ANTI-PETRARCHISM IN THE *DECAMERON*'S PROEM AND INTRODUCTION?

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Summary: Similarities of purpose between the Proem of the *Decameron* and the opening sonnet of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* have been noticed by several scholars. Students of Boccaccio and Petrarch are also becoming increasingly aware that the former was willing to criticize his friend, as he did when Petrarch chose to accept Visconti patronage in Milan, the great enemy of Florence. The Proem of the *Decameron*, however, has not hitherto elicited comment as a text where such friendly criticism, at least of Petrarch's poetic persona in the *RVF*, might be found. The present essay suggests that Boccaccio's famous address in the Proem to fearful, lovesick and housebound women pertains as much to that Petrarcan persona as it does to those *vaghe donne*. Although it refers to and engages with the important debate on Boccaccio's attitudes towards real women, the essay explores the possibility that the *Decameron*'s Proem slyly hints (in a way that is reinforced by the story collection's Introduction) that the *Canzoniere* reveals a male poet who is himself "unmanned" by his excessive lovesickness and pursuit of solitude.

Parallels between Boccaccio's Proem to the *Decameron* and Petrarch's opening sonnet in the *Canzoniere* have suggested themselves to various scholars.¹ One of them, Vittore Branca, perceives a "structural and functional analogy" between the two texts,² evident at the beginning when each

¹ On the dating of the *Decameron*'s Proem to late 1350-early 1351 and of the *Canzoniere*, including its first sonnet, to 1350, see Branca, "Implicazioni strutturali ed espressive," 141; compare Branca, *Profilo biografico*, 80 ("il Boccaccio diede forma, probabilmente fra il 1349 e il 1351, al *Decameron*"). Kirkham too assigns the first sonnet in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* to 1350 ("Chronology of Petrarch's Life and Works," xix). Branca imagines Petrarch and Boccaccio in the former's Padua garden comparing their proemial works: "Implicazioni strutturali ed espressive," 141-42. See idem, *Profilo biografico*, 88-91, and Houston, "Boccaccio at Play," S49 for various literary topics they may have discussed.

² Branca, ed., *Decameron*, 2 vols, I, 10, n. 1: "v'è analogia strutturale e funzionale fra l'inizio di questo proemio e l'attacco del sonetto proemiale del Petrarca: e l'analogia continua lungo tutti e due i testi." See too Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 300-03. Other scholars noting parallels include Scaglione, *Nature*

makes an appeal to compassionate readers by subtly depicting the speaker or narrator, wounded by unrequited love, as the proper recipient of those readers' compassion.³ On Petrarch's part the desire is to find readers capable of "pietà, non che perdono" (*RVF* I.8), on Boccaccio's the wish to establish his authority as one who has "compassione degli afflitti" (*Dec. Pr.*, 2).⁴ Despite their roughly similar purposes and specific reliance on affect, however, these two works imagine strikingly different relationships between authors and the communities they invoke. Boccaccio makes connections with readers, friends and listeners central to our experience of the Proem, while Petrarch, "essentially the introvert, chiefly interested in his own ego,"⁵ interpellates his audience in *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* as largely passive auditors, not true collaborators, in the development of his meaning.⁶ Even if it is only a matter of degree rather than of kind,⁷ this disparity between Petrarchan and Boccaccian depictions of the author-audience relationship quickly becomes evident to those who read or teach the *Decameron's* Proem and the first of

and Love, 19; and Rossi, "Il paratesto decameroniano," 42 and n. 27. Citing Branca's broad documenting of Boccaccio's literary innovations (*Boccaccio medievale*, 335-46), Rossi claims that the *Decameron's* Proem shares with Petrarch's first *rima* the impulse to overturn pre-existing poetic tropes: "Mi pare innegabile che il ribaltamento finemente ironico del patetico esordio petrarchesco rientri nella complessa architettura 'parodistica' del *Decameron*." Rossi does not go so far as to argue, as I do here, that Boccaccio's Proem is challenging the Petrarchan persona itself.

³ As expounded by Branca, ed., *Decameron*, I, 5, n. 2; idem, *Boccaccio medievale*, 301.

⁴ For commentary see Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 300-01. Henceforth I quote the *Decameron* by day, tale and sentence number from Branca's edition, and Petrarch's sonnets by line number from *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, ed. Savoca.

⁵ Thus Scaglione, who adds "Boccaccio had a more genuine interest in others": "Narrative Vocation," 81.

⁶ Recent studies nevertheless confirm that Petrarch anticipated different audiences for works about different themes, whether humanist scholarship, romantic love, classical *otium* or monastic solitude: Barolini, "The Self in the Labyrinth of Time"; Steinberg, "Petrarch's Damned Poetry"; Maggi, "You Will Be My Solitude"; Barsella, "A Humanistic Approach to Religious Solitude"; Zak, *Petrarch's Humanism and the Care of the Self*. Then too, Petrarch's self-absorption may be understood in a different light, as self-mastery in an Augustinian vein: see Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima*, 105.

⁷ As implied by Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 301.

the *sonetti* together.⁸ Less obvious is the possibility that Boccaccio self-consciously uses this contrast not merely to depart from Petrarch,⁹ but to parody the Petrarchan apotheosis of the male lover whose very enslavement to love, no matter how evocatively worded, confines him to a solitude worse than any of the restrictions that, according to Boccaccio, *Trecento* Florentine society typically imposed on women.¹⁰

Let me begin this analysis by qualifying my claim that Boccaccio differs from Petrarch in showcasing a seemingly real dependence on communities of others. Something approximating what Brian Stock terms a “textual community” is undeniably evoked by the *Canzoniere*’s opening sonnet, with its address, partly quoted above, to “Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono/ Di quei sospiri[...]” (*RVF* I.1-2).¹¹ Nevertheless, this community of curious lis-

⁸ F. Regina Psaki’s article “Boccaccio’s *Corbaccio* as a *Secret Admirer*” evolved in part out of her teaching the *Corbaccio* alongside Petrarch’s *Secretum* (112); my essay originated with teaching the *Decameron*’s Proem and Introduction shortly after Petrarch’s sonnets. I thank my students at the University of Victoria who patiently endured the genesis of this argument in my English 410 course, “Backgrounds to the English Literary Tradition” (spring, 2012). A relative newcomer to Italian studies, I have availed myself of the numerous scholarly studies and Boccaccian texts cited by Wallace, Branca, Ginsberg and other scholars referred to in my notes. I thank too the anonymous readers of *Quaderni d’italianistica* for their many helpful suggestions. Any errors that remain are my own.

⁹ As proposed by Scaglione, opposing love in the *Decameron* to both the “‘Gothic,’ ‘transcendental’ love” of e.g. Dante and the “‘Platonic,’ ‘immanent’ but still spiritual love that rose with Petrarch” (*Nature and Love*, 77).

¹⁰ I am unaware of any previous study of Boccaccio’s Proem that makes this claim, but Houston’s “Boccaccio at Play” offers a similar interpretation of Boccaccio’s *Epistola* X, written to Petrarch in 1353. Kocher explores Boccaccio’s capacity for parodying Petrarchan *otium* in the *De casibus virorum illustrium*: “‘Interpres rerum tuarum,’” 67-69. Wallace expounds important political contrasts between Petrarch’s *De viris illustribus* and Boccaccio’s *De casibus* (*Chaucerian Polity*, 303-05). I thank an anonymous reader for pointing out that Rossi (“Il paratesto decameroniano,” 42) maintains that the Introduction to *Dec.* IV tacitly challenges Petrarch’s notions of *vergogna* and *vaneggiare*.

¹¹ On “textual communities” (a term I use in a general sense), see Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, esp. 88-92. I thank an anonymous reader for stressing that there is “at least a ghost of a compassionate community in Petrarch, who writes, after all, ‘ove sia chi per prova intenda amore / spero trovar pietà,’ etc. (only to contrast it with another community, the *popol tutto* to which he has been *favola*).” In this essay, I hope to show that Boccaccio’s audience is less “ghostly” than Petrarch’s, less a projection than Petrarch’s of authorial self-absorption.

teners amounts to a rhetorical aether that exists simply to convey the speaker's lamentations. Petrarch's gestures towards an audience serve really to make us notice his persona's futile search for self-possession. The poet is trying to make his persona, rather than his readers or hearers, seem lifelike; and in this regard he succeeds so well that the *Canzoniere*, like the *Decameron* (but in profoundly different ways), dazzles us with an "autobiographical attitude" if not an indisputably "autobiographical form."¹²

Boccaccio's emphasis on solidarity in the *Decameron*'s Proem has several functions. Of course it is meant to contrast to the social disintegration in Florence that the Introduction will ascribe to the Plague, thanks to which "[l]a massa degli uomini si era imbestiata."¹³ It is also, if tenuously and by no means causally, associated with a cure for immoderate love, though the actual remedy turns out to have been mere time. Boccaccio overcame an age-old "altissimo e nobile amore" (*Dec. Pr.*, 3) not through his friends' efforts, much less as a result of his own, but because God has ordained that all earthly things, including infatuation, should end sooner or later. This is simply a principle of universal nature rather than any benevolent Grace uniquely reserved for Boccaccio:¹⁴

¹² For this distinction (regarding Boccaccio), see Scholes and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 191 (italics in original). I do not disagree with Psaki, following Hollander, that "[t]he Boccaccian narrator is never coextensive with the author" ("Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* as a *Secret Admirer*," 107, paraphrasing Hollander, *Boccaccio's Last Fiction*, 24-26). Other scholars who explore the complexities of the self that Boccaccio puts forth in his writings include Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 191-249; di Pino, *La polemica*, esp. 3-4, 42-43, 210-20; Padoan, *Il Boccaccio*, 93-121; Rossi, "Il paratesto decameroniano," esp. 39; Fido, "L'ars narrandi di Boccaccio nella sesta giornata"; Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*, 13-24, 48-52; Picone, *Boccaccio e la codificazione della novella*, 27-50; Kirkham, *Sign of Reason*, 117-29; Hollander, "The *Decameron* Proem"; Stilling, "The Place of the Title"; Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (esp. 64-82) and "The Untidy Business of Gender Studies." K. P. Clarke suggestively contrasts Boccaccio, who frames his own story collection, to Franco Sacchetti, whose *Trecentonovelle* "dispenses altogether with the frame": from Sacchetti's bold authorial self-referentiality Clarke infers that "[a]n author so willing to take responsibility for his *novelle* has no need of a frame" ("A Good Place for a Tale," 68).

¹³ Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 37, on the Introduction's account of the Plague's devastating effects on Florence.

¹⁴ Muscetta, however, sees in the lines immediately following an "omaggio alla Provvidenza divina" (*Giovanni Boccaccio*, 157).

Ma sí come a Colui piacque il quale, essendo Egli infinito, diede per legge incommutabile a tutte le cose mondane aver fine, il mio amore, oltre a ogn'altro fervente e il quale niuna forza di proponimento o di consiglio o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo che seguir ne potesse, aveva potuto né rompere né piegare, per se medesimo in processo di tempo si diminuì [.] (*Dec. Pr.*, 5)

Boccaccio does not dwell here on the effects of time. It would be illogical to thank it or even an *incommutabile* law of God for its purely accidental aid, so Boccaccio expresses his gratitude to more immediate intercessors, his friends: "Ma quantunque cessata sia la pena, non per ciò è la memoria fuggita de' benefici già ricevuti, datimi da coloro a' quali per benivolenza da loro a me portata erano gravi le mie fatiche" (*Dec. Pr.*, 6). Although his memory will not let him forget his apparently vain efforts to overcome infatuation, it will allow him to acknowledge the help of others, the advice (*consiglio*) he received from those who cared about him: "né passerà mai [la memoria], sí come io credo, se non per morte" (*Dec. Pr.*, 6).

There is a good deal of literary coyness on display here. Much of it takes the form of the author's debt to literary convention, as in Boccaccio's modesty with regard to his book (e.g. "in quel poco che per me si può" [*Dec. Pr.*, 7]),¹⁵ his recollection of his lovesickness and his friends' solicitude,¹⁶ and his shrewd borrowing from and adaptation of Ovid's *Remedia amoris*.¹⁷ Recently parallels between the Proem and Ovid's *Heroides* have been discerned as well.¹⁸ The Proem, then, enters into dialogue with

¹⁵ On the modesty *topos*, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 83-85.

¹⁶ Ciavolella surveys the tradition of literary lovesickness in *La "malattia d'amore,"* with discussion of the *Decameron* (though not the Proem) on 117-23. Wallace compares Boccaccio's acknowledgement of his reliance on friends with *Vita nuova*, XVIII (in which Dante describes himself offering an explanation of his love of Beatrice to a group of women who have asked him for it to make him understand himself better); *Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*, 16. For relevant observations on Boccaccio's complex re-working of Boethian *consolatio*, see Marcus, *Allegory of Form*, 112-25; Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 37-40.

¹⁷ Hollander, "The *Decameron* Proem"; Forni, *Forme complesse*, 27-28; Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 30-32, 39. Hollander also traces the Boccaccian idea of literary "usefulness" (*Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of Satire*, 69-88). Padoan notes the "tradizione retorica" behind Boccaccio's appeal to an audience of women in love (*Il Boccaccio*, 98).

¹⁸ Rossi, "Il paratesto decameriano," 40-41; Forni, *Forme complesse*, 29-30; Muscetta, *Giovanni Boccaccio*, 158.

numerous older textual traditions, but it also takes aim at the more recent literary phenomenon of the Petrarchan lover, despite Boccaccio's ostensible concern with addressing women. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to resolve the debate between those who believe that the Proem reflects "philogyny," even a kind of proto-feminism, and those who insist that it proffers simply a less explicit form of misogyny,¹⁹ it is essential to concede that Boccaccio used gender differences, and not merely the differences of biological sex, to flesh out his characters. Marilyn Migiel has pointed out that

the *Decameron* makes us aware that moral and experiential universes are constructed around categories like gender (and class, civic and national identity, religious identity, and so forth). The *Decameron* depicts how social and discursive power is divided between the sexes. The fictional storytellers of the *Decameron* are marked by their gender and by their express views on sexuality and sexual difference.²⁰

When Boccaccio's characters pronounce upon matters of, say, morality, religion and ethics, they thus reflect points of view that are largely determined by those characters' defining traits within society, such as their gender. To many twenty-first-century critical readers of Boccaccio, this insight will seem so unobjectionable that it may lead us to assume that, in the *Decameron*, "social and discursive power is divided between the sexes" entirely too neatly; that is, that Boccaccio may have rigidly assigned stereotypically masculine roles to men and stereotypically feminine roles to women, without ever blurring the boundaries between those factitious identities. I do not claim that Migiel herself thus perceives the book's characters; I merely state that Boccaccio's emphasis on *compassione* as a good that benefits both men (like the Boccaccian narrator himself) and women invites us to regard the disconsolate female lovers of the Proem in various

¹⁹ For pertinent insights on the complexity of Boccaccio's female characters and attitudes towards women, see e.g. Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*, 17; Migiel, "Untidy Business," 231. On "philogyny" (*filoginia*): Picone, "Il *Decamerone* come macrotesto," 19 and n. 29, citing Claude Cazalé Bérard, "Filoginia/misoginia," in *Lessico critico decameroniano*, ed. Renzo Bragantini and Pier Massimo Forni (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), 116-41. Clarke's discussion of the "empowered [female] reader" envisaged by the compiler of what is now the "Frammento Magliabechiano" ("A Good Place for a Tale," 78) tempts one to imagine a more assertive female readership of the *Decameron* itself than the passive, entrapped women depicted by Boccaccio in that work's Proem.

²⁰ *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 82.

ways: as, to be sure, social constructs that reflect prescribed or at least typical *Trecento* Tuscan notions of female behaviour; as physical bodies into whose erotic potential the Boccaccian narrator may even be seeking to tap;²¹ and also as symbols of a solitary, brooding, and self-induced suffering in love that has the power to render a man, or a male poetic persona such as Petrarch's, womanly (from Boccaccio's point of view).

Boccaccio, of course, never names Petrarch in the *Decameron's* Proem or Introduction, but then he is reticent on several counts, refraining, for example, from identifying those of his dear friends who had given him *consiglio* before his passionate love waned on its own. He is silent too about the object of his love, whom many assume to be the Fiammetta of the early poems. Perhaps he wishes to create the impression of a man whose self-mastery is so fragile that he must suppress the name of the former beloved who had imperilled it. More likely, the lady's anonymity serves the dual purpose of emphasizing the thoroughness of his victory over lovesickness while de-personalizing, and thus neutralizing, a potential ally of those of his female readers who may resent being treated like helpless victims of their own passion. The narrator is, after all, trying to keep the spotlight on himself to advance his argument about the malady and consequences of excessive love; shedding light on the beloved would divert him from this aim by shifting attention from the malady to the "person" who caused it. This interpretation takes for granted that Fiammetta was almost certainly a fiction,²² and it concedes that Boccaccio may even be showing a mild form of misogyny by obscuring the identity of the very woman with whom his narrator had been infatuated. His non-specificity reduces the once-adored woman to a non-entity, a nothingness—though one could retort that the absence of her name merely reminds us that infatuation itself is born of an absence, or at least a romanticized image, where a real person should be.

Although in what follows I occasionally return to the issue of Boccaccio's attitudes towards women, I do not wish to belabour the

²¹ As Milner has recently and cogently argued in "Coming Together." An erotic, or at least affective, response by women seems also to have been anticipated by the illuminator of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Ital. 482, fol. 5r: see discussion by Clarke, "A Good Place for a Tale," 78 (citing, in n. 30, studies by Vittore Branca and Maria Grazia Ciardi Dupré dal Poggetto).

²² See e.g. Billanovich, *Restauri Boccacceschi*, 81-101; Branca, ed., *Decameron*, 5-6, n. 3, citing his own *Boccaccio medievale*, 231ff. Cp. Kirkham, "Maria a.k.a. Fiammetta," reprinting in part *Fabulous Vernacular*, 21-75. Smarr thoroughly examines the many and changing aspects of Boccaccio's "Fiammetta" in *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*.

author's supposed misogyny, because his silence concerning the nameless object of his *amore* is offset by his emphasis on the vital importance of conversation, of reason, of mutual support between men and women. If the Proem leaves unnamed both the woman whom the narrator worshipped and those friends who sought to rescue the Boccaccian narrator from the brink of destruction, it also pays tribute to those friends' "pleasant conversations" with him, which employed reason (*i piacevoli ragionamenti*) and provided great "relief" (*tanto refrigerio*; *Dec. Pr.*, 4). Even if by themselves they were unable to cure the narrator's lovesickness, those talks appear to have been more efficacious than Petrarch's own exercises in *ragionamento* ("Del vario stile in ch'io piango et ragiono/ Fra le vane speranze, e 'l van dolore" [*RVF* I.5-6]). Such aid as the narrator received from his friends anticipates the mutual succour, by means of storytelling, with which the seven youthful narrators of the *Decameron* proper will coalesce in a mini-society, a spontaneous *frazione* of Florence that sustains the reciprocal humanity no longer to be found in the plague-stricken city itself. In return for the *benifici* and *benivolenza* offered to him by his unnamed friends, Boccaccio expresses *gratitudine* by proffering, to those who need it (women, it turns out, rather than men), the *utilità* of his own counsel (*Dec. Pr.*, 6-8): the whole of the *Decameron* itself, as scholars have often observed.

Evident even at the level of syntax, the relationship among these virtues appears in concessive clauses containing *quantunque* followed by a verb or verbal phrase in the subjunctive, usually *essere*. This construction begins the already quoted passage "Ma quantunque cessata sia la pena....," in which the author acknowledges his friends' benevolence towards him. It shows up again in the ironic deprecation of his book: "E quantunque il mio sostentamento, o conforto che vogliam dire, possa essere e sia a' bisognosi assai poco" (*Dec. Pr.*, 8). Then, having conceded that this textual "comfort" might prove worthwhile "dove il bisogno apparisce maggiore" (8), he politely undertakes to refute doubts that the *Decameron* will prove more helpful to women than to men. The paragraph in which Boccaccio develops this argument amounts to four substantial periods, and permits fascinating glimpses into his understanding of the ways in which gender permits or restricts one's ability to overcome unrequited love:

E chi negherà questo, quantunque egli si sia, non molto più alle vaghe donne che agli uomini convenirsi donare? Esse dentro a' dilicati petti, temendo e vergognando, tengono l'amorose fiamme nascose, le quali quanto più di forza abbian che le palesi coloro il sanno che l'hanno provate: e oltre a ciò, ristrette da' voleri, da' piaceri, da' comandamenti de' padri, delle madri, de' fratelli e de' mariti, il più del tempo nel piccolo

ciruito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano e quasi oziose sedendosi, volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora, seco rivolgendo diversi pensieri, li quali non è possibile che sempre sieno allegri. E se per quegli alcuna malinconia, mossa da focoso disio, sopravviene nelle lor menti, in quelle conviene che con grave noia si dimori, se da nuovi ragionamenti non è rimossa: senza che elle sono molto men forti che gli uomini a sostenere; il che degli innamorati uomini non avviene, sí come noi possiamo apertamente vedere. Essi, se alcuna malinconia o gravezza di pensieri gli affligge, hanno molti modi da alleggiare o da passar quello, per ciò che a loro, volendo essi, non manca l'andare a torno, udire e veder molte cose, uccellare, cacciare, pescare, cavalcare, giuocare o mercatare: de' quali modi ciascuno ha forza di trarre, o in tutto o in parte, l'animo a sé e dal noioso pensiero rimuoverlo almeno per alcuno spazio di tempo, appresso il quale, con un modo o con altro, o consolazion sopravviene o diventa la noia minore. (*Dec. Pr.*, 9-12)

This long passage warrants quotation in full because of its detailed and seemingly rigid differentiation between men's and women's social roles, and because of the implications of this binary opposition for Boccaccio's treatment of the Petrarchan persona.

The first sentence contains the aforementioned concessive structure *quantunque* + subjunctive form of *essere*, "quantunque egli si sia," though here it is used as an ironic dismissal of the worth of his book *qua* source of relief.²³ Boccaccio's phrasing deploys modesty not as a means of seriously underestimating his own *Decameron* but as a way to coax readers into consensus with his narrator. The fabricated, if only vaguely felt, sense of community that results prepares the audience to accept the tidy division between the sexes that the passage will proceed to develop. In this diptych, men are characterized by their freedom, women by their confinement, the latter trait manifesting itself in biological and social terms: "Esse dentro a' delicati petti, temendo e vergognando, tengono l'amorose fiamme nascose."²⁴ Passions concealed burn hotter than those openly displayed;

²³ The referent of *egli* being the noun *sostamento* in the preceding period, which again features the *quantunque* + subjunctive of *essere* construction: "E quantunque il mio sostentamento, o conforto che vogliam dire, possa essere e sia a' bisognosi assai poco," *Dec. Pr.*, 8).

²⁴ Primarily meaning "delicate," *delicati* may also connote refinement taken to excess: Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio*, 24, with regard to the adverb *dilicatamente* used by Boccaccio in a 1362 letter to Francesco Nelli. Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition*, 135-36, analyzes Boccaccio's criticism of Florentine "dilicatezze, cosa vituperevole e femminile" (see *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, ed. Sasso, red. I.93).

Boccaccio overtly commiserates with women, but perhaps covertly and more tellingly with a certain kind of man, when he insists that “coloro il sanno che l’hanno provate,” a possible reply to *RVF* I.7-8 (“Ove sia chi per prova intenda amore/ Spero trovar pietà, non che perdono”).²⁵

To pursue this line of argument, I wish first to take Boccaccio at his word, if only provisionally, and assume with other students of the Proem that he is speaking primarily to and for women. Entertaining this assumption will help to underscore the irony with which Boccaccio may be directing his supposedly “philogynistic” advice at Petrarch. His appeal to common but specifically female experience implies a shared bond between author and audience insofar as they were alike healed of lovesickness;²⁶ this bond is meant to strengthen his claim to be able to offer the “useful advice” that his ostensibly female readers will take (“utile consiglio potranno pigliare” [*Dec. Pr.*, 14]). Boccaccio goes to great lengths to prove that they need to listen to his stories; after all, their fathers, mothers, siblings (brothers but perhaps also sisters) and husbands all conspire to rob them of their liberty. In their capacity to confine, these well-meaning oppressors have their counterparts both in the physical chambers that enclose women (“nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano”) and in the psychological conflicts that tear women apart from within. Even solitude promises no relief, because it is enforced rather than freely sought. Unlike contemplatives, who have chosen their vocation, young ladies can never enjoy true peace of mind: they can aspire to the philosopher’s *otium* (“quasi oziose sedendosi”) but can never fully obtain it.²⁷ Evoking and recontext-

²⁵ Then again, as an anonymous reader has pointed out, Boccaccio seems to be echoing Dante’s “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare” (*Vita nuova*, XXVI) which also pairs the verbs *intendere* and *provare*. His purpose may have been to use the Dantean passage to render the parody of the Petrarcan persona that much more pointed, or it may simply have been to hark back to his great predecessor for the mere sake of doing so. I thank the reader for bringing my attention to this passage from the *Vita nuova* and for suggesting multiple ways of thinking about Boccaccio’s possible allusion to it. Houston intriguingly describes Boccaccio “as mediator, as *galeotto*, between Dante and Petrarch” in “Boccaccio at Play,” S47.

²⁶ While avoiding a positivist biographical interpretation, Givens holds that Boccaccio’s depiction of love and lovesickness in the Proem stems from his experience of it as something “superata ed esaminata in una prospettiva universale”: *La dottrina d’amore*, 145. Compare Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 302.

²⁷ In the *Decameron*’s Conclusion, however, Boccaccio will refer to his female readers as *oziose* without qualification by means of *quasi*. Kirkham detects negative connotations in this feminized *ozio* and assumes that Boccaccio’s “feminine public

tualizing a signature Petrarchan *desideratum*, Boccaccio contrasts women's virtual imprisonment to that combination of freedom and philosophical serenity so highly prized by the author of the *De otio religioso*. If women are occasionally described in the *Decameron* as emotionally *mobili* ('inconstant') and *vaghe* ('graceful' but perhaps also 'wandering', 'errant'), it is because society's constraints impose upon them a physical immobility that often prevents them from becoming anything else.

This, at any rate, appears to be what Boccaccio believed, though whether he therefore sympathized deeply with the plight of fourteenth-century Tuscan women must remain a matter of debate. In the long passage quoted above, Boccaccio may be demonstrating philogyny or sublimated misogyny, but in any event he is surely acknowledging the real-life trammels on women's freedom. Whether or not he objects to them, he endows those constraints with a persuasive-sounding substantiality that anticipates the reader's agreement, be it begrudging or otherwise, that those restrictions do exist.²⁸ Women are held to be prone to an almost pathological obsession with thwarted love, but at least they have an excuse for it, along with, presumably, an objective correlative for their affections that lies somewhere beyond the "piccolo circuito delle loro camere."

What of those chronically lovesick men, who have no such excuse and whose beloveds have become *figmenta* suitable for poetic *fragmenta*?²⁹ From the Proem's presupposition that a *quasi ozioso* state of mind actually

dwells" in it (*Sign of Reason*, 125). This interpretation fits clearly the women of the Conclusion, less so the women of the Proem. Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 72, has the former group of ladies in mind, but elsewhere (57) ignores the possible significance of the Proem's *quasi*. The adverb merits attention because in the Proem it identifies women readers as an apt population for the very "middle ground" Mazzotta sees being occupied by literature itself, notwithstanding impulses within the *Decameron* that destabilize that ground (*World at Play*, 56-57).

²⁸ On which, see Kirkham, *Sign of Reason*, 128 and n. 21. Kuehn's *Law, Family, and Women* challenges but does not wholly overturn the thesis of female marginalization in early modern Florence propounded by Christiane Klapisch-Zuper in her many essays.

²⁹ "Women are figured in Petrarch not as participants in a social discourse but as scattered fragments, as an idea, disembodied, posthumous or metaphorical": Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 274 and 467, n. 65, citing Petrarch's *De vita solitaria*. Wallace also discerns in *Decameron* V.8, the tale of Nastagio degli Onesti, "the most sophisticated and extensive critique of [Petrarch's] cultural complex—the relationship of the humanist enterprise to civil society, natural landscape, and the female body" (275).

exists, it is possible to infer that Boccaccio, in the early 1350s, just possibly believed that Petrarch's own longing for *otium* amounted to a chimera for men no less than for women. How can Boccaccio have failed to realize that the Petrarchan persona's *raison d'être* depends on its persistent inability to attain the very inner peace it professes to crave? Even more than Petrarch's personal frustration (or, better, the frustration of his persona), the widespread self-centredness and social disintegration prompted by the Plague and described in the *Decameron's* Introduction should force us to scrutinize *otium* with care. It would be grossly reductive to equate Petrarch's tireless search for solitude with the collapse of community brought about by pestilence, and I do not maintain that Boccaccio equates them explicitly. Nevertheless, too much *otium* can be a dangerous thing, inappropriate in certain contexts and self-destructive when taken to extremes. Rather than saying so directly, however, and offending Petrarch, Boccaccio resorts to parody—no surprise here, for he was capable of circumlocution even when his friend's behaviour in other circumstances scandalized him acutely, as it did when Petrarch decided to accept Visconti patronage.³⁰ Parody in the Proem manifests itself through the seeming empathy for women discussed above, an empathy so pronounced that modern readers cannot help suspecting that Boccaccio is up to something. To return to a possibility suggested earlier and raised by other readers of the *Decameron* as well: Could this be a sophisticated form of misogyny parading itself as “philogyny”? It has been said that Boccaccio's anti-woman views assumed their more extreme and austere tones only after the *Decameron*;³¹ Aldo Scaglione, for example, perceives in that work an

³⁰ See Boccaccio, *Epistola X*, dated 18 July (1353), ed. Auzzas in *Epistole*, 574-83 (Latin and Italian); and discussion in Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 269-71; Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition*, 120-7, 197, 245-46; Houston, “Boccaccio at Play.” Kocher reads certain passages in the *De casibus virorum illustrium* for their own indirect criticism (via parody) of Petrarch (see above, n. 10).

³¹ Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition*, 116 and 135-36, on the *Trattatello* and the increase in Boccaccio's misogyny over time. See too Scaglione, *Nature and Love*, 42, 56, 121-23. Kirkham finds misogyny even in the *Decameron* (*Sign of Reason*, 117-29); see too Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*, 20 (on the misogyny evident in *Dec.*, I, Intro., 29). For contrasting views, see Scaglione, *Nature and Love*, 55; Grimaldi, “Quantunque volte, graziosissime donne...,” 7-18; Picone, “Il *Decamerone* come macrotesto,” 19, and source cited on that page and in n. 29. In “Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* as a *Secret Admirer*,” Psaki challenges older views of Boccaccian misogyny even in the *Corbaccio* and cites other scholars who have had second thoughts about that text.

author "tak[ing] reality and woman as they are, in all their polyvalence," representing "[h]is women characters" as "*real* according to *nature*, not to a superimposed schema of man-made, mentally construed and idolized, supraworldly, suprahuman, and supranatural perfection."³² Scaglione's judgement sounds especially persuasive when Boccaccio's images of women are juxtaposed with Petrarch's Laura. But it may be demurred that even the natural and this-worldly characteristics that Boccaccio imparts to his female characters are "man-made," the embodiments of a male author's reaction to the mixture of deification and abasement of women found in other male authors who composed more straightforwardly in the courtly love tradition.³³ Although Boccaccio seems to speak to and for women, he is more probably negotiating with other male writers behind the scenes to determine what version of woman is to be wedded to what manifestation of men's literary imagination.³⁴

One of those writers is, I submit, Petrarch, whose own irrational suffering in love provided one of the bases for the description of women on offer in the *Decameron's* Proem.³⁵ Boccaccio, in other words, deploys a "biographical attitude" (if I may modify Scholes and Kellogg's formulation) to engage at least implicitly with Petrarch's trademark self-fashioning. Branca has been a pioneer in urging us to study the Petrarch-Boccaccio relationship not solely in terms of dependence or one-sided influence, but

³² Scaglione, *Nature and Love*, 55; see too 74. Italics in original.

³³ See Žižek's trenchant "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing," in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 89-112. Migiel persuasively downplays Boccaccian proto-feminism in *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, esp. 64-82, while resisting the simplistic argument that Boccaccio was an out-and-out misogynist.

³⁴ This formulation borrows from a generally Lévi-Straussian anthropology of marriage in non-industrialized cultures. Limitations to this approach (see Blackwood, "Marriage, Matrifocality, and 'Missing' Men") render no less visible Boccaccio's involvement in a game with Petrarch to negotiate paradigmatic literary images of women. Wallace notes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's adaptation of this approach to the study of male-authored and male-centred literary texts about women: see "*Letters of Old Age*," 324. Wallace himself thus reads the Griselda story, told first by Boccaccio in Italian and subsequently by Petrarch in Latin ("*Letters of Old Age*," 323-29).

³⁵ Smarr makes a general observation about the Boccaccian image of women that dovetails nicely with the specific argument I seek to advance here about Petrarch: "Possibly, then, 'women' means anyone under the power of passion or ruled by appetite rather than reason" (*Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 172).

also as a “convergenza in problemi, in interessi, in soluzioni analoghe.”³⁶ It is possible to go further, to look in Boccaccio, even beyond the well-known *Epistola X*,³⁷ for signs of resistance to Petrarch, for indications that perhaps every now and then the Certaldese tried to have the last word. The older poet believed that monastic serenity could be wedded to humanist scholarly activity, but he remained at best *quasi ozioso* because he was forever riven by opposing desires, as Boccaccio knew well.³⁸

These opposing desires were hinted at earlier, in the discussion of Petrarch's and Boccaccio's different proemial invocations of *ragionare*, the former's mutability revealing itself in emotional extremes and even stylistic heterogeneity (“Del vario stile in ch'io piango et ragiono/ Fra le vane speranze, e 'l van dolore” [*RVF* I.5-6]). Such a man is aptly summed up in the Boccaccian Proem's description of women as “volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora” (*Dec. Pr.*, 10). If only in passing, it should be noted that the relevance of this description to the Aretine poet may be confirmed by glances at other poems in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* where, for example, the Petrarchan persona regards his passion as a source of both life and death (“O viva morte, o dilectoso male,” CXXXII.7), or claims to be imprisoned by the very hand he adores—“O bella man che mi destringi 'l core,/ E 'n poco spatio la mia vita chiudi” (CXCIX.1-2)—but who is in fact immured within his own psyche.

The narrator's reflections on the outlets available to men's emotions further substantiate this possible critique of Petrarchan “malinconia, mossa da focoso disio.” Men can avail themselves of several remedies for melancholy: they can “andare a torno, udire e veder molte cose, uccellare, cacciare, pescare, cavalcare, giocare o mercatare” (*Dec. Pr.*, 12).³⁹ Having juxtaposed the physical frailty of women, their “dilicati petti,” with their domestic confinement, Boccaccio links men's sensuous liberty with masculine pastimes. Males are able to “udire e veder”; their sensible bodies are

³⁶ Boccaccio *medievale*, 305.

³⁷ For commentary, see *inter alia* the studies cited above in n. 30.

³⁸ “Libidine sola aliquantulum non victus in totum, sed multo potius molestatus” (“Only in regard to passion was he, I will not say entirely conquered, but instead much troubled”): Boccaccio, *De vita et moribus Domini Francisci Petracchi de Florentia*, ed. Fabbri, in *Vite di Petrarca, Pier Damiani e Livio*, 898-911 (Latin and Italian), at 908. Translation mine, though I have benefitted from Fabbri's Italian version.

³⁹ Mazzotta identifies partial sources or analogues in “Arnaldus of Villanova, Avicenna and Constantinus Africanus” (*World at Play*, 31).

as free as their minds to go forth into the countryside, as often as they like, to exploit its resources for their own entertainment (to say nothing of making use of town life, with its opportunities for amusement, buying and selling). Boccaccio contrasts men's recreational potential to women's stasis in confinement. Latent in his analysis is a truth that Judith Butler would expound only much later, that gender, men's and women's, is something performed rather than innate, a performance consisting of repeated acts of socially prescribed behaviour.⁴⁰ In Boccaccio's Proem, women are shown performing the acts that compose their own physical and psychological enclosure, while men enact the hunting, seeing and so on that simultaneously constitute and confirm their freedom.

It is possibly with a proto-Butlerian—and certainly with a post-Aristotelian⁴¹—sense of the relationship between repeated activity and the socialization and gender-constructedness of the self that Boccaccio explains to women, and reminds Petrarch, that men can master both themselves and nature. They do not, and should not, squander their time in the green world by using it as a mere sounding board for any emotional torment pent up inside them. Boccaccio's remarks on the things men are free to do in the countryside are apropos of the Petrarch of *RVF* XXXV who claims that "monti, et piagge,/ Et fiumi, et selve sappian di che tempre/ Sia la mia vita, ch'è celata altrui" (9-11). The world where fowling, hunting and fishing take place can offer no solace if the man who enters it, proclaiming "Solo et pensoso i più deserti campi/ Vo mesurando a passi tardi et lenti" (*RVF* XXXV.1-2), will neither heal himself nor reveal his suffering to his friends.⁴²

So far I have tried to show that, in the Proem, Boccaccio's analysis of men's and women's gender roles applies as well to Petrarch as to women themselves. The *Decameron's* Introduction takes that analysis in a surpris-

⁴⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); eadem, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); cited by Joyce, "Feminist Theories of Embodiment," 50-51.

⁴¹ Hutton quotes Boccaccio's remark in the *Vita di Dante* that Aristotle is "the most worthy authority in all things of importance" (*Giovanni Boccaccio*, 234, and n. 4). Aristotle expounds his theory of habituation, specifically the cultivation of virtue by repeating virtuous acts, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, esp. ch. 2 (Irwin, ed., 33-35).

⁴² I defer to an anonymous reader for *Quaderni d'italianistica* who suggests the relevance here of "the community-oriented Dante that Petrarch uses in [*RVF*] 35 and to whose usage as a solitude-reinforcing antecedent Boccaccio perhaps objects."

ing direction. Rather than furthering his thesis that men are freer than women to combat the pain of unrequited love, Boccaccio now retreats from it by having men and women socialize as equals, in effect blurring somewhat the Proem's seemingly rigid gender boundaries. I claim nothing new in saying that the Introduction nearly equates men's and women's potential for self-amusement. Jacob Burckhardt, without attending to early modern gender roles as such, traced the representation of "polite" Italian society from Boccaccio to Bandello to Castiglione and discerned a relationship in them between lively storytelling and harmony between men and women.⁴³ More recently Jonathan Usher has argued that "Boccaccio constitutes his regenerative microcosm through healthy commerce between the sexes, and not via the dead-end of segregated conventualism."⁴⁴ This view is attractive, but its dichotomizing of gender relations—as either unrestricted *bonhomie* or cloistered separation—overlooks the possibility that even "healthy commerce" will admit of inequality, between genders and between social classes as well.⁴⁵ By suddenly flattening the distinctions between aristocratic Florentine men and women (though not between nobles and servants), the Introduction paradoxically confirms the importance of gender roles to the production and dissemination of literature. The illusion of equality between the *brigata's* men and women raises the sex-based and class-based humour of certain *novelle* to high relief; it makes the disparity between male and female ways of talking about women that much more arresting as itself a function of gender—a feature of the *Decameron's* stories so richly delineated by Marilyn Migiel. In veering away from verisimilitude, the Introduction further reminds us that the *Decameron* is at least as much about literary discussions between male writers as it is about real-life women. As a critique of Petrarchism, the Introduction demonstrates how a robust trade in stories, a healthy *literary* commerce—to adapt Usher's evocative phrasing—can narrow the chasm that courtly love opens up between male subjects and female objects, and consequently can help the male writer succeed more spectacularly in representing women *as if* they were "polyvalen[t]," *as if* they were "real according to nature" (to adapt Scaglione).

⁴³ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 2, 377-81.

⁴⁴ Intro. to *The Decameron*, trans. Waldman, xxiii.

⁴⁵ Class tension in Boccaccio is discussed by Wallace (*Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*, 68-69; idem, *Chaucerian Polity*, 28-31, 62) and Migiel ("Untidy Business," 226) but downplayed by Scaglione (*Nature and Love*, 68-73) and reconceptualized by Smarr (*Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 178-79).

The Introduction takes it for granted that infatuation often derives from self-absorption and leads to self-sequestration. As an early object lesson in the "art of narrative,"⁴⁶ it shows that fictional women characters and real-life male authors can more readily resist the worst aspects of Petrarchism if they de-mystify the religion of love openly and rationally with one another as a community. The hopelessly infatuated will mistake their inner psychomachia about love for rational investigation and succumb to unhealthy obsession. Salutary storytelling, from the Introduction's perspective, can expose the delights and follies of love and meet with everyone's approval: "Le donne parimente e gli uomini tutti lodarono il novellare" (*Dec.* I, Intro., 113). If a persistent dreamlike, surreal or Edenic quality hovers over the *brigata's* sojourn in the countryside, as Vittorio Russo claims,⁴⁷ it nevertheless furnishes an apt corrective to the Petrarchan speaker's fugues from socialization to a liminal, extra-urban wilderness. Earlier I quoted Petrarch's *RVF XXXV*, which shows that speaker so much in thrall to his emotions that, despite his search for total solitude, he does not know how to silence the personified Love who is always trying to induce him to forget that vital synonymy in Italian between talking and reasoning (*ragionare*): "ch'amor non venga sempre/ Ragionando con meco, et io co'llui" (13-14). The *Decameron's* Introduction confronts this unhealthy, ultimately anti-contemplative solitude by hinting that Petrarch should get out more often and *ragionare* in company, as the Boccaccian narrator himself has done.⁴⁸ No less arresting than the Proem's apparently rigid demarcation of gender boundaries, then, is the speed with which those boundaries blur in the Introduction. In showing at least fictional women enjoying liberty, the Introduction suggests more tellingly than the Proem does that real-life men, especially male poets in the throes of love, can do so as well.

If a reformist impetus lay behind the *Decameron*, it was one that sought not to increase the rights of women but to expand the possibilities

⁴⁶ On this way of regarding the *Decameron*, see Picone, *Boccaccio e la codificazione della novella*, 38 ("un'ars amandi che dissimula un'ars narrandi"); and Fido's polemical "L'ars narrandi di Boccaccio nella sesta giornata."

⁴⁷ Russo, *Preliminari allo studio di Giovanni Boccaccio*, 37-38.

⁴⁸ For a similar account of Boccaccio's message to Petrarch in *Epistola X*, see Houston, "Boccaccio at Play," S53 (citing Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993], 147-49). On *ragione* and social order, see Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 173; on *ragione* as "restraint," see Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 42. On the term's economic connotations, see Migiel, "Untidy Business," 227-33; Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 76.

of literary form.⁴⁹ Just as Boccaccio deployed older, authoritative texts as a way of expressing his own horror at the Plague,⁵⁰ so too does he narrate lively stories through a chorus of fictional voices rather than committing himself *in propria persona* to mobilizing aristocratic Florentine ladies to better their lot. According to Luigi Russo, Boccaccio, in his *Decameron* period, viewed women themselves as material embodiments of transcendent poesis, as “una metonimia per indicare le Muse stesse, che evadono del sopramondo della teologia e della filosofia e si fanno più concrete, muse di questo mondo[.]”⁵¹ These immanent Muses, however, have a two-way capacity as messengers: they bring inspiration to Boccaccio yet also carry a secular evangel from him to the wider world of *Trecento* Italian poetry, a world increasingly dominated by Petrarch’s ideas about love and love-objects. The *Decameron*’s Proem and Introduction, then, can be said to reach out to a wider audience than literal women alone. Their author may have believed that Italian was for women and Latin was for men,⁵² and he surely embraced Petrarchan humanism more fully late in his life. Nevertheless, the introductory matter to his *Centonovelle* implies some misgivings about the Petrarchan persona, and for this reason it may form an unexpectedly early chapter in the long reception-history of Petrarchism itself.

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⁴⁹ Reflecting an older outlook, di Pino extends Boccaccio’s anti-conformism beyond literature to social convention in general and from “ogni disumana accezione del ‘peccato’” in particular (*La polemica*, 220). Padoan persuasively focuses on Boccaccio’s literary innovations (*Il Boccaccio*, 103), as do Rossi (“Il paratesto decameroniano,” 42), Wallace (*Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron*, 17) and Migiel (“Untidy Business,” 231); Wallace and Migiel question whether Boccaccio was iconoclastic in any socio-political sense. According to Mazzotta, Boccaccio tacitly treated “the boundaries between the two,” i.e. “literature” and “social life,” as “forever blurred”: *World at Play*, 78.

⁵⁰ Noted by e.g. Moravia, “Boccaccio,” 104; Muscetta, *Giovanni Boccaccio*, 160; Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 13-46; Rossi, “Il paratesto decameroniano,” 42; Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio*, 27 and 175, n. 45, citing Branca, *Boccaccio medievale*, 301-07.

⁵¹ *Lecture critiche del Decameron*, 11.

⁵² A commonplace of Boccaccio criticism noted by e.g. Russo, *Lecture critiche del Decameron*, 11; Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular*, 78. For a refinement on this dichotomy, see Ginsberg, *Chaucer’s Italian Tradition*, 195-96, 248.

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