perhaps not quite so objective, immutable, or metaphysical, but that possible alternatives to this rigid and defined structure might exist. One could even say that at the level of human creation, the author of the Decameron acts like the omnipotent God of late scholasticism: he makes clear that the order he has established is the product of an absolute free will which could also have made very different choices.

The narrative order is therefore a human creation: the nucleus of the structured space within which the members of the brigata recount for one another their hundred novelle. The brigata makes use of an imposing villa – the text even speaks of a “palagio” [palace; X Intr. 3] – to create an actual court dedicated to

---

28 See Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer: Boccaccio und der Beginn der Novelle. Strukturen der Kurzzählung zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1969, p. 56–58.
29 For Rossi, Boccaccio’s use of numbers constitutive of Decameronian architecture would allow him to re-evaluate, at the expense of the Christian Middle Ages, the Pythagorean numerology and with it the proto-humanistic “componente pagana o politeista della filosofia classica” [pagan or polytheistic component of classical philosophy]; Luciano Rossi: Il paratexto, p. 36. Rossi rightly emphasizes the aesthetic aspect inherent in Boccaccio’s choice, overestimating however the metaphysical dimension ascribable to it.
30 See Joachim Küpper: Affichertie “Exemplarität”, tatsächliche A-Systematik. Boccaccios “Decameron” und die Episteme der Renaissance. In: Klaus W. Hempfer (ed.): Renaissance. Diskursstrukturen und epistemologische Voraussetzungen. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1993, p. 84–87.
the narration, with a king, an entourage of courtiers and all the figures necessary to courtly life such as the seneschal, the treasurer, the butler, the cooks, etc. The members of the brigata thus simulate a courtly-aristocratic world, free from the obligations of a mercantile existence and devoted completely to the pleasures of culture and conversation. The narrative space created by the characters of the narrative frame has *per se* the status of fiction: fiction that creates a point of connection for other fictions, coming before and after, each with a different hierarchical status. In the narrative frame Boccaccio invents a story (first level) within which the characters, the fictitious members of the brigata, construct an invented world (second level), which in its turn has as its singular purpose the narrative production of other fictional worlds, those of the narrated novelle (third level). The fiction's potential is thus pushed to its extreme.

Particularly important for our argument are the aristocratic semantics of the world inhabited by the characters of the brigata. They reveal a normative function for the often stylistically “low” narrative of the novelle – and in particular for their frequently comic, repeatedly saucy, and occasionally even vulgar aspects. In the Introduction to the Fourth Day the author speaks explicitly of the “istilo umilissimo e rimesso” [as homely and simple a style as may be; IV Intr. 3] of the novelle narrated by the brigata: they are thus described as narrations quite separate from the world of those who tell them. This is also true of the style. The narration of the frame makes use of a methodically formal register, very different from that of the majority of the novelle. It is thus the simulation of an aristocratic custom of dabbling in the “informal” with gusto, because that which amuses belongs to another world. It is precisely this ostentatious diversity of the aesthetics of informality that reveals a more peculiar function, that of provoking laughter, of lightening the burden of social and religious norms and of the many difficulties that belong indissolubly to life: in the Decameron, the most dramatic manifestation of these burdens is the plague. But the real world cannot be substituted in a lasting way by fiction. Once the narrative programme reaches its end, the space created as a function of the story loses its raison d'être: after the tenth novella of the Tenth Day, Dioneo decrees that the narrations must come to an end. The lieta brigata must dissolve and its members must return, from the artificial and well-ordered world of the idyllic “palagio” (X Intr. 3), to chaotic and plague-ridden Florence. We have no word of their eventual fate. In this sense the Decameron has an open ending, an expression of skepticism that takes into account the power of Fortune, which is nothing more than an allegory

---

31 See I Intr. 98–101.
32 As we know, the informal register, while dominant, does not hold exclusive sway in the Decameron, where we also find touching and even tragic novelle.
for contingency.\textsuperscript{33} Despite the underlying skepticism about the fate of the world, the work affirms that art is an undeniable instrument for living well. To better clarify the multifaceted function that Boccaccio attributes to art in the Decameron we must return to the incipit, this time with Dante’s Commedia in mind.

\section*{4 The Decameron and the Commedia}

The reference to Dante is evident even at the numerological level: the one hundred novelle correspond to the one hundred cantos of the Commedia. The formal link that Boccaccio institutes between his book and the Commedia is itself of a parodical nature. The formal structure of Dante’s “poema sacro” (Par. IV, 1) is a sign of the divine order represented within; that of the Decameron, as we have seen, is distinctly human. However, there is much more here than a rudimentary consideration of the numerical relationships between the two compositional structures. To delve deeper we must return once again to our incipit and in particular to the motif of Prince Galehaut.

It is to be expected that the first of the Parigino codex’s eighteen illustrations depicts the opening lines of the text. Unexpected, and therefore highly informative, is the fact that this first drawing refers not to the work’s title, but to its subtitle, here placed in sharp relief. The first drawing represents, in diptych form, two couples on horseback who make their way toward the center in which stands a copse of trees. The now widely held interpretation views the couple to the right, formed by two lovers in an embrace, as Lancelot and Guinevere (the queen bears a crown in accordance with her social rank), while the couple to the left is meant to depict Galehaut accompanied by the Lady of Malehaut.\textsuperscript{34} Readers of the

\textsuperscript{33} For the fundamental differences between the medieval concept of Fortune and that of Boccaccio, see Andreas Kablitz: Zur Fortuna-Konzeption in Boccaccios “Decameron”. In: \textit{Italienische Studien} 12 (1990), p. 7–25.

\textsuperscript{34} See Lucia Battaglia Ricci: \textit{Scrivere un libro di novelle}, p. 80–81: “La coppia di innamorati a destra […] è l’ennesima rappresentazione di Lancelotto e Ginevra. Contro una tradizione critica che tende a vedere raffigurati nell’altra coppia Tristano e Isotta, Daniela Delcorno Branca ha suggerito che si tratti piuttosto di Galeotto e della dama di Malehaut, anche perché la dama è priva di corona. […] questa è, come anche a me pare, la lettura corretta.” [The two lovers at the right (…) are one of countless representations of Lancelot and Guinevere. Going against the critical tradition that tends to view the other couple as Tristan and Iseult, Daniela Delcorno Branca has suggested that it instead depicts Galehaut and the Lady of Malehaut, in particular because this lady has no crown. (…) this is, in my view as well, the correct reading.] Delcorno Branca’s interpretation can be found in: Daniela Delcorno Branca: “Cognominato prencipe Galeotto”. Il sottotitolo illustrato del Parigino It. 482. In: \textit{Studi sul Boccaccio} 23 (1995), p. 79–88.
Decameron in Boccaccio’s age would most certainly have known the Commedia as well and therefore would also have been quite familiar with the episode of Paolo and Francesca. The episode is so widely known that a summary of the salient facts would be superfluous. I would like instead to underscore certain aspects of the celebrated passage which permit us to identify the elements of Dantesque parody present in Boccaccio’s text. The damnation of the lovers, punished for their adultery, is not caused by love itself, but by the pleasureable reading (“Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto” [One day, to pass the time in pleasure, we read];
of a great story of courtly love, so powerful as to break down all barriers of self control and Christian morals. Dante thematizes the motif of reading four times in just a handful of verses: “leggiavamo” [we were reading], “lettura” [the reading], “leggemmo” [we had read], and once again “leggemmo.” The emphasis falls on the act of reading in its physical, corporeal dimension. It is their eyes, the true causa amoris in a courtly sense, which lead Paolo and Francesca to fall in love: “Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse / quella lettura’” [More than once that reading made our eyes meet; Inf. V, 130–1].

On the book read by the lovers and on its author – the parties truly guilty of the adultery – Dante expresses a clear moral judgment; they are considered panderers: “Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse.” [A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it; Inf. V, 137]. In calling his Decameron “Galeotto,” with the same metonymy as Dante, Boccaccio not only eliminates every negative connotation from the expression but turns the original meaning on its head. One can perceive this reversal through a small stylistic clue: the insertion of the aristocratic title ‘prencipe,’ which is absent in the Commedia. Indeed, the “Galeotto” of Inferno V becomes “Prince Galehaut” in Boccaccio’s work. Galeotto, in the Decameron, is not a panderer heralding moral corruption: on the contrary, he is described as a benefactor, his role considered to be a positive one both in Prose Lancelot and in the sphere of aristocratic and courtly culture, and restored to him once again by Boccaccio after the brief Dantean interlude. In the medieval tradition, the reason Galehaut enabled the physical union of Lancelot and Guinevere was due to compassion for his ami, a man consumed by passion for Queen Guinevere to the point of flirting with self destruction. Galehaut, who in the French romance bears the title of Prince, is the symbol of a humanity based on affection, which

35 English translations of the Commedia are taken from Dante Alighieri: Inferno. Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday 2000.
36 Inf. V 127, 131, 133, 138.
37 Paolo and Francesca therefore imitate not an actual but rather a narrated act; see Peter Strohschneider: Höfische Textgeschichten. Über Selbstentwürfe vormoderner Literatur. Heidelberg: Winter 2014, p. 218–231.
38 On Prose Lancelot (which in its turn quotes abundantly from Chrétien de Troyes’s Il Chevalier de la Charrette) as Dante’s hypotext, see Thomas Klinkert: Zum Status von Intertextualität im Mittelalter: Tristan, Lancelot, Francesca da Rimini. In: Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch 81 (2006), p. 27–70; p. 60; on the details of Dante’s reading see Daniela Delcorno Branca: Dante and the Roman de Lancelot. In: Norris J. Lacy (ed.): Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature. New York and London: Garland 1996, p. 133–145.
39 This motif returns at the beginning of the proem where Boccaccio presents the Centonovelle as an expression of the author’s compassion for those in need: “umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti” [tis humane to have compassion on the afflicted; Proem 2].
40 See Delcorno Branca: Dante and the Roman de Lancelot, p. 141.
is intentionally placed above the norms of “official” ethical standards enforced at the court of King Arthur. It is precisely this aspect that Boccaccio has in mind. Clearly we are quite far from the Dantean ethic that distinguishes between objective norms and subjective perception. Even Dante the pilgrim shows compassion for the lovers, but the subjective passion of Pilgrim Dante cannot change the narrator’s attitude. The objectivity of divine justice never comes into doubt: the chain of divine law for Dante supersedes the pity that the character feels for the heart-breaking consequences of the verdict of divine Judgment.\textsuperscript{41}

I will now conclude with a brief return to our \textit{Incipit}, and this time in relation to the proem.

\section*{5 \textit{Incipit} and \textit{Proem}}

“\textit{Umana cosa è avere compassione degli afflitti}” [‘Tis humane to have compassion on the afflicted; \textit{Proem} 2]: from these words one might assume that Boccaccio wishes to begin his work in a genuinely Christian way, but it is not the case. His compassion, unlike that of Dante, stems from a secular anthropology not bound to Christian morals. For this reason he strongly emphasizes the human dimension of the problem in question.\textsuperscript{42} His model is, as mentioned previously, the commiseration with which Galehaut, oblivious to the ‘official’ ethics of the world in which he lives, lends aid to his friend who is afflicted by adulterous love.

In the \textit{Decameron} the author directs his compassion toward those “vaghe donne” [gentle ladies; \textit{Proem} 9] in love, house-bound and in need of a \textit{remedium melancholiae} in the form of the \textit{Decameron} itself,\textsuperscript{43} thanks to its amusing stories. Its usefulness to the women in love,\textsuperscript{44} which the \textit{Proem}’s author does not neglect to

\textsuperscript{41} For the relationship between human commiseration and the validity of divine judgment, see Gerhard Regn: Zeitsemantiken des Jenseits in Dantes “Commedia”. In: Susannes Köbele/Coralie Rippl (eds.): \textit{Gleichzeitigkeit. Narrative Synchronisierungsmodelle in der Literatur des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit}. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2015, p. 110–120.

\textsuperscript{42} The beginning of the proem can be interpreted as a parody of the Pauline principle, that everything should be done in the Lord’s name (Colossians 3:17). As we can see, Boccaccio substitutes this divine principle with its human counterpart. On this aspect see the contribution by Andreas Kablitz in this volume.

\textsuperscript{43} The causes of melancholy are described in \textit{Proem} 10–12, with particular emphasis given to love (obviously not of the conjugal sort) which must be kept hidden, and to the conditions of a sedentary life, cloistered and controlled by persons who hold a position of authority (fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands).

\textsuperscript{44} In speaking of the “utile consiglio” [useful counsel] that the female readers “potranno pigliare, in quanto potranno conoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare”
mention among the work’s aims, is made secondary, while in the foreground is the Epicurean “diletto” [pleasure; Proem 14] which gives comfort and relieves the pressure of the norms that rule the life of a society governed by Christian morals.

The Proem has the same meaning for both the public to which it is addressed and for the members of the brigata who listen to the novelle. The stories told remain forever tied to the context in which they were narrated, and this is characterized by aristocratic refinement. Throughout the narrative frame, aristocratic elegance is blended with the world of a prevalently bourgeois public, as is confirmed by the tradition’s history. The so-called frammento magliabechiano, which is counted among the oldest witnesses of the Decameron, focuses primarily on the narrative frame. This is a codex prepared at the Neapolitan court of Anjou for an aristocratic public. Its aesthetic ideals are most apparent in the frame itself, where the formulation of a subtle narrative structure combines with the representation of a simulated life at court. But that which was so pleasing to the Anjovin court was at the same time an expression of the “ambizioni aristocratiche della ricca borghesia fiorentina” [aristocratic ambitions of the wealthy Florentine bourgeoisie.] In other words, the largely humble and ‘informal’ narration of Boccaccio’s novelle passes through the filter of French aristocratic culture. For this reason it makes even more sense that Boccaccio, in giving a second name to his Decameron, would restore the original aristocratic title from the original French romance, which Dante refused to recognize: “Prince Galehaut.”

Bibliography

Primary Literature

Alighieri, Dante: Inferno. Trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday 2000.
Boccaccio, Giovanni: Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio. Edited by Vittore Branca. Vol. 7/8: Esposizioni sopra la “Commedia” Edited by Giorgio Padoan: Milano: Mondadori 1965.
Boccaccio, Giovanni: Decameron. Edizione critica secondo l’autografo hamiltoniano per cura di Vittore Branca. Firenze: Presso l’Accademia della Crusca 1976.

[may derive, in that they may learn what to shun, and likewise what to pursue; Proem 14], the author refuses to restrict the meaning of “useful” to that of the ethical dimension, thus including his own interpretation in a more pragmatic sense.

45 See Marco Cursi: Il Decameron, p. 21–31.
46 Antonio Lanza: La letteratura tardogotica. Arte e poesia a Firenze e Siena nell’autunno del Medioevo. Anzio: De Ubeis 1994, p. 354.
Boccaccio, Giovanni: *Decameron con le illustrazioni dell’autore e di grandi artisti fra Tre e Quattrocento*. Edited by Vittore Branca. Firenze: Le Lettere 1999.
Boccaccio, Giovanni: *Decameron*. Ed. by Vittore Branca. Torino: Einaudi 2004.
Boccaccio, Giovanni: *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio Faithfully Translated by James M. Rigg*. 2 vols. London: The Navarre Society 1903.

**Secondary Literature**

**Monographs and Anthologies**

Battaglia Ricci, Lucia: *Scrivere un libro di novelle: Giovanni Boccaccio autore, lettore, editore*. Ravenna: Longo Editore 2013.
Blumenberg, Hans: *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*. 2 Auflage. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1983.
Branca, Vittore: *Boccaccio medievale*. Firenze: Sansoni 1981.
Branca, Vittore: *Tradizione delle opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*. Vol. 2: *Un secondo elenco di manoscritti e studi sul testo del “Decameron” con due appendici*. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 1991.
Brownlee, Marina /Kevin Brownlee et al.: *The New Medievalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1991.
Cerquiglini, Bernard: *Eloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1989.
Cursi, Marco: *Il Decameron: scritture, scriventi, lettori. Storia di un testo*. Roma: Viella 2007.
Genette, Gérard: *Seuils*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1987.
Greenblatt, Stephen: *Shakespearian Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1988.
Lanza, Antonio: *La letteratura tardogotica. Arte e poesia a Firenze e Siena nell’autunno del Medioevo*. Anzio: De Ubeis 1994.
Neuschäfer, Hans-Jörg: *Boccaccio und der Beginn der Novelle. Strukturen der Kurzerzählung zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1969.
Nichols, Stephen G: *From Parchment to Cyberspace. Medieval Literature in the Digital Age*. New York: Peter Lang 2016.
Strohschneider, Peter: *Höfische Textgeschichten. Über Selbstentwürfe vormoderner Literatur*. Heidelberg: Winter 2014.
Veeser, Harold Aram: *The New Historicism Reader*. New York and London: Routledge 1994.

**Articles and Papers**

Battaglia Ricci, Lucia: Edizioni d’autore, copie di lavoro, interventi di autoesegesi: testimonianze trecentesche. In: Guido Baldassarri (ed.): *Di mano propria. Gli autografi dei letterati italiani*. Roma: Salerno 2010, p. 123–157.
Cerquiglini-Toulet, Jacqueline: Conceiving the Text in the Middle Ages. In: R. Howard Bloch/Alison Calhoun et al. (eds.): *Rethinking the New Medievalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2014, p. 151–161.

Ciardi Dupré dal Poggetto, Maria Grazia: Corpus dei disegni e cod. Parigino lt. 482. In: Maria Grazia Ciadra Dupré/Vittore Branca: Boccaccio visualizzato dal Boccaccio. *Studi sul Boccaccio* 22 (1994), p. 197–225.

Delcorno Branca, Daniela: “Cognominato prencipe Galeotto”. Il sottotitolo illustrato del Parigino lt. 482. In: *Studi sul Boccaccio* 23 (1995), p. 79–88.

Delcorno Branca, Daniela: Dante and the Roman de Lancelot. In: Norris J. Lacy (ed.): *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*. New York and London: Garland 1996, p. 133–145.

Küpper, Joachim: Affichierte “Exemplarität”, tatsächliche A-Systematik. Bocaccios “Decameron” und die Episteme der Renaissance. In: Klaus W. Hempfer (ed.): *Renaissance. Diskurstsukturen und epistemologische Voraussetzungen*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1993, p. 84–87.

Kablitz, Andreas: Zur Fortuna-Konzeption in Boccaccios *Decameron*. In: *Italienische Studien* 12 (1990), p. 7–25.

Klinkert, Thomas: Zum Status von Intertextualität im Mittelalter: Tristan, Lancelot, Francesca da Rimini. In: *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch* 81 (2006), p. 27–70.

Regn, Gerhard: Zeitsemantiken des Jenseits in Dantes “Commedia”. In: Susannes Köbele/Coralie Rippl (eds.): *Gleichzeitigkeit: Narrative Synchronisierungsmodelle in der Literatur des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2015, p. 110–120.

Rossi, Luciano: Ironia e parodia nel “Decameron”: Da Ciappelletto a Griselda. In: *La novella italiana. Atti del Convegno di Caprarola (19–24. 9. 1988)*. Roma: Salerno Editrice 1988 (Biblioteca di Filologia e critica, 3), p. 385–398.

Rossi, Luciano: Il paratesto decameroniano: Cimento d’armonia e d’invenzione. In: *Introduzione al ’Decameron’. Ed. by Michelangelo Picone/Margherita Mesirca*. Firenze: Franco Cesati Editore 2004 (Lectura Boccaccii Turicensis), p. 35–54.