INTRODUCTION: DIALOGUES ON THE *DECAMERON*

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The seventh centenary of the birth of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), perhaps the most humorous and humble of the three crowns of Italian literature, occasioned numerous celebrations of his works and life throughout 2013, in the form of conferences, colloquia, exhibitions, and new publications. In April of 2012, in anticipation of this scholarly flowering of all things Boccaccio, Simone Marchesi of Princeton University inaugurated a colloquium on *Johannes tranquillitatis*' vernacular masterpiece, the *Decameron*.

Singular in its focus on one Boccaccian text, but pluralistic in its diversity of approaches, the conference at the heart of this collection brought together scholars whose recent work had made a significant contribution to Boccaccio studies, as well as up-and-coming scholars of Giovanni Boccaccio and the *Trecento*. The colloquium was organized broadly around five topical triads, that is, interpretive categories of three key terms composed of a set of diametrical opposites with a third, mediating term that served to bridge the conceptual schism between the opposing terms. The organizing triads were the natural-supernatural-artistic (artificial); the domestic-foreign-hybrid (mobile); the ancient-modern-eternal (stable); the comic-tragic-ironic (serious); and the diegetic-mimetic-lyrical (argumentative). Although guided by these categories, the presentations quickly went beyond this structure, evolving into a more complex—and richer—product.

It was precisely this variety and openness of approaches that enriched our discussions of the *Decameron*, staving off any methodological myopia or intractability. To be sure, one of the common threads in these talks, although not originally designed as such, was the notion of the *Decameron*'s diversity, its multiplicity within a single work, particularly as reflected in language. As Martin Eisner puts in his contribution, “part of Boccaccio’s singularity is this very multiplicity, in the ways that his defenses of poetry cut across linguistic and generic boundaries.” Indeed, all of the essays in this collection address the multiplicity of Boccaccio’s language and his *Decameron*: in the contribution of Susanna Barsella, it is with respect to realism; for Katherine A. Brown, it is in relation to the physical world; for Roberta Morosini, it is with respect to genre; for Timothy Kircher and Simone Marchesi, it is with respect to time; for Tobias Foster Gittes, it is in relation to

medicine and salvation; and finally for Martin Eisner, it is within the history of Boccaccio criticism.

Both the essays themselves and their interrelationships shed new light on Boccaccio's masterpiece. Just as the *Decameron* offers its careful readers continued pleasure in discovering new links among the 100 *novelle* as well as among the different narrative layers—the narrative “frames,” as Joyce H. Potter calls them—so, too, is this collection rich in conceptual ties that seamlessly interconnect these novel contributions.

The seeds planted during these “Dialogues on the *Decameron*” ultimately resulted in the collection of essays that follows, although not without undergoing some further cultivation inspired both by the discussions during the colloquium itself, and by other academic events of the following year that helped illuminate Boccaccio's *œuvre*. As Kircher observes in his essay on the phenomenology of the *Decameron*, “readers may respond differently to the *Decameron* as it progresses in its sequence, and as they, too, alter their views on life and eros over time.” Over the course of time, the authors have modified their view of Boccaccio's work, and consequently this series of essays has developed into a cohesive and complementary set of narratives that, unlike most of the other volumes engendered from the 7th centenary celebrations, is focused on what we may call the singular multiplicity of the *Decameron*.

The order of the essays in this collection is thus intended to illustrate a variety of approaches to Boccaccio's *Decameron* while still highlighting shared interpretive strategies. The first two essays demonstrate the methodological variety of this collection through their different, though complementary, readings of the first novella of the *Decameron*. Susanna Barsella's inaugural essay, “The Merchant and the Sacred: Artifice and Realism in *Decameron* I.1,” addresses the problematic relationship between Boccaccio's poetics of realism and his representation of the religious sacred in the *Decameron* by focusing on the opening tale, which features the sanctification of the usurer Ser Cepparello da Prato. Her essay shows that, distinct from magic, marvel, and fantasy, Christian imagery emerges in the *Decameron* as a space where a new sense of the sacred is articulated. In the staging and the mystery of his miracles, Boccaccio questions the possibility of inferring divine truths from the signs human judgment is called to interpret. The ambiguity and opacity of the sign leads us to reflect on what causes such ambiguity, namely the moral issues related to the mercantile world and the inefficacy of religious teaching in addressing them.

If Barsella orients her reading of *Decameron* I.1 within a mercantile mode, the following essay by Katherine A. Brown, “Confession and Social Space in the *Decameron*,” concentrates on the intersections of the sacred and the profane as manipulated by the trickster. In this essay, the author examines three tales, including the first one, about confession in the *Decameron*, which is always used as a vehicle for tricks or *beffe*. Positing that the words of a confession create a liminal space in and of storytelling that allows for personal and social transformations, this essay hints at the instability of language as a system of absolute meaning and exchange in the *Decameron* and in the world.

The focus on geographical space continues in the next contribution, authored by Roberta Morosini. In “What a Difference a Sea Makes in the *Decameron*: The Mediterranean, a Structural Space of the Novella,” Morosini shows how the Mediterranean is a structural space in and of the novella and consequently of the *Decameron*. Specifically, her essay examines different cases of women travelling in the *Decameron* and the paralysis and diaspora of female identity in the hybrid space of the Mediterranean, which the author argues is always a foreign space of immobilization and danger for women. Morosini posits that this hybridity of the Mediterranean is intimately tied to the hybridity of the novella form.

For Timothy Kircher, we shift from space to time and a phenomenological approach to the *Decameron*. Kircher’s essay, “Eros and Evanescence in the *Decameron*: The Weave of Love, Time, and Memory,” explores Boccaccio’s understanding of time and love as phenomena. He posits that in the authorial interventions of the *Proemio*, the Introduction to Day 4, and the Conclusion, Boccaccio identifies sexual desire as a guiding impulse for his story-telling. Eros, the author posits, is the main theme of both the comic and tragic *novelle*, which are designed to alleviate the depression suffered by women in love. But since Boccaccio notes the stories will aid in the *passamento di noia*, the transience of distress, Kircher’s study looks at the way Boccaccio links his narration not only to emotional volatility but, more fundamentally, to the temporal, mortal nature of human existence. These interventions suggest that language for Boccaccio can disguise or unveil the existential condition; his work’s earnest linguistic play with time is a fundamental mode of its irony. Kircher’s inquiry therefore opens a way to a new understanding of the relation between appearance and reality, seeming and being, in Boccaccio’s work.

The conflation of seeming and being, and the all-too-serious ramifications of any mistakes between these two, are the subject of Tobias Foster Gittes’s essay

“‘Forgers of Falsehood, Physicians of Nought’: Retailing Fictions in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.” Gittes explores the medical dimension of the Proem and of the work as a whole in his essay. Moving from the same essential hermeneutic question posed by the opacity of the signs that the plague inscribed on the bodies of its victims, the author confronts the redeployment of narrative and symbolic material associated with the medical profession in *Decameron* IX.3 and VIII.9. In both cases, the narrative displaces the cultural role of the doctor onto painters and makes of medicine the object of a biting satire. In these stories, Boccaccio’s professed medicinal goal for the *Decameron* is defined as much in his refusal to trust the unquestioning inferences and diagnostic procedures of doctors as in his evocation of painting as the art that, by creating a system of signs and imbuing them with meaning, creates a self-effacing but ultimately salvific fiction.

From a medicinally and emotionally salvific fiction to a metaphysically and critically salvific one, Simone Marchesi’s essay, “Fiction with Fiction: Confessing to Dante in *Decameron* I.1,” addresses a previously undiscussed element of *Decameron* I.1: the curious order in which the holy friar questions Ciappelletto in his confession. Marchesi relates this order to the larger dialogue that Boccaccio establishes with Dante’s *Commedia* in the initial phases of his work. By avoiding the canonical models of confessing penitents (according to the Decalogue, the seven deadly sins, or the circumstances), the confession proceedings in the first novella evoke most distinctively and idiosyncratically the order of sins in Dante’s hell, thus involving Dante’s fictional text about the Christian afterlife in the fiction-making of the new earthly text and its author, story-tellers, and protagonists. Ending with an appeal to phenomenology, particularly in its insistence that the *Decameron* “has been created in time, through a writing process entailing chronological stratification,” Marchesi’s essay serves a dual function of looking back to the previous contributions and forward to the final essay.

Martin Eisner’s essay, “A Singular Boccaccio: Defending Poetry from the Author’s Conclusion of the *Decameron* to *Genealogie* 14,” addresses the *Decameron* within a broader picture of Boccaccio studies, showing Boccaccio’s poetic stability over time. For Eisner, Boccaccio studies have long made a distinction between the author of the vernacular story collection addressed to women, the *Decameron*, and the mature scholar who has undergone a spiritual conversion and later in life composes works for a male audience in Latin, particularly the *Genealogie*. These binaries of vernacular/Latin and love/scholarship, Eisner argues, can distort interpretations of Boccaccio’s works by establishing an almost impermeability between

them. The power of this separation is particularly evident for the relationship between the *Decameron* and the *Genealogies of the Gentile Gods*. The author advances that the *Decameron* not only fits the literary theory of the *Genealogie* but also informs the matrix of ideas and images that Boccaccio develops most fully in the *Genealogie*. The similarities that Eisner illustrates among these texts suggest that part of Boccaccio's singularity is the very multiplicity of his work, in the ways that his defenses of poetry cut across linguistic and generic boundaries. Indeed, the thread of the multiplicity of Boccaccio's work is woven throughout this collection of essays.

Finally, I would like to thank Luca Somigli and the reviewers who helped shape this collection. I would also like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Simone Marchesi for organizing the conference that brought these essays together and for all of his helpful insights and suggestions on early versions of the articles that have come together to form these Dialogues on the *Decameron*.

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