Patient Griselda and *matta bestialitade**

Charles Haines

The story of Patient Griselda is the most famous of the *Decameron* tales. Petrarch admired it so much he translated it into Latin. Chaucer put it into English and gave it to the Clerke to tell. Dekker, with Chettle and Houghton, wrote a play based on it, as did Goldoni; and there are other versions of the events. Petrarch, in a letter to Boccaccio, says that the story "had delighted me ever since I first heard it some years ago." Whether this means that the tale had been written down before Boccaccio, or that the events in it had actually occurred, Petrarch does not make clear; but John Dunlop, already in 1816, mentions three ladies known to history who had been advanced, at various times, as the original of Griselda.

The Griselda story is told in *The Decameron* by Dioneo. It is the tenth and last story told on the tenth and last day of storytelling; which is to say, it is the hundredth canto, if we will, in Boccaccio's Human Comedy. Some commentators have suggested that Dioneo is Boccaccio himself, though the literal meaning of 'Dioneo' — new god — does little to advance the notion. Boccaccio or not, Dioneo early in the transactions of the *lieta brigata*, the Happy Band, was accorded the right to tell the last tale on each day of tale-telling; and also the right to tell a tale on any subject he wanted to, rather than follow the assignment, given by the ruler-for-a-day, of the general kind of story to be told. He was the only member of the group to have these, or any, special privileges as narrator.

Dioneo's opening statement in his Griselda story contains two words I have suggested in my title that we look at fairly closely. The opening statement is as follows:

... vo' ragionar d'un marchese, non cosa magnifica, ma una matta bestialità, come che bene ne gli seguisse alla fine.

G.H. McWilliam in his 1982 translation of *The Decameron* has:

I want to tell you of a marquis, whose actions, even though they turned out well for him in the end, were remarkable not so much for their munificence, as for their senseless brutality.

Matta bestialità are the words that I want to look at particularly. In McWilliam, they become in English, 'senseless brutality.' Musa and Bandanella, in their 1982 translation, have, for *matta bestialità*, 'insane cruelty.' Richard Aldington, 1930, has 'silly brutality.' Frances Winwar, also 1930, has 'mad piece of stupidity.' Of these, Aldington and McWilliam are closest to the mark. *Bestialità* is, as they have it, brutality — certainly not stupidity, as Winwar wants. *Matta* perhaps means more nearly 'wild' than 'senseless' or 'silly,' and I might myself have had Dioneo say that the marquis behaved with wild brutality.

My reason for spending time on the two words is not entirely a passion for lexical minutiae. It is that they must affect our reading of the whole *Decameron* Griselda tale, because Dioneo borrowed them from Dante, where they occur at a crucial moment of the *Inferno*. In Canto XI Virgil outlines the classification of human sins. Starting at l.79, he says, in Ciardi's translation:

. . . . your *Ethics* states
the three main dispositions of the soul
that lead to those offenses Heaven hates —
incontinence, malice, and bestiality?

Virgil's phrase here, is *matta bestialitade* (*bestialitade* and *bestialità* are interchangeable in meaning). It has been put into English by five translators of the *Inferno*, as 'mad brutishness' (Cary, Sinclair), 'mad bestiality' (Huse), 'brute bestiality' (Sayers), and 'bestiality' (Ciardi). The *Società Dantesca Italiana* edition of the *Comedy*, edited by Guiseppe Vandelli, has a footnote for the phrase that reads (my translation): ". . . because of which one encourages animal desires, senselessly satisfies them; and even does violent things not out of place in the animal world."

What we have established, so far, is that Dioneo pre-describes the marquis's behaviour with a phrase classically applied to one of the three great modes of sin; indeed, one of the two modes more vicious, more heinous than incontinence. With fraudulence, *matta bestialitade*, is sin at its worst.

Let me parry any objection that Dioneo and Virgil quite by accident hit on the same phrase: that *matta bestialità* came into Boccaccio's mind as an original expression; and therefore Dioneo's judgement does not carry the grim implication given to it by association with Virgil's analysis. Such a coincidence I think impossible. Boccaccio knew the *Comedy* well. He was to become its first editor. He gave Dante's poem its name. The 1958 Club del Libro edition of the *Decameron*, in Italian, edited by Remo Cesarani,¹ has a footnote at this point that reads (my translation): "Phrase taken from Dante, but here used in the broad sense of 'cruel stupidity.' By using this phrase 'Dioneo pronounces at the start of the story the judgement of Boccaccio himself on the character and disposition of the marquis and on the barbarity, the lack of civilization, of the customs that were a part of the remote age in which the story is set'." (The sentence beginning "Dioneo pronounces . . ." is a comment made by Natalino Sapegno in his 1956 edition of *The Decameron* and here quoted by Cesarani.) Both Cesarani and Sapegno clearly believe that Boccaccio consciously borrowed the *matta bestialità* phrase; but I detect in Sapegno's desire to banish Dioneo's entire tale as far as possible into legend and fairyland a nervous anticipation and premature rejection of the case I want to make. Cesarani, in fact, in his next footnote contradicts the nervous part of Sapegno's assertion: "Saluzzo was, during medieval times, the seat of an important marquisate." In other words, Cesarani implies, Boccaccio, living and writing in Florence and saying 'A long time ago in Saluzzo,' would be, in 1984 Canadian terms, a Boccaccio living and writing in Ottawa and telling a story set in Winnipeg at the time of Louis Riel; or, in other 1984 terms, a Boccaccio living and writing in Boston and telling a story set in Atlanta in 1860. In any case, there can be no doubt that Dioneo knew he was quoting Virgil when he said *matta bestialità*.

Marga Cottino-Jones, in her 1973 article, "Fabula vs. Figura,"² re-states the idea that nearly all readers of the tale will have long accepted: that *The Decameron X*, has both a literal and an allegorical meaning. She sees the allegory as quite specifically a presentation of Gualtieri "typifying the Divine Father archetype, and Griselda, symbolizing the Christ archetype." She remarks that "Gualtieri's wisdom is stressed all through the introductory part of the novella." She does not mention or refer to the wild brutality phrase. There is little doubt that in part Cottino-Jones is right: allegorically Gualtieri is God or, if you will, a Deus figure; but Griselda will not be as readily accepted as a Son of God figure.

Like Prospero, and the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Gualtieri is more a *deus in* than a *deus ex machina*. He controls the action but he is not, to use a modern phrase, parachuted into the problem, with a solution, at the end of the tale; and he does derive certain benefits from the outcome of the events. Though *in*, rather than *ex machina*, Gualtieri is surely a *deus* figure. Now, though, we are faced with the allegorical statement that the *deus*, God, in dealing with Griselda, commits a vicious sin, of wild brutality. This statement must have been plain to a large group of 14th century readers, if we are prepared to believe, with Elliot Krieger, that the medieval mind read allegory as readily as we read acronyms.³ It seems probable, then, that Griselda cannot allegorically, be Christ, but is, more simply, mankind.

The Decameron opens with a lengthy description of the vicious effects of the plague, and what the plague did in Florence to even such unshakeable forces as family relations and domestic affections. *The Decameron* closes with this story of thirteen years of misery visited on an unoffending shepherd girl. We are not long in seeing that what Gualtieri does to Griselda, the plague might equally have done, and did do to hundreds of thousands of people. He disrupts her life entirely. He kills (or seems to) her children. He separates her from her father and her friends. He turns her out of her house — his house — nearly naked and without a penny. He calls her suddenly back to take on an emergency task. And throughout, she does not murmur nor repine. Griselda is, of course, the perfect Christian in her relationship with God 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him' she adopts Job's motto — it is worth noting that there is no Satan in Griselda's not un-Job-like world, nor does Griselda ever want to curse God and die — and she extends the motto to 'Though he slay my children, yet will I trust in him and obey him.'

Dioneo, or Boccaccio, is shaking his fist, protected by allegory, at Heaven, at God Himself. How could a wise lord, a God who loved his subjects, visit on them such an appalling cavalcade of horrors as the plague? Dioneo's partial answer to the question is simply that "the idea came to" Gualtieri "to test Griselda's patience with a long trial, and intolerable things." Dioneo, at this point, gives no reason why Gualtieri suddenly wanted to test his wife. "The idea came to" Gualtieri is all he says — but that phrase is reminiscent of a phrase in the Abbot of Cligny tale (Day I, tale vii) where Filòstrato says "A malicious thought suddenly entered the Abbot's mind, of a sort he had never entertained before, and

he said: 'Why should I give hospitality to the likes of that fellow?'" Later, when Griselda is restored, Gualtieri makes a short speech, intended to justify his frightful behaviour: he wanted to show Griselda how to be a wife, his people how to choose and keep a wife, he wanted to ensure his own peace and quiet though married. Dioneo concludes that Gualtieri was acknowledged to be wise, though what he had done was harsh and intolerable — and Griselda was the wisest of all. Griselda is rewarded by being taken into heaven, back into Gualtieri's house. Dioneo does not ask the question whether a heaven administered by a Gualtieri is worth gaining.

But Boccaccio is not content with a simple, one-track piece of ultimately consoling allegorical encouragement and advice. Griselda may be your perfect uncomplaining Christian. She is, at the same time, socially almost a monster. Wildly brutalized by Gualtieri, she becomes to an extent a brute herself. Boccaccio has included in the story a great deal of misbehaviour of several kinds. For one thing, the Marquis Gualtieri must not marry beneath him, according to the general run of accepted medieval thought; certainly not so far beneath him as the daughter of Giannucolo, a shepherd. Gualtieri's choice of bride is in one sense an allegorical aspect of a descent to brutality, or brutishness.

Griselda, however saintly in her patience, seriously misbehaves as a human. She gives birth to a child and then with only a whispered hope that wild life may not be allowed to devour its little corpse, hands her child over to a murderer. There is a touch of Medea here; and in no Christian society is a mother applauded for consenting to the murder of her child: three of the Gospels speak of a millstone and drowning for a person who makes 'one of these little ones to stumble.' Five years later Griselda (having made love with her husband: did she want to? she says she loves him. Could she have rejected his advances?) has another child, a boy, and turns him over to the murderers. She is, at the least of it, in terms of human society, an unnatural mother, who compounds her crime by continuing to serve the man that has brutalized her. Boccaccio is writing no subtle psychology-case history. Krieger speaks of this tale as one about a perfect masochist married to the perfect sadist.⁴ The barb is witty, but of no value here as explanation. Dioneo gives a defiant, nonpsychology twist to his tale at the end. He cannot resist a final impertinent grace-note; and I beg your indulgence when I translate in less guarded terms than are used in other translations, Dioneo's final lines:

It would probably have served Gualtieri right if he'd run into a woman, who, pushed out of the house with nothing on but her underwear, would have immediately found another man to stir up her little triangle of hair and, having done that, get her a whole nice new wardrobe.

Already the complexities in this tale have multiplied, without our having taken a close look at the human-society/human-gender allegory. Dioneo's message, however, is that God is capable of behaving with the same senseless brutality, for the employment of which humans may be condemned to Lower Hell; and the plague is proof of this, "although good came of it in the end." Here is a hard thought: that the omnipotence of God extends to the doing of prohibited evil.

Some readers might want to take refuge in a total reversal of the tale; that is, see Gualtieri, not as a deus, but as a Satan figure. Behind the story, and not visible in it, is God, wise and good, allowing, as in the Book of Job, the Evil One to try his children. At last, then, pursuing this difficult allegory, Mankind sits down comfortably with Satan, who has let up on his pernicious influence, to live out the rest of mortal life in his company. It is not easy to accept this reading, if only because good, Dioneo assures his listeners, does come out of the events: Dioneo's final little adulterous grace-note did not get played. Either we see, then, a Satan fully in control of the world and mysteriously capable of causing and sustaining some goodness; or God, fully in control, but capable of a moment of sin. There is further the comfortable, if remote, possibility that Boccaccio here is pre-figuring one of the beliefs of Cusanus: that Gualtieri is a deus who is, in turn, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a meeting-point of extreme opposites, good and evil, in this case; and incomprehensible to and by the human mind. I perhaps wish this reading were possible; but the sense of the Boccaccio text does not seem to me to endorse it.

Let me return briefly to my original contention: that a reading of Boccaccio's version of the Griselda story must take into account the Dantean-Virgilian phrase *wild brutality* and its oblique allegorical application to God Himself; and let me nudge that contention forward one more notch.

If God, in *The Decameron*, is capable of acting with *matta bestialità*, man is capable of replying with virtue; and that virtue is, or can be, human, rather than God-given, in origin. Griselda at the end of the tale tells Gualtieri that she was able to endure his evil-doings because she had been basely — humanly — brought up;

and she warns him that his new bride, brought up nobly — divinely — might crack under the same pressure. Griselda does not say that God or religious faith had sustained her during her thirteen dreadful years, but that her base-born familiarity with hard work had been her strength.

It is worth notice, in this connection, that the whole *Decameron* is, in a sense, a circular book that ends much as it begins. *The Decameron* opens with Boccaccio's description of his own painful, tormenting love-affair: love for a woman too noble and lofty, he says, for a man of his lowly birth; a fervent love that no resolve, warning, shame, or risk of danger could break. At last, though, that love, he says, grew less, diminished: because of the passage of time and even more important, because of the compassion and the comfort given him by his friends. Finally, now, all torment has been removed, and only delight remains: good came of his torturing love in the end. Boccaccio goes on that he wants, as a kind of repayment, to write a book that will provide, in turn, compassion and consolation for others in love — particularly for women, whom society cruelly mistreats.

The similarity of outline between Boccaccio's own adventure and Griselda's painful marriage is striking enough. More interesting, still, is Boccaccio's first sentence of all, his first description of the compassion and comfort that intervened and brought him back to sanity and health out of a fierce and tormenting love. The first word of that first sentence, in Italian, is *umana* — human: it is not 'God-like,' nor the phrase 'God wants' or 'God commands us' or 'We ought to': it is *umana* — *umana cosa è l'aver compassione agli afflitti*: — It is human to have compassion on the unhappy.

I am inclined to wonder whether Griselda had compassion upon, pardoned, Gualtieri's wild brutality. I am inclined to wonder whether, pardoned or not, Gualtieri, the deus, God, repented of his harsh acts and thus, as all who repent, became entitled to enter Purgatory and at last, allegorically, be saved. A Boccaccio Christian God, who has lodged within His omnipotence an ability to commit, with devastating results, one of the very sins He sternly prohibits, must also be capable of repentance; and further, in this Boccaccio scheme of things, it must be up to Man, victimized by the plague, to have compassion, to pardon God, who has for whatever reason sent that plague. Here is a different Boccaccio, more revolutionary than the amiable teller of merry tales we have been accustomed to read and laugh over, and officially shy away from. He is beginning to shift the perceptible source and

centre of moral excellence away from the Deity and toward Man. He is beginning to establish Mankind, as architects of their own destiny, responsible for their own well-being. Here is indeed a Human Comedy.

NOTES

* This a revised version of a paper read at the XIIth Annual Symposium of the Ottawa-Carleton Medieval-Renaissance Club, Carleton University, Ottawa, March 31st, 1984.

1 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*. Prefazione, cenni bibliografici, note e glossario a cura di Remo Cesarani. Edizioni per il Club del Libro (Milano. 1958).

2 Marga Cottino-Jones, "Fabula vs Figura: Another Interpretation of the Griselda Story," *Italica* 50 (1973), 38-52.

3 Elliott Krieger, "Re-Reading Allegory: The Clerk's Tale," *Paunch* 40-41 (1975) 116-35.

4 Ibid.