FICTION WITH FICTION: CONFESSING TO DANTE IN *DECAMERON* I.1

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Abstract: This essay addresses one specific element of *Decameron* I.1, the curious order in which the holy friar questions Ciappelletto in his confession, and relates it to the larger dialogue Boccaccio establishes with Dante's *Commedia*. By avoiding the canonical models of confessing penitents, which traditionally unfolded according to the Decalogue, the seven deadly sins, or the sinner's circumstances, the confession proceedings in the first novella evoke most distinctively and idiosyncratically the order of sins in Dante's hell. Dante's authoritative but not canonical text about the Christian afterlife, thus, colors our reading of the first novella of the new work, in which the protagonist, narrator, and author are all similarly involved in the making of a fiction.

This essay has a double point of origin. The first is the recent critical interest in Boccaccio's life-long enterprise as a multifaceted, multi-tasking, and eventually professional *dantista*. In this general area of scholarly interest, there is a wide choice of recent additions, ranging in scope from monographs, to editions and translations, to conference proceedings, to individual essays, and in approach to different areas of Boccaccio's engagement with Dante.¹ Within the field of Dante-Boccaccio studies, my argument keeps a stricter focus, being concerned with the allusive and perhaps elusive relation that the *Decameron* establishes with Dante's *Commedia*.² Within this *Decameron-Commedia* subdivision several readings

¹ See, for instance, Papio, Houston, Eisner. See also the program of the 2011 Columbia conference *Boccaccio Philologist and Philosopher*, organized by Teodolinda Barolini. Of note are also Storey, "A Note on Boccaccio's Dantean Categories" and "Boccaccio Narra la Vita di Dante."

² This is a topic which has received sufficient treatments to constitute a veritable sub-field, if not a full sub-industry, quite crucial to Boccaccio studies. Essential highlights in this tradition are Fido, Durling, Hollander. Most recently, see Olson, "Resurrecting Dante's Florence" and *Courtesy Lost*, *passim*.

of *Decameron* I.1 have focused on the interplay of Cepparello's rhetorical and narrative strategies and the *Decameron*'s own literary fiction-making.³ These are all works that focus on the first installment of the *Decameron*, its status as fiction, and its relation to other fictional or non-fictional texts and traditions present in the environment in which and for which it was composed. Relying upon the critical vulgate that these studies form, my contribution will consist of a reading of one element of *Decameron* I.1, the order of sins in the friar's confessional questioning of Cepparello, as it may reflect a peculiar feature of Dante's *Commedia*: the moral geography of the *Inferno*, a work of narrative eschatological fiction, in relation to which Boccaccio felt the need to position his own work, and to do so from the outset.

The second point of origin of my notes is of a much narrower scope, and it consists of philological minutia rather than a wide hermeneutical discursive field, a puzzling little divergence between two versions of one of Vittore Branca's glosses to the incipit of Cepparello's confession in the novella. The glossed paragraph reads as follows:

"Messer lo frate, non dite cosí: io non mi confessai mai tante volte né sí spesso, che io sempre non mi volessi confessare generalmente di tutti i miei peccati che io mi ricordassi dal dí ch'io nacqui infino a quello che confessato mi sono; **e per ciò vi priego, padre mio buono, che cosí puntalmente d'ogni cosa mi domandiate come se mai confessato non mi fossi.**" [34, emphasis added]⁴

[Master friar (...) do not speak thus, for however frequently or regularly I confess, it is always my wish that I should make a general

³ See the analysis of literary marginality in Mazzotta, 47–74; the examination of the fictional quality of all levels of the narrative in the *Decameron* in Almansi; the discussion of the diverging treatment of *intelligenza* between Dante and Boccaccio in Pertile ("Dante, Boccaccio e l'Intelligenza"); the study of the mediating tonal mechanisms in the novella by Rossi; the account of the apotheosis of fiction in Cepparello's confession in the first chapter of Marcus; the study of the dialogue with the *exempla* tradition that this story establishes in being set up as the fictional account of the veritable making of a false saint in Delcorno, 268–276. See also Usher. A thorough study of the individual tale, with indications for further reading, is now available in D'Agostino.

⁴ All English translations of the *Decameron* are from McWilliam.

confession of all the sins I can remember committing from the day I was born till the day of my confession. **I therefore beg you, good father, to question me about everything, just as closely as if I had never been confessed,** 29.]

The following quotation represents what Branca wrote about Cepparello's plea that the friar examine his conscience *puntalmente*, which means, as we shall see in a moment, both "discriminatingly" and "in a specific order":

*Incomincia la confessione che con ordine [canonico] si volge prima ai peccati di incontinenza (accidia, lussuria, gola, avarizia, ira: trascurate superbia e invidia come meno facili alla **qualità** del confessato), poi a quelli di malizia.* [V. Branca, comm. ad loc. (1980 & 1986 editions)]

[Here begins the confession. Following **canonical order—or, Proceeding orderly**—the confession turns first to sins of incontinence (sloth, lust, gluttony, avarice, wrath—leaving behind pride and envy as the **quality**—technically, the **status**—of the penitent would not be conducive to them). Thereafter, it moves to those of malice.]

As the wavering of my translation between different renderings of two phrases has perhaps suggested, there are two areas of uncertainty in this gloss. The first issue is that what we read in Branca's note does not correspond either to the actual workings of the narrative it is supposed to account for, nor to any categorizing of the sins the footnote reviews. The second problem is the commentator's change of mind between the 1980 Nuova Universale Einaudi and the 1986 Meridiani Mondadori editions. In the former, he simply states that the confession develops in an orderly manner; in the latter, he makes this order a canonical one. As we are about to see, this order is all but canonical. Better yet, it is canonical, but only if we are ready to grant to Dante's idiosyncratic fiction, the *Inferno*, the status of canonical text, and to Dante himself the authority of a canonical author.⁵ In the body of this essay, these two areas will be reviewed in order—or, as confessors and penitents would have said in Boccaccio's day, *punctualiter*.

⁵ The essential contributions to our understanding of the strategies that Dante's text and Dante as author adopted in constructing, respectively, the fictional self-validation of the text and the author's authority are in Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, but see also Ascoli.

1. Confessing *punctualiter*: The Limits of Order

Let us review, in schematic fashion, the proceedings of Cepparello's sacrament of penitence. From the comparison we may gather a sense of the relative looseness of Branca's *Decameron* commentary in the area of gloss-to-narrative correspondence. After the friar's preliminary question on the time since the last confession, quoted above, these are the main phases of the protagonist's sacrilegious ritual:

- A **Lust**: Queste parole piacquero molto al santo uomo e parvongli argomento di bene disposta mente; e poi che a ser Ciappelletto ebbe molto commendato questa sua usanza, **il cominciò a domandare se egli mai in lussuria con alcuna femina peccato avesse**. [36]

[These words were greatly pleasing to the holy friar, and seemed to him proof of a well-disposed mind. Having warmly commended Ser Ciappelletto for this practice of his, **he began by asking him whether he had ever committed the sin of lust with any woman**, 29]

[No Envy]

- B **[No Pride]** Al quale ser Ciappelletto sospirando rispose: "Padre mio, di questa parte mi vergogno io di dirvene il vero, **temendo di non peccare in vanagloria**." Al quale il santo frate disse: "Dí sicuramente, ché il vero dicendo né in confessione né in altro atto si peccò giammai." [37–38]

[To which, heaving a sigh, Ser Ciappelletto replied: 'Father, I am loath to tell you the truth on this matter, **in case I should sin by way of vainglory**.' To which the holy friar replied: 'Speak out freely, for no man ever sinned by telling the truth, either in confession or otherwise,' 29]

- C **Gluttony**: E appresso questo il domandò se nel peccato della **gola** aveva a Dio dispiaciuto. Al quale, sospirando forte, ser Ciappelletto rispose di sí e molte volte [41]

[Next he asked him whether he had displeased God by committing the sin of **gluttony**; to which, fetching a deep sigh, Ser Ciappelletto replied that he had, and on many occasions, 30]

- D **Avarice**: “Ma dimmi: in avarizia hai tu peccato *disiderando* più che il convenevole o *tenendo* quello che tu tener non dovesti?” [44]

[‘But tell me, have you ever been guilty of **avarice**, *by desiring* more than was proper, or *keeping* what you should not have kept?’ 30]

- E **Wrath**: “Bene hai fatto:” disse il frate “ma come ti se’ tu spesso **adirato**?” [47]

[‘You have done well,’ said the friar, ‘but tell me, how often have you **lost your temper**?’ 31]

- F **Violence**: “Ma per alcun caso avrebbeti l’ira potuto inducere a fare alcuno **omicidio** o a dire **villania** a persona o a fare **alcuna altra ingiuria**?” [50]

[‘But has it ever happened that your anger has led you to **commit murder** or to pour abuse on anyone or do them **any other form of injury**?’ 31]

- G **Fraud**: “O mi dí, figliuol mio, che benedetto sie tu da Dio: hai tu mai **testimonianza** niuna **falsa** detta contra alcuno o detto male d’altrui o **tolte dell’altrui cose** senza piacere di colui di cui sono?” [52]

[‘May God give you His blessing,’ said the friar, ‘but now, tell me, my son: have you ever borne **false witness** against any man, or spoken ill of people, or **taken what belonged to others** without seeking their permission?’ 31]

“Or bene, tu mi dí che se’ stato mercatante: **ingannasti** tu mai persona così come fanno i mercatanti?” [54]

[‘Let me see now, you tell me you were a merchant. Did you ever **deceive** anyone, as merchants do?’ 32]

E, oltre a questo, **il domandò il santo frate di molte altre cose**, delle quali tutte rispose a questo modo; e volendo egli già procedere alla absoluzione, disse ser Ciappelletto: Messere io ho ancora alcun peccato che io non v’ho detto.” [57]

[**The holy friar questioned him on many other matters**, but always he answered in a similar vein, and hence the friar was ready to proceed without further ado to give him absolution. But Ser Ciappelletto said: ‘Sir, I still have one or two sins I have not yet told you about.’ 32]

Non ebbi alla santa domenica quella **reverenza** che io dovea. [58]
Non avvedendomene, **sputai** una volta nella chiesa di Dio. [62]
Quando io era piccolino, io **bestemmiai** una volta la mamma mia. [71]

[‘I recall that I once failed to show a **proper respect** for the Holy Sabbath,’ 32;
‘[F]or I once, without thinking what I was doing, **spat** in the house of God,’ 32; ‘[O]nce, when I was a little boy, I **cursed** my mother.’ 33]⁶

When we match the current gloss to the order of the story, we find two points of divergence. First, it is not immediately true, as Branca writes, that pride and envy are the only two sins about which the friar skips questioning Cepparello. In the confession, one may note, there does not seem to be any question directly targeting *acedia*; the only hint of it may be the question about the assiduousness with which the penitent avails himself of the sacrament. While self-exclusion from the body of the Church may be one of the symptoms associated with sloth, it is a characterization that is hardly central to the sin. Furthermore, Branca’s desire to have sloth as first of the examined sins for Cepparello brings him to contradict the principle he articulates in the note about pride, a sin that is not tackled by the friar in his questioning (but that Cepparello obliquely recuperates, speaking of

⁶ All emphases added.

vainglory). It is certainly true that pride, as an aristocratic sin, is not appropriate to the social condition as merchant of this particular sinner, but then it is difficult to see why sloth, as a typically monastic sin, is not automatically and quite logically excluded as well.

In the world of the *Decameron*, merchants are anything but idle; if anything, they are frantically and vainly moving about all the time. The geographically and ethnographically wide dimension of Day Two of the *Decameron* proves as much: traveling merchants ranging from the young Alessandro of II.3, to Landolfo Rufolo in II.4, to Andreuccio da Perugia in II.5, to Bernabò e Ambruogiuolo in II.9, are treated as typical in their instability and restlessness. If pride is not appropriate to a merchant, then sloth is not typical either: why should the confession of a merchant start with a most unlikely sin for a member of that social category?

But there is more: when Branca states that, in addition to pride, envy is a sin not particularly appropriate to the *quality* (the *status*) of this particular middle-class sinner, his gloss may be trying too hard to justify *ex post facto* the absence of that vice from Cepparello's confession. For indeed, if we trust Dante and his ethical diagnosis of the political evils of Florence, as is given in *Inferno* VI and then again in *Inferno* XV, it appears that envy would be appropriate to the merchant reprobate, since this sin appears as the middle (and intermediary) fault between aristocratic pride and mercantile avarice. One may add that *envy* is perhaps precisely the sin held in common by both classes, pitting them against each other, which opposition Ciacco treats in his dialogue with Dante:

“Giusti son due, e non vi sono intesi;
superbia, invidia e avarizia sono
le tre faville c'hanno i cuori accesi.” (*Inf.* VI.73–75)

[Two men are just, and they are unheeded there. Pride, envy, and avarice are the three sparks that have set all hearts on fire.]⁷

For Ciacco the moral diagnosis for the city entails a deadly mix of pride, envy and avarice, indicted as the three sparks that have enflamed the hearts of the Florentines to what, in the prophetic narrative of the canto, is tantamount to a civil war. Similarly, in a confirmatory vein, Brunetto Latini notes that the

⁷ Dante's poem is cited according to the edition by Petrocchi. All translations of the *Commedia* are mine.

Florentines are a “gente avara, invidiosa e superba” (“a greedy, envious, and proud people”; *Inf.* XV.68), who for their vices will ostracize the righteous ones among them, *in primis* Dante. In the two political and personal prophecies extended to the protagonist of the *Commedia*, the three ills of Florence are not simply clustered together, they are most likely ordered according to an apparent scheme of social appropriateness. The sins at the opposed poles of the two definitions are a specific appurtenance of each class, while the middle one is the vice that pits the two groups against each other. On the one hand, the Black Guelph’s aristocratic ethos is proud, and yet envious of mercantile affluence; on the other hand, the White Guelph’s mercantile ethos is greedy, and yet envious of aristocratic prestige. The aggressive desire of each social group to see the other lose what it most prizes makes *invidia* such a dissecting sin for the body politics of the city.

Most importantly, when we read Branca’s gloss with care, the general dichotomy that he establishes for the sins being examined by the friar in the novella—first sins of incontinence, then sins of malice—also does not reflect the list that is given in the note. The sins that Branca lists as sins of incontinence, *accidia*, *lussuria*, *gola*, *avarizia*, *ira*: *trascurate superbia e invidia*, are not actually the sins of incontinence; they are simply the seven deadly sins. And the seven deadly sins, in any treatment of which I am aware, are never organized according to any distinction between incontinence and malice. If, in adding canonicity as a critical afterthought to the ordering of the sins that is being offered in Cepparello’s confession, Branca’s gloss appears to be wrong on a first count of cultural appropriateness, it also appears to be wrong on a second count of internal coherence.

Yet, in essence, the gloss is right—and it is for two reasons. The gloss is right first because it actually captures the system of sins that the novella evokes and confronts, and second because it suggests that, rather than mirroring societal or cultural norms, Boccaccio’s story is designed to invite readers to test the boundaries and coherence of a specific, idiosyncratic system for the cataloguing of sins. Paradoxically, in its internally contradictory quality, the typology of sins that Branca sketches out correctly reflects a non-canonical, but authoritative system. Branca’s gloss describes an arrangement in which the seven deadly sins, but not all of them, are considered sins of incontinence and these are followed by sins of malice, which are basically sins of violence and deceit taken together. Now, that system, as we all know, does exist and it is Dante’s.

The moral schematics of Hell, according to Dante’s *Inferno* are as follows:

- (Neutrality) [Limbo] **Incontinence: Lust, Gluttony**
Avarice —& Prodigality
Wrath —& Sullenness (or Sloth)
- (Heresy) **Violence**: exercised on others, self, God (in themselves or objects)
- **Fraud**: 10 ditches. Panderers & Seducers, Flatterers, Simoniacs, Diviners, Barrators, Hypocrites, Thieves, Fraudulent Counselors, Schismatics, Counterfeiters
- **Treachery**: Caina, Antenora, Tolomea, Giudecca

As we can see, it is Dante's system that distributes through Hell's *cerchi*, *gironi*, and *bolge* the sins of mankind in an order that matches the one correctly detected by Branca in Boccaccio's novella. Dante's system, too, moves, bracketing the extraterritorial neutrals, from lust to gluttony to avarice to wrath, then stops on the banks of the Styx to fold back on itself and resume beyond the gates of Dys. After the new extraterritorial liminality of the heretics, it proceeds with an analysis of violence, then a phenomenology of fraud, and finally a dissection of treachery.

Coming to more precise points of connection, it is only Dante's treatment of sin in the *Inferno* that does not officially take into account pride and actually distributes it among all sinners, in addition to distilling it in figures such as the Giants or Lucifer. In Dante's moral universe, pride is at once everywhere, nowhere, and specifically in some sinners: not unlike what seems to be articulated in the holy friar's interrogation, which bypasses questions of pride only to have them reactivated by Cepparello, with his mocking concern for vainglory. It is only the protagonist of Dante's poem who, just like Cepparello's confessor, in his exploration of sin in Hell, does not get around to meeting any clear exemplar of envy.⁸ Finally, it is only Dante's text (again like Cepparello's confessor, who does not treat it, and Branca's note which lists it *in absentia*) that gives a confused, one may even say "muddy," status to this sin of sloth—whether or not the sinners guilty of *acedia* are to be seen as paired with the wrathful, submerged in the depths of the Styx and

⁸ Incidentally, it is easy to see that pride and envy are the only two of the seven deadly sins missing from Cepparello's confession and Dante's Hell, when we look at their disposition on the seven terraces of Dante's Purgatory, where pride is followed by envy, wrath, sloth, avarice (& prodigality), gluttony, and lust.

gurgling up an *accidioso fummo*.⁹ In sum, it is only Dante's system that maps well onto the apparently confused and surely unorthodox questioning style adopted by the friar in Panfilo's tale in the *Decameron*, as well as onto the wrongly phrased, but rightly intended, gloss that Branca appends to it.

2. Professional Handling of Sin: Orderly Confession in the Manuals

The adverb "only" has appeared perhaps too many times in the previous section for the rhetoric of this essay not to be in need of some qualification. The insistence on Dante's uniqueness is intended to remind ourselves that not all Dante does in the *Commedia* can be automatically raised to the status of the canonical. Dante's apparent canonicity in theological matters is the product of a literary strategy, which has worked with modern readers (sometimes all too well). It may not have worked, however, as smoothly with his contemporary readers. To measure how canonical we may consider the structure of questioning adopted by the saintly friar in examining Ser Cepparello on his way to becoming San Ciappelletto, we may run some contextual tests. When we measure the friar's line of questioning against common manuals for confessors, we realize that it is actually less straightforward and less traditional than we have come to accept.¹⁰

Reading for exclusionary purposes is a dangerous exercise; reading in an attempt to show that no antecedent may be found for a given phenomenon in Boccaccio's culture is even more dangerous. It would not be wise, thus, to say that there is no system of questioning penitents that matches the one used by the friar in *Decameron* I.1, either in medieval spirituality in general, or in Boccaccio's culture in particular. Allowing for a finding that may falsify the main thesis, it is perhaps wiser to say that the overwhelming majority of instructional material on

⁹ A second hypothesis could match them with those who are made to run around aimlessly in the anti-inferno. This identification with the neutrals is, of course, utterly tentative and only to be considered if we accept that the regimen of intense aerobic exercise given to the slothful in *Purgatorio* may be used as a retrospective hint of the nature of the first sin encountered in *Inferno*. For a comprehensive treatment of the moral architecture of Dante's afterlife, see Cogan.

¹⁰ On the cultural shifts connected to the reform of the sacrament of confession in the thirteenth century, see Rusconi, "I Francescani e la Confessione"; for the theological scholastic underpinnings of the adopted taxonomies, see Wenzel. In English, useful indications may be found also in Tentler, though focusing on somewhat later material. See also Biller and Minnis, esp. 1–26; and Taylor, esp. 55–63.

the interrogation of penitents does seem not to depart from one of the following three standards. The three “canonical” orders are: first, the structuring principle afforded by the model of the personal narrative; second, the grid provided by either the seven deadly sins or the Decalogue; and third, the order suggested by the examination of the circumstances. A few examples, taken from some of the widely known and used *Summae confessorum* that had some degree of currency in Boccaccio’s days, may suffice to give a sense of how soon the provisions of the Fourth Lateran Council precipitated a tradition of questioning—and how compact this tradition was on the essential point of order:

A Biographical model.

Robert of Flamborough, *Liber poenitentialis* (early 1200s): “**Fere omnes inordinate confitentur; quia omisso ordine vitiorum ordinem aetatis, locorum et temporum observant**, dicentes: “In illa aetate feci illam fornicationem, illud adulterium, illud furtum, illud perjurium, illud homicidium. Item in illa aetate feci illum incestum, illam monialem procatus sum, illud sortilegium feci.”

[Almost all penitents confess disorderly, since—disregarding the order of the sins themselves—they list their sins in order of age, by time and place, saying things like: “When I was that age, I committed that fornication, that adultery, that theft, that perjury, that homicide. Also, at that other age, I committed that incestuous act, I courted that nun, I casted that love spell.]

Jean de Fribourg, *Summa confessorum* (early 1300s): “Postea dicas ei ut peccata sua dicat eo ordine quo melius poterit recolere, quia nullus ordo enarrationis determinatus est quod in confessione oporteat necessario observari. **Modus autem et ordo secundum quod confiteri debent homines plenius peccata sua est secundum processum etatis et locorum varietatem et moram quam cum diversis personis contraxerunt et negocia vel officia que gexerint.**”

[Afterwards, you should tell them to recite their sins, in the order by which it may be easiest for them to recollect them, for in confession there is no specific order of narration one has to observe

necessarily. **The way and order by which people should confess their sins more accurately is according to the progress of their age, the variety of places, the time they spent with various people, the trades or tasks they performed.]**

B Seven- or ten- (or mani-)fold model.

Homo quidam (1155–1165): “Poenitens debet et memoriter mente colligere omnes excessus suos et cum magna contritione confiteri. [...] Et, quia multi ignorant peccata, ut confessio sit facienda, **sacerdos debet enumerare ei septem capitalia.**”

[The penitents should carefully bring back to mind all their trespasses and confess with deep contrition. [...] But, since many do not know the sins, **the priest should list for the penitent the seven capital sins**, in order for the penitent to give confession.]

Robert of Flamborough, *Liber poenitentialis*: “Michi placet, ut incipiens a superbia, que est radix omnium malorum, singula cum suis speciebus confiteantur gradatim vitia, prout unum ab alio nascitur et procedit; **scilicet prius per vanam gloria, secundo invidiam, tertio iram, quarto accidiam, quinto avaritiam sexto gulam, septimo luxuriam.**”

[I prefer that, beginning with pride, which is the root of all sins, all vices be confessed one by one in order, just as one is born of and proceeds from the other, **which is to say, at first through vainglory, second envy, third wrath, fourth sloth, fifth avarice, sixth gluttony, and seventh lust.**]

Petrus Pictaviensis, *Summa de confessione. Compilatio praesens* (after 1215): “Duo sunt genera peccatorum. Quaedam dicuntur spritualia, quaedam carnalia. [...] **Haec et illa solent sub septenario comprehendi.** Carnalia peccata sunt principaliter **gula et luxuria.** [...] Spiritualia in quibus communius peccatur et frequentius, reor esse huiusmodi et ex huiusmodi [peccatis] provenire: **superbia, inuidia, acidia**, scilicet taedium boni, cupiditas, **auaritia**, uana gloria, negligentia, **ira**, tristitia quae

dicitur ab aliquibus taedium mentis cum maerore, adulatio, detractio, maledictio, mala cogitatio, praua delectatio, prauusque consensus, et ex his alia fere infinita, ut impatientia, ambitio, simonia et caetera.”

[There are two kinds of sins; some are labeled spiritual, others carnal. [...] **Both these and those are usually included under the sevenfold list.** Carnal sins are mainly **gluttony** and **lust**. [...] Spiritual sins, in which more commonly and frequently one sins, I believe are of this kind and derive from vices of this kind; namely, **pride**, **envy**, **sloth** (i.e., weariness of what is good), cupidity, **avarice**, vainglory, negligence, **wrath**, sadness (which some call a sorrowful weariness of the mind), adulation, slander, invective, evil thoughts, depravity in pleasures, consent to evildoings. From these descends an almost endless number of other sins, as lack of patience, desire for honor, simony, and so on.]

Jean Rigaud, *Formula Confessionis* (1309–1312): “Cum ad sacerdotem peccator accesserit, dicat sacerdos: *Dominus vobiscum*. Et respondat peccator: *Amen*. [...] **Postea querat de decem preceptis** sine quibus non potest esse salus.”

[After the sinner will have approached the priest, the priest should say: The Lord be with you. The sinner should answer: Amen. [...] **Thereafter, he should inquire about the Ten Commandments**, without which there can be no salvation.]

C Circumstantial model.

Pseudo-Augustine, *De vera et falsa poenitentia* (eleventh century): “**Consideret [confessor] qualitatem criminis**, in loco, in tempore, in perseverantia, in varietate personae, et quali hoc fecerit tentatione, et in ipsius vitii multiplici executione.”

[**The confessor should be mindful of the circumstances accompanying the crime:** the place, the time, the duration, the different agents involved, as well as the specific temptation which brought it about and the recurrence of the specific vicious act.]

Domenico Cavalca, *Specchio dei Peccati* (1333): “Le colpe che si commettono comunemente **per li sei movimenti del cuore**, cioè amore, odio, dolore, gaudio, timore e speranza. [...] In cuore, in lingua, in opera, in negligenza.”

[One commonly sins **on the basis of the six motions of the heart**; that is, love, hate, pain, joy, fear, and hope. [...] Sins may take place] in thought, word, deed, or omission.]

Not all of these manuals were equally within the reach of Boccaccio, and no claim of philological connection is advanced here. Taken together, however, the statements they contain corroborate one another, as a tradition-forming body of work which enjoyed a capillary presence in the religious and lay discourse of Boccaccio's time. Reinforced by the preaching of the Mendicant Orders and the practice of the confessors, in other words, these questioning models had ample opportunities to make their presence felt in the culture of his days.¹¹ As it immediately transpires, in none of these lists can we find the desultory procedure that marks the friar's questioning of Cepparello. His procedure was marked by the three radical, systemic shifts highlighted above: first, the shift from an incomplete listing of the seven deadly sins to a consideration of the sins of aggression (what Branca calls the shift from incontinence to malice); second, the ensuing attention given to sins involving fraud; and finally the review of a few, parodically minimal, casuistry matters.

These shifts, I would argue, are not just eerily reminiscent of the ones marking Dante's own shifting ethical plans in the *Inferno*. They are converging with them to the point of identification. When we move from consideration of Branca's note to the text of the novella itself, the matching game that we can play becomes even more rewarding. Not unlike the *Commedia*, which begins by treating one sin in each canto and then splits the fourth circle into the two opposing vices of avarice and prodigality, the *Decameron's* friar appears to be jumping from an initial seven-mortal-sin scheme (starting, as we have seen, with lust and gluttony) to a

¹¹ Passages from the *Homo quidam* and the works of Robert of Flamborough, Jean de Fribourg, Jean Rigaud, and the Pseudo-Augustinian (and much-quoted) tract, are excerpted from Rusconi, “*Ordinate confiteri*.” The remaining texts are cited from the following editions: Longère for Petrus Pictaviensis; del Furia for Domenico Cavalca (for which, see now also Zacchetta).

specific, Aristotelian definition of avarice.¹² Having dealt with the first three sins which Purgatory will class as those of excessive love, the friar moves to considering another sin as articulated in an oppositional pair. It is wrath that has effects *in factis* and *in dictis*: possibly the same dichotomy that we could see at work in Dante's Styx, with Filippo Argenti militating evidently on the side of physical, factual violence, and the sullen who mutter their hymns of verbal repressed violence below the surface of the swamp.¹³

Finally, both the friar and Dante's poem move to fraud and a point-by-point, somewhat random, nickel-and-dime series of sins; a list that, in the *Commedia*, even resists complete mapping. In *Inferno* XI.52–60, all readerly love for systematization is frustrated by Virgil's prospective lecture on the realm of fraud, Malebolge, an exercise in prospective mapping which seems to prepare the terrain mostly in general terms.

La frode, ond' ogni coscienza è morsa,
 può l'omo usare in colui che 'n lui fida
 e in quel che fidanza non imborsa.

Questo modo di retro par ch'incida
 pur lo vinco d'amor che fa natura;
 onde nel cerchio secondo s'annida
 ipocresia, lusinghe e chi affattura,
 falsità, ladroneccio e simonia,
 ruffian, baratti e simile lordura.

[Fraud, which bites every conscience, may be used against someone who is trusting or someone who has no trust in his pocket. This latter mode of action seems to cut only the basic tie of mutual affection

¹² Ellero has just shown how strictly dependent on Aristotle's *Ethics* is the dichotomy "in desiring" vs. "in keeping," which the friar activates here. Avarice is the first and only vice in Hell (and sinful disposition in Purgatory) that Dante treats in Aristotelian terms. On the impact of such a decision to treat the sin in conjunction with its opposing tendency as delimiting the two excesses, in the middle of which is located virtue, see also Barolini, "Aristotle's *Mezzo*."

¹³ Of course, this is not the grid according to which one should interpret the moral geography of Dante's Hell, in reading the text of *Inferno*. The text of the poem, however, may offer itself to precisely this first-time reading; at least, before readers reach *Inferno* XI, when Virgil's lecture helps clarify the issue.

that nature creates among human beings; therefore in the second zone have their nest hypocrisy, flattery, those who practice magic, falsifying, thievery and simony, ruffians, barrators and scoundrels of the like.]

Two elements of possible unsettling emerge from a retrospective reading of this forward-looking plan. First, the order of the list: Virgil lists the sins and corresponding ditches in a randomized sequence, introducing the sin of the sixth *bolgia* as the first, that of the second as the second, the fourth as third, the eighth as fourth, the seventh as fifth, the third as sixth, the first as seventh and the fifth as eighth. Second, Virgil's lecture also appears to distinguish a little too little, by including under the concluding heading of "simile lordura" the two categories of Fraudulent counselors and Schismatics from *bolgias* 8 and 9, with the effect of making these two sins somewhat unforeseen and eventually somewhat problematic, at least the first one, for Dante's professional readers.¹⁴

In the novella, the rhetoric of the confession and Cepparello's exhilarating protestations of sinfulness cast this last group of occasional sins, which has no apparent specific order, as solely more culpable, again according to a similar principle at work also in the *Inferno*, for which the later (or the lower) we find one sin, the worse that sin is supposed to be considered. Beyond the parody entrusted to Cepparello's rhetorical elaboration of each more reluctantly confessed sin, we would be hard pressed to distinguish the relative value of, or an ordering principle in, the three final sins that he confesses or in the many more of the same kind that the tale does not report. As a transitional sentence duly notes, before introducing the last parodically gravest sin, Cepparello does not limit himself to just a few imagined misdemeanors: *in brieve de' così fatti ne gli disse molti* (65). Not sufficiently observing the Sabbath, inadvertently spitting in church, and as a young child cursing one's own mother's name are acts too haphazard to be laid out on any precise moral grid. In sum, not unlike what happens in Dante's poem, in Cepparello's confession, the neat plan of the seven deadly sins from which the friar started may be shown to have quickly morphed into a scholastic Aristotelian dissection of two of them, with wrath as a bridge to consider violent acts, and then again to open up a consideration of deceit as an aggravating circumstance in one's behaviour, and finally to undergo an utter diffraction, resolving itself into a series of occasional sinful acts.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Pertile, "*Inferno* XXVII."

3. Fictions

May the coincidence unearthed through the parallel mapping of their texts tell us something about the relation Boccaccio establishes with Dante? Having noted it, what may one say? In reflecting on Boccaccio's interest in playing with the moral scheme of the *Inferno*, two possible interpretive consequences may be advanced. The first has to do with the status as fiction that both the *Inferno* and the *Decameron* differently but relatedly claim for themselves. The first story of the *Decameron* programmatically reckons with Dante's *Commedia* in several explicit ways. As proposed before, *Decameron* I.1 contains a series of subtly articulated relational moves, each at the same time distancing and implicating the text with Dante's antecedent. The first novella polemically chooses the stance of limiting the scope of the narrative to the human rather than the divine point of view on reality; it presents the story of a man-made saint by the force of a self-validating fiction; it allows ser Cepparello to become san Ciappelletto thanks to his deft manipulation of narrative tropes. In the same breath as it allusively calls into question Dante's own techniques of narrative self-validation and claims to supernatural visionary power, however, Boccaccio appears to do the same through the friar's Dantesque confessional technique. By engaging Dante's text in this dialogue from a distance, Boccaccio's stance also confirms how problematic the theological and prophetic side of Dante's claims about the truth status of his poem was perceived to be in the early reception of the *Commedia*. It is by matching fiction with fiction, in other words, that Boccaccio confronts Dante's text and claims for his own work a different status.

Decameron I.1, I propose, invites reflection also on another Dante-related matter. Once refracted through the lens of the novella, Dante's system of sins appears not only far from being an absolute, canonical, and standard model for professional handlers of sin in the Middle Ages, but also the product of a development, a literary compositional process unfolding in time and in response to time-bound circumstances. In Dante's poem, Virgil's lecture in *Inferno* XI is designed to provide readers with a stringent plan for Hell and for the *Inferno*. One of the corollaries of the character's analytical tour de force is that the text of the poem convinces readers that in Dante's Hell everything makes sense. Every imagined place seemingly has a moral function, every feature in the landscape bears some meaning, and the narrative of the poem only follows the contours of this metaphysical and moral space. *Inferno* XI has, however, an additional effect

on the readers: in its internal retrospective completeness and prospective (relative) coherence, it insinuates the notion that from the start the plan of the narrative fiction was the same as the one the poem realized. *Inferno* XI, that is, suggests that the poem's plan was to proceed in Aristotelian fashion, addressing in an orderly way incontinence, malice, and (within malice) violence and fraud, and within fraud (or together with simple fraud), treacherous behaviours.

And yet, coming at it from Boccaccio's perspective, having been offered a fumbling version of the same scheme—in the context of a fictional story that makes of fiction's power to create retrospective coherence its absolute focus—the system appears to be strained. Having been given an opportunity to reflect on the inner workings of *Decameron* I.1, in sum, readers of the *Inferno* also have a better chance to realize that, no matter how hard it tries to impose order on the fictional matter the poem has presented until that point, *Inferno* XI can only do so artificially and retrospectively. Readers, that is, leave the text with the sense that Dante began writing the poem with a system in mind and in place and then changed it once—or perhaps even twice—while writing. Having started with the Seven Deadly Sins, he first moved to an Aristotelian scheme of oppositional vices, and eventually complicated it with the Ciceronian violence-fraud distinction, reaching a stable categorization system for his Hell and for the *Inferno*. The retrospective compacting of the moral structure of Hell performed in *Inferno* XI has been, from a critical point of view, fully successful. Dante's moral geography of Hell has become for us the result of the poem's syncretistic assembling, or grafting onto one another, of innovatively Ciceronian, peculiarly Aristotelian, and traditionally Christian ethical systems. We have forgotten, that is, that the text has been produced in time, through a writing process entailing chronological stratification. It is precisely this phenomenological dimension of the poem that the fictional lens of the *Decameron* may help us bring into sharper focus.

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