“FORGERS OF FALSEHOOD, PHYSICIANS OF NOUGHT”: RETAILING FICTIONS IN BOCCACCIO’S *DECAMERON*

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Abstract. Whereas Petrarch’s portrait of his doctor in *Invectives Against a Physician* is deliberately caricatural and seized at a glance, Boccaccio’s attitude towards doctors in the *Decameron* is far harder to grasp and easily overlooked. Yet, doctors and medical science are a central concern of the *Decameron*, whose first significant action (the *brigata*’s movement from the plague-afflicted city to the countryside) and activity (storytelling) are predicated on the Florentine doctors’ failure to find a remedy for the plague. Throughout the *Decameron*, the doctors’ glaring incapacity to help their patients is implicitly contrasted with the poets’ success in offering some measure of solace—if not a definitive cure—to those afflicted by the plague. The conventional view that poets retail fictions, and doctors, real cures, is repeatedly cast into doubt as Boccaccio reveals that all too often the real difference between doctors and poets is that doctors hawk medical fictions (their arsenal of exotic powders and decoctions) as true cures, whereas poets cloak true cures in poetic fictions. Medical fictions sicken the healthy and kill the sick; poetic fictions quicken the spirit and promote life. This counterpoising of doctors and poets (or painters), medicine and fiction in the *Decameron* both anticipates and contributes to Boccaccio’s lifelong defense of poetry that culminates in the 14th and 15th books of the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*.

The first documentary evidence of the Italian vernacular, as students of the origins of the Italian language know only too well, takes the form of a riddle, one, fittingly enough, concerned with questions of textuality: “separeba boues alba pratalia araba & albo uersorio teneba & nero semen seminaba” (“with the oxen before him, he was plowing white fields, and holding a white plow, and sowing black seed”; Migliorini 64). This brief but highly evocative eighth-century, or perhaps early-ninth-century, riddle uses an agricultural image as a metaphor for writing; the sowing of black seed in a white field is likened to the tracing of black

characters on a white sheet of parchment. The first pages of the *Decameron*, a text often credited with fathering Italian prose, present the reader with a similar riddle, an indecipherable pattern of black or bluish blotches of varying sizes inscribed on the living parchment of human skin: “macchie nere o livide, le quali nelle braccia e per le cosce e in ciascuna altra parte del corpo apparivano a molti, a cui grandi e rade e a cui minute e spesse” (“many discovered black or bluish blotches on their arms, along their thighs, and on all other parts of their bodies, in some large and wide-scattered, in others small and closely clustered”; I.Intro.11–12).¹

Whereas the Veronese riddle was solved with relative ease, this more enigmatic text, the one written by the Plague of 1348 on the bodies of the afflicted, successfully defied all attempts to unlock its hidden meanings. Giuseppe Mazzotta has aptly described it as “an ominous text, with its signs proliferating, shifting and only decipherable as presages of death” (30). Boccaccio tells us that those entrusted with reading this somatic language of medical symptoms, the physicians, proved unequal to the task. Nor, indeed, is this simply an indictment of contemporary medical practice or proficiency, for shortly afterwards Boccaccio observes that the greatest doctors of the ancient world—Galen, Hippocrates, and Aesculapius—would have judged healthy numerous men and women who, having breakfasted with family and friends, were destined to dine with their ancestors (I.Intro.48). By invoking this roster of ancient doctors in the description of a contemporary epidemic, Boccaccio universalizes the problem—the failure of the greatest intellects of any age to successfully grapple with the plague—while at the same time associating it with a particular discipline: medicine. Though readers have long recognized that the *Decameron* Introduction dramatizes the futility of human *ingegno* when confronted by the virulent Plague of 1348, it should be noted that while this failure may implicate all varieties of human intelligence, it bears most directly on that of the physicians, whose collective effort has done little to contain the epidemic, let alone to cure it.²

Whereas the evolution of linguistic systems is generally quite gradual and, to a certain degree, predictable, the symptomology of the plague evolves, we are told, so rapidly and erratically that the usual diagnostic procedures—based, as they are,

¹ Quotations from the *Decameron* are from Branca (*Decameron. Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

² For a compelling treatment of this failure of *ingegno* and its consequences, see Barolini.

on precedent—prove useless.³ The same disease announced by a nosebleed in the Orient first takes the form of tumours (*gavoccioli*) and, later, of “macchie nere o livide” (“black or bluish blotches”) as the plague progresses to the West; three-dimensional, tangible symptoms are gradually replaced by two-dimensional, textual signs inscribed on the body. Since this new text signifies the death of the afflicted individual as clearly as an order of execution, what eludes the doctors’ understanding is not the identity of the disease, nor its inevitable outcome, but its origin and the precise mechanism of its lethal effect on the human body. Boccaccio allows that while the insidious quality of the disease might alone account for the failure to successfully treat it, the ignorance of the doctors (whose ranks, moreover, were swelled by untrained profiteers) was as likely a cause, since, unable to establish the etiology of the disease (“non conoscesse da che si movesse,” I.Intro.13), they could not prescribe an appropriate remedy (“per conseguente debito argomento non vi prendesse,” I.Intro.13). This observation reminds us that medical symptoms are not causes, but effects, and that therapeutic failures are often due to doctors’ inability to accurately trace the origins of a given condition or due to an inclination to mistake effects for causes (or secondary, for primary causes). Confronted with the text of livid blotches, doctors can only predict a death, not produce a cure. In short, the failure of medicine is essentially cast as a failure to correctly read and interpret a text written in a language of clinical signs. By characterizing the failure of *ingegno* to find a remedy for the plague as one related to poor reading skills, Boccaccio reminds us that, from the medieval perspective, the phenomenal world is itself a text written by God—Dante’s “volume [...] che per l’universo si squaderna” (“volume [...] that is scattered through the universe”; *Par.* XXXIII.86–87)—and that, in the spiritual sphere, each individual’s interpretation of this text has consequences no less important than those of the text written by disease in an individual’s flesh.

Given the protean, entirely unpredictable nature of the disease, it may seem unreasonable for Boccaccio to blame the physicians for their failure to find a cure. Indeed, Boccaccio does not issue a blanket indictment of doctors. Those doctors who earn Boccaccio’s contempt do so not because of their failure to find a remedy but because of their arrogance: they tend to cast themselves as so many Oedipus-like solvers of enigmas rather than having the humility to acknowledge their limitations. Confronted by God’s inscrutability, Job modestly covers his mouth with

³ Mazzotta briefly notes the instability of the symptoms which signal the Plague; see Mazzotta 20.

his hand. Quite different are those doctors whose ignorance, emboldened by arrogance, ratified by medical degrees, and disguised by dignified robes, has a tongue ever ready to make specious diagnoses and a hand only too eager to write useless prescriptions.⁴ Job's caustic description of his fair-weather friends perfectly suits such doctors as these, "forgers of falsehood, physicians of nought" (Job 13.4).⁵

In his *Invective contra medicum* (*Invectives Against a Physician*), Petrarch comments on the extraordinary presumption of physicians, who, because they have expertise in one field, imagine that they master all others as well (par. 31). Their actual expertise—gleaned, according to Petrarch, by a life spent poking about the latrines of popes and paupers—is that of interpreting (with no apparent success) the evidence of excreta; enterology is elided with epistemology in this hermeneutics of human waste. In his most vitriolic evaluation of the doctor's poor analytical skills, his incompetence to correctly infer causes from effects, Petrarch observes that the doctor has misread his own pallid complexion, indeed, his own person, whose "color, smell and taste come from the stuff to which [he] is exposed—shit" (par. 100).⁶

In these same invectives, Petrarch recounts that Socrates, upon learning that a certain painter had become a physician, praised him for showing the wisdom to desert an art whose defects are exposed and embrace one whose errors are hidden by the earth. In Petrarch's invectives, as in other satirical treatments of doctors, death is cast as the doctor's most obliging accomplice, always ready to hide evidence of malpractice in the tomb, thereby allowing doctors to retail their medical fictions with impunity and at whatever price they wish.⁷

⁴ Mazzotta observes that whereas tradition had long viewed medicine as a "silent art," "Boccaccio, by contrast, evokes precisely the loquaciousness, acknowledgedly ineffectual, of the physicians" (34).

⁵ Note, however, that Boccaccio would have read "fabricatores mendacii et cultores perversorum dogmatum" ("forgers of lies and fosterers of perverse opinions") in Jerome's Vulgate, a translation that does not, like the original Hebrew Scripture or the King James translation, explicitly link physicians with falsehood. For Jerome's Latin text, see Weber, Fischer, et al.

⁶ Citations of Petrarch's *Invectives Against a Physician* are from David Marsh's translation.

⁷ In novella XLVII of *Il trecentonovelle*, a tale that neatly combines misogyny with mistrust of doctors, Franco Sacchetti presents the mortally ill protagonist, Iacopo, as uncertain about whether to ascribe his imminent death to his wife of 43 years or his doctors, the celebrated Giovan dal Tasso and Tommaso del Garbo; he is therefore hard-put to decide which of the two, his wife or his doctors, has a stronger claim to his estate!

Petrarch’s use of this example, one that compares painters to doctors, draws attention to a motif that assumes a central importance not only in Petrarch’s *Invectives Against a Physician*, but also in Boccaccio’s treatment of doctors in the *Decameron*: doctors, like painters, are professional illusionists. If this comparison of doctors to painters allows Petrarch to insinuate the dishonest nature of medical practice, the comparison of doctors to poets that follows shortly afterwards is far blunter in its criticism. The difference, Petrarch tells us, between the fictions of poets and those of doctors is that the former are a medium for conveying the truth through figurative language, whereas the latter are simply bold-faced lies (*pars.* 36–37).

If the doctors have encroached on the territory of poets and painters by hawking their fictions for gold, Boccaccio has trespassed on the doctors’ turf by dwelling on the medicinal qualities of his text—one, after all, that is presented explicitly as a remedy for love-sickness and implicitly as an antidote to the plague. Among the many traits that distinguish Boccaccio’s therapeutic approach from that of the doctors is his refusal to subscribe to such medical practices as the drawing of inferences based on precedent and the issuing of prescriptions. His rejection of precedent as an accurate basis for making judgments is—though in the moral, rather than the medical, field—clearly illustrated in the first tale of the *Decameron*, where, if precedent alone sufficed to form an accurate judgment, readers would be justified in concluding that Ser Cepparello’s life-long history of depravity had infallibly earned him a place in hell: “nelle mani del diavolo in perdizione” (“in the hands of the devil, in perdition”; I.1.89). However, Boccaccio goes out of his way to show that, bound by the epistemological limits of our human nature and temporal context, we are not in a position to make categorical judgments of this sort. Though appearances are all against it, we cannot, as Panfilo observes in the conclusion of his tale, exclude the possibility that Cepparello turned to God in his final moments and found a place among the blessed. By the same token, prescriptions are slippery terrain, for, as Boccaccio makes clear, what is good for the goose is not necessarily good for the gander. The success of both moral and medical prescriptions depends on the fundamental sameness of human beings; Boccaccio’s study of human nature consistently underscores difference. Like Dante, for whom temporal difference finds its origin in the prism-like quality of the eighth heaven where the undifferentiated essence of the *primum mobile* is first refracted (*Par.* II.112–117), Boccaccio clearly sees the temporal realm as regulated by a pattern of graded difference, a principle of “più e meno” (“more and less”; *Par.* I.3) that

opens the way for comparison but forestalls assumptions based on the illusion of a more essential identity.⁸

How, then, is Boccaccio's text able to fulfill its medicinal function? Boccaccio's Fiammetta proposes that the therapeutic value of stories, their success in alleviating her love agonies, at times stems from their success in eclipsing her reality through escapist fantasies that have no bearing on her lived experience, and at other times from their ability to furnish her with examples of others' sufferings to which she can compare her own, thus comforting herself with the thought that she is not alone in her suffering:

[...] alcuna volta, se altro a fare non mi occorreva, ragunate le mie fante con meco nella mia camera, e raccontava e faceva raccontare storie diverse, le quali quanto più erano di lungi dal vero, come il più così fatte genti le dicono, cotanto pareva ch' avessero maggiore forza a cacciare i sospiri e a recare festa a me ascoltante; la quale alcuna volta, con tutta la malinconia, di quelle lietissimamente risi. E se questo forse per cagione legittima non poteva essere, in libri diversi ricercando le altrui miserie, e quelle alle mie conformando, quasi accompagnata sentendomi, con meno noia il tempo passava. (*Fiammetta* III.11)

[...] at times, if I could think of nothing else to do, I would gather all my maids together in my room and tell, and have them tell, all sorts of tales, which, when they wandered further from the truth—as people of this sort are apt to tell them—gained greater force, it seemed, to chase away my sighs and bring me, listening, pleasure; for I at times, for all my sorrow, was moved to merriest laughter by these tales. And if, by chance, diversion of this sort were not, for some good reason, to be had, by seeking out in various books the miseries of others and fitting their misfortunes to my own, as though companioned in my grief I passed the time less sorrowfully.

⁸ Boccaccio would have found a similar emphasis on natural difference expressed by Seneca: "among the other reasons for marvelling at the genius of the Divine Creator is, I believe, this—that amid all this abundance there is no repetition; even seemingly similar things are, on comparison, unlike" (Epistle 113.16).

The storytelling in the *Decameron* clearly assumes a similar palliative function. Montaigne concludes his essay “De la force de l’imagination” (“On the Power of the Imagination”) with the gnomic observation: “Il n’est pas dangereux, comme en une drogue medicinale, en un compte ancien, qu’il soit ainsin ou ainsi” (*Essais* I.21; “In an ancient tale it is not dangerous, as it is in a medicinal drug, if it be so or so,” 105). Whereas the faulty prescription or composition of a medicinal drug can have mortal consequences, narrative prescriptions in the form of ancient tales are relatively anodyne; if, according to Montaigne, they do not precisely answer the reader’s needs, at least they are unlikely to do any real harm. In the author’s Conclusion of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio, as has frequently been observed, goes even further in the ethical absolution of narrative. Responsibility for the effect of the tales is transferred to readers, whose interpretative approach, conditioned by their characters, will ultimately determine the tales’ effect, for *novelle* “chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono, sì come possono tutte l’altre cose, avendo riguardo all’ascoltatore” (“whatever their nature, can hurt or heal, just like all other things, depending upon the listener”; 8). Moreover, in contrast to the mysterious compounds and distillations of doctors, Boccaccio’s fictions treat not the symptoms but their underlying causes. While this is particularly true of sicknesses—like *amor hereos*—with a psychological cause, it is no less true of that other morbidity from which none of us escapes: death.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates observes that he is less concerned that others should believe his arguments in support of the immortality of the soul than that he himself should believe them, for by such arguments he shores up his courage and spares his friends the distress of his lamentations (91B); the value of these arguments does not consist in their accuracy but in their effect. Boccaccio’s fictions might be said to have an essentially Socratic character in that they, too, are designed to galvanize the most ennobling human traits—compassion, intellect, liberality, and so forth—and a Socratic modesty in that they, too, neither make categorical claims nor pretend to convey transcendent truths. In short, poetic fictions are most valuable because they have the quality—or at least the capacity—of promoting life and elevating the spirit. Whether or not they are true in the historical sense is a far less important criterion for judging their worth than the nature of their effect on their audience. What, then, of medical fictions?

A brief tale from the *Gesta Romanorum* succinctly illustrates the fundamental difference between poetic and medical fictions. In tale 132, “Of Envy Toward the Good,” we read that the youngest, and most gifted, of four doctors has diverted

all the local patients to his practice and inspired such envy in his three older colleagues that they are driven to destroy him. As they ponder the question of how best to achieve this end, one of the three comes up with a plan:

“Why [...] you know he goes every week on a visit to the duke, about three leagues off, and he will pay a visit there to-morrow. Now, I will go a league beyond the city, and there await his coming. You shall be stationed at the second league, and our fellow here at the third. And when he has advanced the first league, I will meet him and make the sign of the cross before him. Both of you must do the like. He will then ask the reason of this, and we will answer, ‘Because you are a leper;’ and his fear will certainly occasion it; ‘for,’ says Hippocrates, ‘he who fears leprosy will through fear become a leper.’ Thus diseased, no one will approach him.” And so it was done. (236–237)

Readers familiar with the Calandrino cycle of the *Decameron* will undoubtedly have noticed the striking parallels between this tale and the novella of Calandrino’s pregnancy (IX.3). That this tale in the *Gesta Romanorum* has not been identified as a source or analogue for Boccaccio’s novella is, no doubt, because attempts to trace a source tend to focus on the motif of a male pregnancy, rather than consider the more general story pattern. For the three doctors of the *Gesta Romanorum* tale, Boccaccio substitutes three painters—Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Nello—and the deception is fuelled not by professional envy but by the prospect of finagling a free meal and the desire to gently chasten Calandrino for his avarice. Most importantly, whereas the doctors’ cruel conspiracy is designed to afflict the young physician with a mortal disease, the painters’ more benign scheme does not, like that of the doctors, hinge on a positive diagnosis aimed at securing a particular outcome. Rather, as Simone Marchesi has pointed out, it adopts a maieutic procedure, which, through its very indeterminacy, induces Calandrino to reveal his secret anxiety that his wife’s sexual habits—her desire to be on top—could result in his pregnancy (Marchesi 112–113).⁹ Moreover, the painters show notable restraint in their exploitation of the credulous Calandrino, for while they easily could have bilked him of the full two hundred *lire* that he had recently inherited from his aunt (Calandrino readily volunteers the full sum in his desperation to be cured of his pregnancy), they demand only five *lire* and three brace of capons. Their real

⁹ See also Gittes 397–398.

payment, of course, consists in the pleasure of the deception—i.e., the practice of their art in the living medium of human individuals—and in the satisfaction, underscored in the tale’s concluding words, they have received in exercising their ingenuity to chastise Calandrino’s avarice: “e Bruno e Buffalmacco e Nello rimaser contenti d’aver con ingegni saputa schernire l’avarizia di Calandrino” (“and Bruno and Buffalmacco and Nello were quite content that they had found a way to get round Calandrino’s avarice with their wits”; IX.3.33). These relatively harmless ambitions contrast starkly with those of the three doctors, whose sole concern is to destroy the young colleague whose medical skill has clouded their reputations and diverted money from their pocketbooks. Moreover, the deception cooked up to achieve this end, the insinuation that the young doctor is suffering from leprosy, is neither playful nor ingenious but out-and-out vicious. If, like the Socratic arguments for the immortality of the soul, the poetic fiction elevates the spirit and promotes ethical behaviour, the medical fiction too often has the opposite effect: that of smothering the human spirit and rewarding unethical actions.

The fullest, and most nuanced, treatment of this contrast between artistic and medical fictions is found in *Decameron* VIII.9, the hilarious novella of Maestro Simone’s aborted bid to join Bruno and Buffalmacco’s magical brigade of pleasure-seekers. Mario Baratto sees the comic effect of this tale as proceeding not from the characters but from the dialogue, “nel ritmo delle cadenze e risposonde del discorso” (“in the rhythm of the cadences and correspondences of the discourse”); indeed, he sees the whole of the novella as a “commedia di linguaggio” (319). While this is certainly true, I would argue that the comic effect has another, no less important source: the tale’s parodic recapitulation, in a context of quotidian particularities, of the tragic, universal themes that dominate the *Decameron* Introduction. Certainly, the pleasure associated with comedy is often due to its success in defusing the anxiety, alienation, and sense of helplessness produced by circumstances over which we have no control; Dante’s *Commedia* is comedic not simply because it begins in hell and ends in paradise, but because it encourages us to believe that, however little control we exert over our temporal circumstances, we are able to determine our metaphysical destiny through the proper exercise of our free will.

The universalizing impetus of the *Decameron* Introduction underscores the tragic pathos of the plague, the unknowability of its causes, the depressing certainty of its effects, and the utter uselessness of medical practice in stemming its devastation. Boccaccio’s allusion to the celebrated physicians Galen, Hippocrates,

and Aesculapius, whom historical distance has stripped of particularity and rendered emblematic of medicine's greatest achievements, heightens this sense of abstraction, and the allegation that even they would have failed to accurately diagnose plague victims—at least in the prodromal stage of their illness—situates the failure to combat the plague in a universal, timeless frame. It is, therefore, significant that when these themes are reprised in VIII.9, they have been given a distinctly historical cast, and such metaphysical concerns as death, vice, and divine justice have been systematically converted into their physical analogues. Death is recast as a tumble into human excrement; vice no longer takes such radical forms as abject egotism and abandonment of family, but the more venial, and far less alienating, forms of professional vanity and adultery; and divine justice takes the form of a temporal eschatology, where punishments are meted out by the roguish painters Bruno and Buffalmacco. Even the “macchie livide” (“bluish blotches”) of the Introduction, telltale signs of impending death, are replaced here with an illusionistic and harmless analogue: the painted bruises, “lividori” (VIII.9.104), with which Bruno and Buffalmacco cover their bodies to clinch their falsehood with empiric “proof.” Tellingly, when the names of illustrious doctors are invoked in this novella, they are given a grotesquely distorted form, one that, by stripping them of sublimity, defuses their power to evoke tragic associations: in Bruno’s humorous deformation, Ipocrasso (Hippocrates) and Avicenna become “Porcograsso and Vannaccena” (VIII.9.37). Moreover, the absence of Aesculapius and Galen, and linking of an ancient with a medieval, that is, Hippocrates with Avicenna, reflects the tale’s comedic movement from the universal to the particular, from Hippocrates’ Cos to Maestro Simone’s *cloaca*.

The overarching movement from the metaphysical and universal concerns of the introduction to purely physical and local concerns is indicated not only by the emphatically historical texture of the tale—so well grounded in circumstantial detail that many critics never thought to doubt its historicity¹⁰—but also by its ingenious substitution of the metaphysics of artists for that of theologians. Though both Lucifer and God the Father make cameo appearances in this tale, their participation, significantly, does not take the form of a theophany, but of a painting: the Lucifero da San Gallo (VIII.9.15), an enormous fresco of Lucifer once found on the façade of the Hospital of San Gallo, and the Dio da Passignano (VIII.9.62), an equally impressive fresco that once graced the façade of the eleventh-century

¹⁰ For a thorough re-appraisal of the alleged historicity of the events recounted in this tale, see Kirkham.

abbey of Passignano.¹¹ While these representations of God and Devil may point to a metaphysical reality, they are themselves purely material, a pigmented film of slaked lime, which, to recall the crude analogy made by Calandrino in an earlier tale (VIII.3.29), human artists have smeared across the wall in the manner of mucus-trailing snails. Bruno’s claim that he fears the painted Lucifer—whose gaping maw, he tells Maestro Simone, would devour him were he to reveal his secret knowledge (VIII.9.15)—is as false and foundationless as the vow he takes on the painted God of Passignano (VIII.9.62); only an idolater could imagine that painted devils have any purchase on the human soul, or that painted gods can offer guarantees. Indeed, Maestro Simone’s readiness to believe Bruno’s and Buffalmacco’s fictions is a form of idolatry, a mistaking of the created for the creator, of effects for causes, of signs for their referents.

To resolve the nature of Calandrino’s illness in IX.3, Bruno advises Calandrino to send a urine sample to Maestro Simone. The terms used to refer to this sample range from *segnal* (par. 15), to *segnale* (par. 17), to *segno* (par. 19), an orthographic instability that is, perhaps, designed to underscore the insidious, ever-shifting nature of the signs (i.e., symptoms) upon which we rely for medical diagnoses. What is certainly true is that, in contrast to the painters Bruno and Buffalmacco, Maestro Simone is revealed to be an egregiously bad reader of signs, incapable of penetrating beyond the literal level—a defect advertised by all his judgments, but most glaringly exposed in his failure to distinguish the painted *lividori* (VIII.9.104) from real bruises.¹² For Maestro Simone, a diploma from Bologna is as certain a proof of his medical competence as his fur-trimmed scarlet robe is a sign of his professional dignity. Applying a similarly literal and materialistic logic, Maestro Simone has concluded that since happiness is a function of financial liquidity, and Bruno and Buffalmacco can hardly scrape by on the income from their art, their notable brio and nonchalance must be nourished by some secret source of revenue. In his bid to be accepted by Bruno and Buffalmacco’s imaginary *brigata*, he proudly advertises his social ease and wit, noting that, during his years at the university of Bologna, he could hardly say a word that did not provoke laughter—oblivious to the fact that it was his simplicity, rather than his wit, that had inspired this response.

¹¹ Concerning the historical existence of this fresco, see Gilbert, 54–56, and 746n8 in Branca, IV, 1446–1447.

¹² Paul F. Watson notes that Maestro Simone’s failure to distinguish real from painted bruises “says much about the doctor as diagnostician” (56).

If Maestro Simone's hermeneutic incompetence were accompanied by a suitable modesty, Bruno's decision to dupe him would be, like bearbaiting, a form of gratuitous cruelty. However, Maestro Simone shows such arrogant confidence in his skill as a diagnostician that he amply confirms Petrarch's contention that doctors' (supposed) expertise in the field of medicine has stoked their illusion of competence in all other fields of human endeavour.

Our first view of Maestro Simone, fresh from his medical training in Bologna, shows him honing his diagnostic skills by soliciting, and storing in his mind, information about each passerby, "quasi degli atti degli uomini dovesse le medicine che dar doveva a' suoi infermi comporre" ("as though from these men's acts he could compose the medicine best suited for his patients"; VIII.9.6). Maestro Simone's absurd belief that the study of people's activities and occupations, in the abstract, can somehow guide his efforts to prescribe medicine for particular patients suggests that he has no real concept of how things are connected to one another—how effect stems from cause, conclusion from premise, or act from motive. Since he clearly has no sense of consequence, it is certain that he has no means of grasping the narrative quality of a disease and its etiology, evolution, and end.

Medical history, or anamnesis, is among the most powerful diagnostic tools available to doctors, and its usefulness lies in its ability to weave a coherent narrative from a patient's description of symptoms. In *Decameron* VI.1, we are told of a knight whose poor storytelling skills provoke such intense heart palpitations and cold sweats in Madonna Oretta, his audience, that she seems to be mortally ill and about to expire: "come se, inferma, fosse stata per terminare" (VI.1.9). If a poorly told tale can so easily produce a semblance of deadly sickness in a healthy person, a poorly understood medical history is certain to have even more devastating consequences for the ailing patient.

The two main criteria for a well-executed medical history are that it should form a coherent narrative from an apparently arbitrary series of symptoms, and that in shaping this narrative, it should be sensitive to the particular character and circumstances of the patient. Cynically indifferent to the true state of their young colleague's health, the envious doctors of the *Gesta Romanorum* tale travesty the medical anamnesis by treating their colleague as a blank screen upon which to project their own specious narrative, thus creating, rather than curing, a disease. Though Maestro Simone is not, like the doctors of the *Gesta Romanorum*, afflicted with professional envy, his diagnostic skill is as compromised, in its way, by a

different vice: vanity. Whereas the gifted physician reads a coherent narrative in the signs, or *segnali*, of human excreta, it is clear that even if Maestro Simone were to be thrown head first into a pool of human excrement—as, indeed, he is—he would learn nothing from the experience: the open sewer is a closed book to Maestro Simone who, we are led to believe, never has the slightest inkling that he has been duped.¹³ The painters, by contrast, exercising the same skill that allows them to accurately capture the essence of things in their painted representations, have so successfully sized up Maestro Simone’s character that they are able to predict, with near-perfect accuracy, how he will respond in any given circumstance. Hence, through an ingenious manipulation of circumstance—the staging of a diabolic masque to induct Maestro Simone into the *brigata*—they are able to control his every action. For instance, they know with absolute certainty that Maestro Simone will not be able to keep the single condition demanded of him, that is, that he must under no circumstances make an appeal to God or the saints (VIII.9.82).

The brilliance of Bruno and Buffalmacco’s prank consists, on the one hand, in its application of a Dantean system of retributive justice—one whose very essence lies in the perfect correspondence of the punishment to the individual punished—and, on the other, in its allegorical transformation of the *materia prima* of medical diagnosis—urine and excrement—into a sustained narrative: an excremental allegory. As noted above, Boccaccio casts his painters as justiciars, granting them a function analogous to that of Dante’s Fortune: they are temporal ministers of retributive justice whose illusionistic skills are used for the purpose of revealing, and gently punishing, such vicious tendencies as pride and avarice. Their success in fulfilling this function derives from their consummate skill in reading human character. Moreover, like Dante’s Minos, they are connoisseurs of human sin, able to size up an individual’s moral complexion and susceptibility to vice almost at a glance. A scant few moments with Maestro Simone (“in poche di volte che con lui stato era”) suffice for Bruno to conclude, with perfect accuracy, that Maestro Simone is “uno animale” (“an animal”; VIII.9.10). It is fully consistent with this underlying principle of *contrappasso* that Maestro Simone, for whom the chamber pot is as mute as a bedpost and relays no story whatsoever, should be gulled by a narrative shaped from personified excrement. Once Bruno

¹³ Maestro Simone’s apparent immunity to disillusionment, the remarkably durable form of his credulity, is a trait that he shares with numerous other Boccaccian dupes. For a thought-provoking discussion of the implications of this failure to be disabused, see Marcus’s chapter 5.

and Buffalmacco have modelled the stuff of human latrines into forms that reflect Maestro Simone's prurient desires, they are able to lead him by the nose. The same doctor who proves himself incapable of constructing a medical narrative from the *segnali* of human waste is unwittingly given a central role in a narrative whose characters consist of that most exquisite production of human bowels (VIII.9.73), countess Civillari (i.e., cesspool), domiciled in the Latrine, and surrounded by her motley crew of barons, "Tamagnin della porta, don Meta, Manico di Scopa, lo Squacchera e altri" (VIII.9.76), a magisterial taxonomy of turds.¹⁴ Having conjured up an affluent beauty and sung her praises, Bruno and Buffalmacco complete the romantic plot by consummating the union between this fictional countess and the fatuous doctor. As those who have read the tale will undoubtedly remember, Buffalmacco achieves this by pitching the poor doctor into an open sewer, a virtual coupling with countess Civillari that even includes an exchange of liquids—Maestro Simone's ingestion of "alquante dramme" ("a few ounces"; VIII.9.100) of excrement. Far from being gratuitous, this scatological touch, as Victoria Kirkham has noted, completes the *contrappasso* by effectively "giving the doctor a dose of his own medicine," since excrement was considered to have therapeutic properties and had long had a place in the standard pharmacopoeia (261). While the true meaning of this excremental allegory is evident enough to most readers—even without recourse to erudite notes to inform them that the colourful roster of barons' names actually refers to the different qualities and forms of fecal matter—it is entirely opaque to Maestro Simone, despite his alleged expertise in all matters touching on human waste.

In the *Convivio*, Dante observes that, since each thing naturally strives for its self-preservation, the vernacular, were it able to express a desire, would seek greater stability by the imposition of order through metre and rhyme (*Convivio* I.13.6–7). Like Dante, Boccaccio sees order as the key to survival. As Pampinea declares in the Introduction, the *brigata's* first priority should be to establish some order to their activities, for "le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare" ("things that are lacking order cannot survive for long"; I.Intro.95). No doubt the ubiquity and sophistication of Boccaccio's framing devices stem from this desire to impose order—and permanence—on material viewed as fragmentary, chaotic,

¹⁴ Frances Winwar translates this catalogue: "His worshipful Highness of the Door, Master Shyte, Lord Broomhandle, Spattersplash and many others besides" (514). G. H. McWilliam gives us: "Baron Ffouljakes, Lord Dung, Viscount Broomhandle, and the Earl of Loosefart, and others" (626).

and in danger of dissolution. Of course, the most famous, and complex, of these frames is that found in the *Decameron*, one that serves to collate (an ordering function), commemorate (a mnemonic function), and thereby resuscitate and grant some permanence to the plague-shattered remnants of fourteenth-century Florentine society.¹⁵

Order, particularly when it comes in the trail of a destabilizing period of chaos or calamity, is inherently comedic, for it represents a return to some sort of normalcy, security, or contentment. That Boccaccio intends for the exceptional circumstances of the *brigata*—their removal from Florence, ordered lives, civility, and so forth—to be viewed as comedic is made quite clear in the *Decameron* Introduction, where Boccaccio tells us that the “orrido cominciamento” (“fearful beginning”) will be followed by a “bellissimo piano e dilettevole” (“a very beautiful and delectable plain”; I.Intro.4)—thus, as critics have long noted, replicating the comedic pattern as it was defined by Aristotle and others. Less often noted, though by no means overlooked, is the fragile, unsustainable nature of this comedic resolution. Just as the *Decameron* begins with the promise of future pleasure, it seems to end with a less cheering prospect of future woe, since the *brigata* members have chosen to return to plague-afflicted Florence. Why, indeed, does the *brigata* head back to plague-infested Florence at the end of their two weeks of storytelling? No doubt this is at least partly due to a change in the *brigata* members themselves, who, strengthened by their brief respite, are ready to return; but it also reflects the highly artificial nature of their 14-day interlude, one whose idyllic socio-political organization and carefully regulated forms of recreation can exist, like the fictions of poets and painters, only as art, not as a sustainable reality. In other words, the comedic element of the *Decameron* is historical only in the same way that any artistic performance is historical. Its function is not to replace reality in any permanent way, but to render reality less alienating by passing it through the filter of the poetic—or painterly—imagination: as Goethe’s “Poet” observes in the prelude to *Faust*, it is the poet who transforms the disconnected, desultory stuff of nature into a consequential, rhythmic whole.¹⁶ In Boccaccio’s time, this ordering function was assigned to God; however, when God—or his minister, Nature—elected to shatter this order in 1348, the task of re-creation

¹⁵ For an early and extensive treatment of this theme of social reconstruction, see Cottino-Jones.

¹⁶ “When Nature spins with unconcern / the endless thread and winds it on the spindle, / when the discordant mass of living things / sounds its sullen dark cacophony, / who divides the flowing changeless line, / infusing life, and gives it pulse and rhythm?” (Goethe 11).

necessarily fell to human creators: the painters and the poets. It is no coincidence that the word *ordine* (order/arrangement), in its various forms and cognates, crops up with insistence in the four *novelle* that describe the activities of the painters Bruno, Buffalmacco, Calandrino, and Nello:

—VIII.3: “essi quello che intorno a questo avessero a fare *ordinarono* fra se medesimi” (“these *arranged* between themselves what had to be done regarding this”; 38); “secondo *l’ordine* da sé posto” (“according to the *arrangement* they had made”; 41).¹⁷

—VIII.9: “*Ordinato* questo, Bruno disse ogni cosa a Buffalmacco per *ordine* [...]” (“*Having arranged* this, Bruno described the whole affair to Buffalmacco in due *order* [...]”; 60).

—IX.3: “e senza troppo indugio darvi, avendo tra sé *ordinate* quello che a fare avessero [...]” (“and without too great a delay, having *arranged* among themselves what each should do [...]”; 6).

—IX.5: “e insieme tacitamente *ordinarono* quello che fare gli dovessero di questo suo innamoramento” (“and together they quietly *arranged* what they should do to him concerning his enamourment”; 21); “*ordinatamente* disse loro chi era Calandrino e quello che egli aveva lor detto, e con loro *ordinò* quello che ciascun di loro dovesse fare e dire” (“*in an orderly fashion* he told them who Calandrino was and what he had told them, and *arranged* with them what each would do or say”; 25); “*ordinato* quello che fosse da fare” “*having arranged* what needed to be done”; 43).

Artistic order, the fictions of painters and poets, is the only true antidote to the plague. While the pratfall (Simone’s tumble into a pit of excrement), scatological puns, and Simone’s simplicity are conventional forms of humour calculated to inspire the occasional guffaw, beneath this physical comedy lies a metaphysical comedy, the defusing of tragic alienation through an artistic imposition of meaning on the arbitrary stuff of life: the salvific fictions of poets and painters. Whereas doctors’ prescriptions prove useless in confronting love-sickness, plague,

¹⁷ Emphasis is added in all cases.

or death, the compassionate fictions of painters and poets can offer some solace by doing what Hegel has suggested is true of all art: they “strip the outer world of its stubborn foreignness” (36) by rendering the alienating familiar, put a human face on both God and Satan, and prove that death’s grim text of black and bluish blotches will never be a match for fiction’s infinitely richer palette.

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