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INTRODUCTION

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO'S *Decameron* is an intriguing collection of stories, concerned with the interpretation of literature. The *Decameron*'s frame narrative format, with the ever-present traces of literary production and reception on all levels of the text, calls attention to its potential as a tutor in literary criticism. As many Boccaccio scholars have pointed out, one of the *Decameron*'s literary lessons is that interpretation is an ongoing and open practice which always entertains new perspectives and fresh insights.[1] Even scholars who would balk at this assessment provide evidence of its truth by augmenting Boccaccio studies with additional metaliterary interpretations and analyses.

One of the goals of this book is to develop a reading of the *Decameron* which exposes the tensions generated by sexual difference that motivate privilege, in order to investigate the possibilities for changing the power relations inherent in that privilege. To this end, I will concentrate on the way Boccaccio's book functions as a mediator between the reader and the fictional world presented in the *Decameron*. The arguments I will develop posit that reading is an encounter among various subjects (internal and external to the text) who are embedded in a specifically patriarchal structure. The positions held by these subjects are, however, susceptible to reconfiguration by critical reading and rewriting. Because the field of Boccaccio studies and the literary tradition within which Boccaccio wrote his stories have been for the most part a male prerogative, it is important to examine and question the ideological adaptation evinced by the stories themselves and by the criticism.

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As we shall see, the mediating position taken up by Boccaccio's text underlines and exploits its own erotic potential, highlighting questions of sexual difference. Of course, the notion of sexualizing the acts of reading and mediation is not novel in literary history, but in Boccaccio studies the practice has not been brought to bear on the issues of gender and subjectivity as they are constructed in the *Decameron*.

Boccaccio introduces the *Decameron* as an erotic mediator, thereby extending a metaphoric as well as literal invitation to his readers to engage in an exchange with the text. Some of the categories of exchange solicited in the book are established in the subtitle: "Here begins the book called *Decameron* whose last name is Gallehault, in which one hundred tales are inscribed, told in ten days by seven women and three men."[2] The importance of naming and sexual difference as well as the processes of identification, representation, and storytelling are all emphasized briefly in the subtitle. In particular, Boccaccio's insistence on establishing the paternity of the text (by giving it a last name) signals the sexual intent and content of his project while symptomatically expressing the erotic economy in which it takes place.

The very fact that Boccaccio bestows a patronym on the *Decameron* alludes to its literary lineage, which is patterned on the human model of the patrilinear family. The gesture of anthropomorphizing the text endows Boccaccio's book with the potential to take up the position of the child – the progeny of the writer and the literary tradition in which he was educated. Further, the subject position given to the book is animated by Boccaccio's desire to make contact with his audience. Questions regarding the relationship between reading and mediation, in particular the eroticization and sexualization of the process of mediation, that will be made explicit and dramatized later in the *Decameron* are presented *in nuce* in the subtitle.

The surname "Gallehault" derives from the Arthurian legends, in which Prince Gallehault serves as the go-between in the ill-fated love affair between Guinevere and Sir Lancelot. In Italian literary tradition, Gallehault occupies a well-known position in Dante's *Divina Commedia* as well. In the circle of the lustful in the *Inferno*, Francesca da Rimini explains to the pilgrim how her own tragic love affair with Paolo was mediated by the reading of the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere, "Galeotto fu il li-

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bro e chi lo scrisse" (Gallehault was the book and its writer).[3] In Dante's famous line, the distinction between subject positions is blurred: Gallehault is both the book and the writer of the book. He occupies two places that are normally discrete. The flexibility demonstrated by Dante's Gallehault is maintained when Boccaccio appropriates the figure. The fact that Boccaccio's book begins with this allusion gives us a strong hint that subject positions in the following text will be fluid. As we shall see, the possibility of multiple and changing identificatory positions is played out again and again throughout the various levels of the *Decameron*'s narrative. The advantages of this kind of identificatory paradigm for the feminist approach taken up in this book have been discussed at length in recent feminist film criticism. In her book *The Future of an Illusion*, Constance Penley explains, "[a]s a model for understanding identification in relation to sexual difference, the feminist interest in this structure of fantasy lies in the fact that such a model does not dictate what 'masculine' or 'feminine' identification would be or how an actual spectator might take up any of the possible positions."[4]

In addition, by naming Gallehault as the father of the book, Boccaccio implies that the tales it contains are being proffered specifically as an impetus for lovesick and loveless women to engage in verbal intercourse with the text (with the possible result of following the example of Paolo and Francesca). This idea is pursued at length in the Proem, where Boccaccio explicitly addresses the collection of stories to ladies afflicted by love. He claims to desire to attend to their pleasure by helping them into and out of love relationships. This offer to make the book an erotic mediator for the reader provides an interesting opportunity to explore the possibilities available in the dynamic rapport among the positions occupied by the reader, the writer, and the text.

Boccaccio's *Decameron* has managed to remain delightfully enigmatic through centuries of critical readership. Conflicting scholarly interpretations as well as a wide array of varying visual representations of the stories attest to the rich possibilities offered by the book. In addition to the illustrations in manuscripts, innumerable visual representations of Boccaccio's tales have been made, including frescoes, *spalliere*, *cassoni*, tapestries, painted canvases, engravings, sculptures, birth trays, and vases. The proliferation of visual responses to the *Decameron* that has continued

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throughout its history and the attention many Boccaccio scholars address to the visual cues in the *Decameron* indicate that Boccaccio's book is imbued with visuality. This may be partly because much of the humor in the *novelle,* or tales, is based on "sight gags," and partly because Boccaccio's rhetoric lingers on descriptive detail; in any case, there is ample evidence of an immanent visuality in the language of the *Decameron.*

Historically, very little scholarship has dwelt on the different visual representations as a means of shedding further light on the tales. This reluctance to use verbal and visual texts that share common themes, issues, and ideas to illuminate each other is not peculiar to Boccaccio studies; rather, it seems to reflect a particular historical bias in scholarship that regards visual representations as secondary and subordinate to verbal texts. Recently, however, scholars have demonstrated the potential for critical insight offered by the juxtaposition of works of visual and verbal art.[5] This movement toward integration of the verbal and visual fields opens up fresh and interesting perspectives in scholarship.

Although the scope of my study includes visual representations inspired by the *Decameron* as well as the book itself, I do not intend to imply thereby that the *novelle* are more important. The fact that Boccaccio's book chronologically precedes the visual pieces does not mean that the book should be given greater weight in an interpretation that compares verbal and visual representations. Nor does it imply that there is an inherent superiority in the book's ability to convey the subject matter. Consequently, this study will consider the paintings, illuminations, and a film inspired by the *Decameron* as texts in their own right, as well as resources for the interpretation of the *novelle.* A dialogue, rather than a source–imitation/illustration relationship, is the model I will adopt in considering the interaction between the *Decameron* and the visual representations.

In this analysis, I will pay special attention to the central role of women in the *Decameron.* In addition to the fact that the book is dedicated to women in the Proem, the *Decameron* abounds with female characters who exist in a wide range of social, economic, and interpersonal circumstances. Boccaccio's female characters are not exclusively relegated to the more typical medieval characterizations of women as saints, whores, subordinates, and chattel. Because many different positions are

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taken up by women in the *Decameron*, my theoretical approach, which is concerned with the spectrum of subjectivity in representation, is challenged and facilitated by concentrating on the female roles. Yet, this is not to claim that Boccaccio was a protofeminist. The representation of women in the *Decameron* is frequently complex and troubled, and even though the female characters are much more interesting than those found in the standard literary fare of the time, the *Decameron* includes several arresting examples of female characters who suffer severe oppression. Dramatically divergent critical receptions of the presentation of these women attest to the importance and vitality of the female presence in the *Decameron*. I will investigate the notion asserted by some critics that certain characterizations of women in the *Decameron* are consonant with the text whereas others are disruptive (e.g., in the tale of Griselda, her extreme masochism and her husband's extreme misogyny have fueled critical controversy for six hundred years) in order to question the very definitions of "normal" and "deviant."

In this project, I will take a feminist position and use literary critical, psychoanalytic, and film theories to investigate the various versions of the *Decameron*. Taking these interpretations as a point of departure, I will examine recent critical work that explores the relations between visual and verbal arts. In this endeavor I will adopt tools from the disciplines of literary theory, film theory, and art history in an effort to expand the scope and insight of interpretation by considering perspectives and approaches not commonly brought to bear on the usually independent disciplines. By "crossing over," I intend to investigate the extent to which the narrative is perceived as serving to repress or contain the image, and the extent to which the image may elude or subvert the narrative. Questions of viewing and voyeurism, frames and boundaries, and syntax and ambiguity will be addressed. Each text will be accorded an independence from the others, rooted in its own specific historical and social context. The selections I have made in determining the shape of this book are based on my desire to reflect on the interpretative liberties and restrictions inherent in the various media under consideration.

I will begin the book with a chapter on the tale of Griselda (*Dec.* X, 10). In the past six hundred years much ink has been spilled over the interpretation of Boccaccio's "tale of misogyny," and it is this provocative

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quality that makes the last *novella* in the book an auspicious beginning. The potential advantages of this organizing strategy are particularly evident for those readers who agree with Marcus's assertion that when the reader reaches this final, difficult, and contradictory story, he or she is inaugurated into the realm of independent readership (i.e., is no longer given guidelines with which to determine the meaning of the story but must instead interpret it for him- or herself). In this sense, we can see that the Griselda story is a crucial moment in the book. Additionally, by beginning a study of interpretation with a text as rich as this tale, we are given great latitude to examine the complexities of the reader–viewer–text relationship. I will approach the tale of Griselda with the tools of narratology and psychoanalysis in order to delineate the emphasis on subjectivity in my interpretative practice throughout this book.

The second chapter explores the insistent visual aspect of the *Decameron* by concentrating on the specific relationship between words and images in an obvious place: illustrated manuscripts of the *Decameron*. My approach to the illuminated manuscripts draws upon Claire Richter Sherman's notion of "codicology"[6] and what Stephanie Jed calls the "new paleography."[7] By this I mean that the material production of the text (including surface, tints, layout, script, and design as well as patronage and audience) will be considered in interpreting the aesthetic as well as historical and cultural significance.

The first manuscript editions of the *Decameron* were widely read and copied by a large segment of the Florentine population. From the prologue to Day Four and the "Author's Conclusion," it is possible to infer that the text was distributed and commented upon even as a work in progress. The narrator's rebuttals of criticism imply a diverse and eager public, and, although the narrator addresses only the negative responses to his text, it is clear from the number of copies of the *Decameron* dating from this period (the late fourteenth century) that there was a sizable and equally engaged community of *Decameron* fans. The text's audience ranged from the most wealthy and educated literati to the solidly bourgeois mercantile class and extended even to less educated segments of the population. In his "Boccaccio visualizzato," Vittore Branca emphasizes the extreme popularity of the work, characterizing the book's early readers and copyists as "impassioned" and "fanatical" mer-

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chants, who "stole hours from business and sleep in order to personally transcribe the text."[8]

In the second chapter, I will rehearse the deconstructive move that questions the hierarchical relationship between word and image in manuscript illustration. The Franco-Flemish miniatures that are the visual texts for this chapter are a particularly interesting case in light of their doubly "derivative" categorization; first, they are traditionally discounted with respect to the written text, and second, they are considered a "minor" art. Otto Pächt, who argues for the consideration of miniatures in their own right, concedes that "it is probably inevitable that manuscript illumination continues to be looked upon as a stunted form of monumental art even by those who fully understand that the name 'miniature' painting originates not from *'diminuere'* (to reduce) but from *'minium'*, a frequently used red pigment."[9] The examples I will consider are illuminations for the story of Tancredi and Ghismunda (*Dec.* IV, 1). These illuminations offer intriguing possibilities for understanding an undercurrent in Boccaccio's text that is deeply concerned with, and ambivalent about, the function of vision (both licit and illicit) and concealment. In Boccaccio's *novella,* the association of vision with knowledge and of knowledge with both power and love (although not always at the same time) leads to startling consequences. The illuminations provide a gloss on the power and love relations in a father–daughter–lover triangle while overtly challenging some of the subtle endorsements the rhetoric of Boccaccio's text extends.

After considering the relationship between words and images on the same page, the third chapter turns to a series of paintings by Botticelli that was inspired by the story of Nastagio (*Dec.* V, 8). These paintings, which repeatedly depict the most violent and coercive episodes of the *novella,* were commissioned as *spalliere* (wall panels) to adorn the bedroom of a newlywed couple. The paintings were designed by Botticelli, who, with the help of his studio artists, completed the series. The segmentation of the *spalliere* (made up of a group of four separate panels) would seem to have lent itself to the serial depiction of the narrative of the entire *novella,* yet this is not the case. Instead, Botticelli chose to paint scenes in which a knight's furious pursuit and violent murder of a naked woman in a *caccia infernale* (hell hunt) appears on three of the four pan-

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els, even though the *caccia* is described only once in the *novella*. (The *caccia infernale* is a literary form in which particular sins are punished in hell by the staging of a hunt and the slaughter of the sinner.)

Interesting discrepancies exist between the verbal and the visual representations of the tale of Nastagio; details from Boccaccio's *novella* are omitted or changed in the paintings, and Botticelli adds several literary references to his work that are absent from Boccaccio's text. Independently, each of these versions of Nastagio's story provides ample opportunity for us to question the motivation and logic of the *caccia*'s cruelty, and when juxtaposed they allow us to reconstruct and interrogate the premise of guilt on which the genre depends. I will argue that the text offers the possibility of a subversive reading of its overtly didactic content. The fact that Boccaccio's *novella* allows for the contradiction of its overt project, while simultaneously calling into question the integrity of the conspicuous "heroes," provides the reader with the opportunity to develop an interpretation wherein the significance of the *novella* does not rest exclusively on the male bias so strongly apparent on the surface of the story. Instead, an interpretation sensitive to the irony in the story can posit a narrative that does not make absolute claims to the Christian truth proposed by the internal narrator. Such an interpretation calls into question not only the logic of the story but the position of the reader of the text and the viewer of Botticelli's paintings as well. As a result, the reader's position becomes ambiguous (in the context of the *caccia*, does one identify with the victim, the victimizer, or the voyeur?) thus providing for shifts among gender roles and power positions.

The fourth chapter will look at the late Italian author and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1973 film *The Decameron* and incorporate the theoretical elements discussed in previous chapters in an interpretation of the film's version of Boccaccio's text. Pasolini's film provides a unique occasion to consolidate my investigations of the relations between the verbal and visual representations of the *Decameron*, because it incorporates elements of the written text and of painting and is itself an entirely different verbal and visual medium. Although Pasolini's film provides some remarkably literal renditions of the *novelle*, it also diverges drastically from the book Boccaccio wrote. First of all, Pasolini completely rearranges the frame narrative in Boccaccio's work. In addition, he selects

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only ten of Boccaccio's one hundred tales to represent, complementing these with ten of his own invention. Also, the *novelle* Pasolini takes from Boccaccio are radically changed when he centers the action in Naples and integrates the characters from the stories into segments of his frame narrative. In a further delicious complication, Pasolini, the film's director and screenwriter, himself plays the role of the famous Florentine artist Giotto di Bondone, who, in the fiction of the film, is shown producing a fresco and presides over the transitions from one story to the next in the second half of the film.

The fourth chapter will explore how the figure of the artist and his work are represented in Pasolini's and Boccaccio's versions of the *Decameron*. Comparison between Giotto in the film and the authorial voice in the *Decameron* bring to the fore the status of fantasy, imagination, and play in the two works. In my investigation of these key issues, I will turn to the Boccaccian character Calandrino, who embodies a particular version of the artistic imagination common to Boccaccio and Pasolini. This exploration of the theme of artistic creation, and particularly of visual representation, nicely condenses many of the issues at the center of my inquiry into comparative arts strategies.

Finally, in the last chapter I will expand my analysis of the role of the artist in Pasolini's film. In the first four chapters I develop a feminist reading of the verbal and visual texts, concentrating on the meaning engendered by sexual difference. In this final chapter, I shift gears and explore the homosexual sensibilities in the text, extending my interpretation to include the first half of Pasolini's film. Here I contend that Pasolini's *Decameron* represents a fantasmatic negotiation of his homosexuality, an eroticism that is intimately informed by the homophobic and heterosexist culture in which it developed. I discuss Pasolini's use of film techniques such as the embodiment of a "cruising" gaze with the "eye" of the camera, and the infiltration of high art pastiche, in the form of tableaux vivants, in the ostensible narrative of the film. I argue that these two elements characterize the particular homosexual aesthetic in the film. Further, I discuss how this homosexual aesthetic works against the narrative impulse toward coherence in a manner that both indicates the homosexual investment in the film and sublimates its literal expression.

In this last chapter, I argue that in Pasolini's *Decameron* the representa-

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tion of Giotto's artistic vision is distinctly nonnarrative. In this respect, Pasolini's negotiation of the questions surrounding the verbal–visual dichotomy in his representation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* differs in essential respects from the way these issues are addressed in the works discussed in the other chapters of this book. For example, Pasolini's active participation in the fragmentation and scattering of narrative meaning stands in sharp contrast to Griselda's husband's "transformative" gaze and its accompanying performative language. Gualtieri's attempts to fix meaning by imposing categories of behavior and address on Griselda represent an effort to generate order and coherence from a position of instability through his use of vision and language. In an effort to firmly establish his own position in a patrilinear family history, Gualtieri seeks to make Griselda over, for and through the affirming gaze of his vassals and subjects.

Somewhat differently, in both the visual (illuminations) and verbal versions of Tancredi's and Ghismunda's story, the representation of vision corresponds to an effort to impose a coherent narrative of political power and the doctrine of courtly love on unruly physical and emotional desires. Significantly, the rigid strictures of the courtly love tradition, which ultimately developed into the ideology of Romantic love, are sustained by a coherent psychological fiction. In Boccaccio's tale of Tancredi and Ghismunda, courtly love and political power are articulated in a shared verbal and visual field, and the overlap between the verbal and visual rhetoric gives rise to the dangerous transgressions that shape the movement of the tragedy. When the prince's paternal and political supervision turns into voyeurism in his invasion of Ghismunda's bedroom, where he witnesses the consummation of courtly love, the stability of the political and amorous institutions is undermined. Unlike Pasolini's tableau vivant of the Last Judgment, here in Tancredi's realm the reigning figure of optical competence is unable *not* to look and consequently, unable not to know. Significantly, although Tancredi's invasive vision and actions lead to tragedy, they also serve to reestablish his control over his dominion.

Finally, in the tale of Nastagio and Botticelli's paintings, discussed in the third chapter, visuality works to define and support narrative coherence. In contradistinction to Pasolini's use of painting, Botticelli's panels

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