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Carissime donne: Boccaccio's fabliaux for a new audience

ABSTRACT: in the composition and structure of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* we can identify a double articulation and a double setting, as well as a double audience. This article explores whether this choice is part of what Boccaccio was learning from his experience of reading the French fabliaux that constitute some of his sources. It offers a reader-oriented interpretation of the relation between the *Decameron* and the fabliau material, before focussing on the sixth novella of the ninth day – the story of Niccolosa and Pinuccio – and its antecedents, the anonymous fabliaux generally known as *Le meunier et les deus clers*, together with Jean Bodel's *Gombert*. It also proposes a comparison with a text possibly deriving from these, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*.

ABSTRACT: nella composizione e nella struttura narrativa del *Decameron* di Giovanni Boccaccio è possibile identificare una doppia articolazione e un doppio contesto: la narrazione si rivolge quindi anche a un doppio pubblico. Questo saggio esplora tale aspetto dell'opera boccacciana, mettendolo in relazione con la conoscenza, da parte dello scrittore, dei *fabliaux* francesi, che sono una fonte di alcune delle novelle. Si offre così un'interpretazione dal punto di vista del lettore della relazione tra *Decameron* e *fabliaux*. Nella seconda parte, si focalizza l'attenzione sulla sesta novella della nona giornata – la storia di Niccolosa e Pinuccio – e sui suoi antecedenti, i *fabliaux* anonimi dal titolo *Le meunier et les deus clers*; si analizza inoltre la relazione della novella con *Gombert* di Jean Bodel. Infine, si propone una comparazione con un testo che deriva sia dai *fabliaux* che da Boccaccio, vale a dire il *Reeve's Tale* di Geoffrey Chaucer.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Fabliau, Jean Bodel, Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Geoffrey Chaucer, *I racconti di Canterbury*

KEYWORDS: Fabliau, Jean Bodel, Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, probably completed in 1351, presents a double setting: one in 1348, during the Black Death epidemic, when seven young women and three young men escape to the hills outside Florence, in a lovely palace surrounded by marvellous gardens, where they spend ten days exchanging tales and songs; the other in the early 1350s, when the city of Florence, recovering from the plague and seeing in Boccaccio one of its most illustrious representatives, sends him on diplomatic and cultural missions, electing him among the *Camerlenghi* of the city council – and incidentally, fighting for copies of his works.¹ In the celebrated Proem to the first day, Boccaccio plays on this double articulation, implying also a double audience for his work. The single novellas are listened to, and commented upon, by a primary audience, the *lieta brigata* of young people who are in their turn narrators; but the Proem makes it clear that Boccaccio has in mind a secondary audience: the *graziosissime donne* of Florence who make their first appearance in the Proem's opening words.

The hundred novellas in the *Decameron* are famously framed by the conversation and songs of the *lieta brigata*. In its turn, this narrative construction is framed by the Proem and Conclusion, in which Boccaccio addresses the *graziosissime donne, nobilissime giovani, piacevoli donne*: a sophisticated but not courtly readership, closely resembling the *lieta brigata* but marked by a very specific gender distinction. Both audiences enjoy tales in which the narrative art is the object of witty meditation: the supreme example is the central tale of the collection, the story of Madonna Oretta (VI.1). This focus on a specific audience results in Boccaccio's filtering of all his material – including the lowly comic element – through one cultivated medium. In order to do so, he needs a strong pact with his intended audience; but once this pact is established, the shared terrain over which narrator and audience move allows for great freedom and experimentation.

Such shared awareness of narrative conventions is particularly evident in the sections of the work dedicated to the secondary audience, the paratext framing his fictitious *lieta brigata*: in the Proem, justifying his choice to begin with a description of the plague, Boccaccio adds a metaphor suggesting a *tonal pathway* (Davis 1981: 15):

Questo orrido cominciamento vi fia non altramenti che a' camminanti una montagna aspra e erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia reposto, il quale tanto più viene lor piacevole quanto maggiore è stata del salire e dello smontare la gravezza. (11)

[This horrid beginning will be to you even such as to wayfarers is a steep and rugged mountain, be-

¹ Branca (1985: liii-liv, 919). This is also the edition of the *Decameron* I use throughout. This article was first presented as a paper at the Fables of the Fabliaux conference held at the University of Melbourne, in September 2014, and subsequently at the Circolo Filologico Linguistico at the Università di Padova, in January 2015. I wish to thank the organizers and participants of both events.

yond which stretches a plain most fair and delectable, which the toil of the ascent and descent does but serve to render more agreeable to them].

With its Dantesque allusion, this passage prepares the audience's mind for a purgatorial experience: going through pain in order to better appreciate pleasure. The relation between metaphorical image and actual reading experience is often reiterated: Boccaccio talks of his description of the plague as «brieve noia (dico brieve in quanto *in poche lettere si contiene*)» (11; «this brief exordium of woe – brief, I say, inasmuch as it can be put *within the compass of a few letters*»; my emphasis). This is an intuition we find elsewhere in Boccaccio: in book XIV of the *Genealogiae Deorum gentilium* we read, «Amplissima fingendi est area et pleno semper fictionum cornu poesis incedit» (XIV.4) – the space of invention is immense, and poetry walks with her horn always filled with fictions (Menetti 2009: 31-38). Within this immense space, the *Decameron* forges a special relation with a specific audience, becoming a locus of shared experience and experiment. What I would like to explore here is whether this attitude can also be part of what he was learning from his experience of reading the French fabliaux that constitute some of his sources, before focussing on the sixth novella of the ninth day – the story of Niccolosa and Pinuccio – and its antecedents, the anonymous fabliaux generally known as *Le meunier et les deus clers*, together with Jean Bodel's *Gombert*. I shall also propose a comparison with a text possibly deriving from these, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*.

Recent studies have underlined the Italian writer's awareness and use of the French fabliau: there is the possibility, for instance, that he might have seen one or more manuscripts containing fabliau material during his sojourn in Naples, at the Angevin court, or even earlier, thanks to his contacts with the same court (Kelly 2003: 43).² Katherine Brown has hypothesised, perhaps over-optimistically, a very close dependence: «Approximately one fourth of the *novelle* in the collection borrow from the *fabliaux* tradition» (Brown 2010: 54);³ the scholar has also shown a close intertextuality, possibly based on Boccaccio's reading of a written record of fabliaux, rather than his relying on the memory of an oral transmission (Brown 2010: 57, 63-71). This dichotomy between oral and written experience is also at the basis of Boccaccio's relation with his secondary audience in the *Decameron*: if the *lieta brigata* listens to an oral recitation, commenting and occasionally interrupting the narrator, the secondary audience is undergoing a different experi-

² There is also the possibility that manuscripts including fabliaux were composed or decorated in Italy – for instance, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Française, français 2173, probably originating from Venice (Viellard 1989: 382-83). I wish to thank Francesca Gambino for helping me with this point.

³ In a more recent work, Brown has offered an articulate comparison between the fabliau material and the *Decameron* (Brown 2014). Here, more prudently, the scholar lists twenty-seven novellas in the *Decameron* for which there is an analogue (not explicitly a source) in one or more fabliaux (171-172).

ence, based on the manuscript transmission of the written text: this is evident in the use of the verb *leggere* in the Proem: «Ma non voglio per ciò che questo di piú avanti leggere vi spaventi, quasi sempre tra' sospiri e tralle lagrime leggendo dobbiate trapassare» («But I would have you know, that you need not therefore be fearful to read further, as if your reading were ever to be accompanied by sighs and tears», 11). The aural experience of the primary audience is underlined in the Proem to the third day, in which we see the young folk spending some time in a beautiful garden: when the time for a siesta comes, some of them go to sleep, but there is more than one who,

vinto dalla bellezza del luogo, andar non vi volle, ma quivi dimoratisi, chi a legger romanzi, chi a giuocare a scacchi e chi a tavole, mentre altri dormiron, si diede. (226)

[others were too charmed by the beauty of the place to think of leaving it; but tarried there, and, while the rest slept, amused themselves with reading romances or playing at chess or dice].

Here the author underlines a difference between listening to the tales, and *reading* – only the reading matter is somewhat different, as it is of *romanzi*, chivalric poems of the kind Boccaccio himself had written, rather than humorous prose tales.⁴ But this relationship undergoes an interesting transformation in the revelatory Proem to the fourth day. Here the writer interrupts, without any warning, the fiction of the *lieta brigata*, thus contravening his own rules, and once again turns directly to his secondary audience: *carissime donne*, he addresses them, raising the issue of manuscript circulation and reader response, his *novelette* are only unassuming little things:

non solamente in fiorentin volgare e in prosa scritte per me sono e senza titolo, ma ancora in istilo umilissimo e rimesso quanto piú il possono. (329)

[written as they are not only in the vulgar Florentine, and in prose, and without dedicatory flourish, but also in as homely and simple a style as may be].

In spite of this humility, they have triggered criticism and envy, and an overall negative judgement on the author and his work, even if he has not yet completed one third of his work. Boccaccio's response is unexpected:

Ma avanti che io venga a far la risposta a alcuno, mi piace in favor di me raccontare, non una novella intera, acciò che non paia che io voglia le mie novelle con quelle di così laudevole compagnia, quale fu quella che dimostrata v'ho, mescolare, ma parte d'una, acciò che il suo difetto stesso sé mostri non esser di quelle; e a' miei assalitori favelando dico. (330)

⁴ Boccaccio himself clouds the issue, since he claims for his book not only a name, *Decameron*, but also a *cognome*, *Prencipe Galeotto*, with an obvious allusion to romances, and to the episode in *Inferno V* featuring the disastrous consequences of such reading.

[However I am minded to answer none of them, until I have related in my behoof, not indeed an entire story, for I would not seem to foist my stories in among those of so honourable a company as that with which I have made you acquainted, but a part of one, that its very incompleteness may shew that it is not one of them: wherefore, addressing my assailants, I say].

The choice of locutionary verbs is here different: rather than *leggere*, we find *raccontare*, *favelando*, *dico*. What follows is the unfinished (if still wildly funny) tale of Filippo Balducci and his son. It is a revelatory moment in narrative terms: discussing a reading experience, Boccaccio introduces what is apparently a shared oral moment, breaking down the stability of the written text; the unfinished tale opens up a space of confrontation, and by denying its audience the pleasure of completion suggests a continuation of the work outside the boundaries of the book.

This articulate, metafictional space apparently has little analogy with the form of the *fabliau*, and Boccaccio's use of the genre seems confined to his borrowing motifs and plots. To begin with, the very uncertainty in the definition of the *fabliau* – generally identified in the simplest terms as «a comic tale that was especially popular in the Norman and Picardy regions of France during the 13th century» (Sauer 2008: 116)⁵ – resides in the difficulty of identifying its social or historical background. Critical discussion has not yet arrived at a univocal decision on this point, since the genre is variously seen as addressing a bourgeois audience, a courtly milieu, or even, given its parodic nature, the students of the cathedral school or of the nascent universities (Togebly 1974: 12-13). Such difficult identification blurs the margins of the genre: later writers such as Boccaccio or Chaucer could re-set the flexible short stories by inventing new frames and new margins for them, or simply by inserting a strong narrative voice. Relying on bodily humour, normally centring on love triangles, often crude, the *fabliaux* are in fact characterized by an extremely unobtrusive narrator. Occasionally they open with an invitation to listen, and conclude with a short and gnomic sentence posing as a *moralitas*, but their pithy brevity and situational humour require the *fabula*, the actual narration and the plot line, to stand out. Like the English medieval ballad, the *fabliau* is characterized by the minimal presence and role of the paratext. Where it is present, as in *Le prestre qui dist la passion*, it refers to the literary context but it does not engage the audience in dialogue:

Dire vos vueil une merueille
A qui nule vne s'apareille
D'un prestre sot et mal sené ...

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* is surprisingly conservative in its definition (though in this case it still presents the 1894 definition, which has not been updated): «a metrical tale, belonging to the early period of French poetry». To this the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* helpfully add «typically a bawdily humorous one». The 1922 edition of *Larousse Universel*, though coyly starting with «petit conte français populaire en vers, du XIIIe et XIIIe siècle», then admits that «ces récits sont parfois scabreux».

[I've something wonderful to tell.
a rarity, a nonpareil,
about a priest, and none too smart].⁶

Or, more intriguingly, it refers to the lightness of the text it is introducing:

De fables fait on le fabliaus
Et de notes les chans nouiaus
Et de matiere les chancons
Et de drap chaucés et chaucons.

[Fabliaux are made of tall tales, just as music is made of notes, and songs of matters, and pants and breeches are made of cloth].⁷

Only very rarely, as with Jean Bodel's *Les deus chevaus*, does the paratext introduce the author in the third person – a device enhancing the authority of the speaker, and often present in contemporary French romances such as *Erec et Enide*, in which «dist Crestiens de Troies» is inserted in the opening lines (Kunstmann 2009: l. 9).⁸

This would also explain why Boccaccio found them so congenial to his own construction of a collection of *novelle*: like the stories of the local, oral tradition from which he drew his material for the adventures of Calandrino, Bruno and Buffalmacco, they could easily be inscribed within the writer's own narrative structure. In its extreme bareness the fabliau is an ideal tool in Boccaccio's hands. Yet a further exploration of the genre reveals other interesting traits. The simplicity of these tales may be related to their oral origin, underlined by opening sentences such as «Plest vos oïr d'une bourjoise / Une aventure asés courtoise?», «Say, how would you all like to hear / a townswoman's courtly affair?» (*La borgoise d'Orliens*, NRCF III, 366), or by observations such as «Flabliaux sont boin a escouter», «It's good to hear a fabliau» (*Les trois aveugles de Compiegne*, l. 9, NRCF II, 176). Even if in many fabliaux we find literary traits, we should also acknowledge that

many (if not all) fabliaux clearly invite analysis in terms of their oral character. Not merely did they originate in an old story-telling tradition, they long continued to be not merely read aloud but recited from memory. And many fabliaux do seem strongly oral in their basic conceptualization – for example, in their rudimentary and inconsistent psychology, their use of epithets, their scene-by-scene rather than complex plot structure, their reliance on direct (and punchy) dialogue, their lack of abstract thought, etc. (Birge 1988: 200)

⁶ The texts of the fabliaux are taken from Noomen and van den Boogaard 1983-1998 (henceforth *NRCF*); this text *NRCF* VIII, 252. Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Dubin (2013: *passim*).

⁷ *Dou chevalier qui faisoit les cons parler*, Paris, BnF, MS fr. 25545, fols 77c-82d, lines 1-4, transcribed in *NRCF* III, 56; translation mine. As Rosanna Brusegan notes (1980: vii), here the writer offers a definition of his own material – the frivolity of the tone is the frivolity of the genre (I wish to thank Rosanna for her illuminating comments and suggestions).

⁸ I wish to thank Gianfelice Peron for discussing this point with me.

The «tension between oral and literary tradition» (Birge 1988: 200) inherent in the genre is evidently a trait that appealed to Boccaccio's curiosity, and that finds an analogue in the tension inscribed in the double audience and double frame of the *Decameron*. The Italian writer thus provides the bare margins of the fabliaux with a modern paratext that inscribes, justifies and gives a new direction to the stories.

Unlike other medieval traditional tales such as the Aesopic fables, the fabliau eschews any attempt at *moralitas*. This does not mean that a *moralitas* may not be present: as shown above, the narration may conclude with a gnomic sentence:

Par cest fableau poez savoir
 Que cil ne fait mie savoir
 Qui de nuiz met sa feme hors,
 S'el fait folie de son cors.⁹

[Through this fabliau one may learn that the man hardly behaves wisely who puts his wife out at night, if she has fun in her turn].

But what is interesting is that the moral, when present, «actually documents the unfitness of the fabliau for moralization», as Beyer notes, continuing thus:

In the fabliau the farcical reduction does not stop short of the lesson, but in most cases destroys it. The most conclusive proof of this effect is found in those works which appear to do nothing other than demonstrate a proverbial teaching as in *Jouquet*, but it is not a teaching comparable to that of the didactic exempla [...] The scatological reduction of this fabliau [...] is directed against nothing less than one of the most fundamental convictions of the Middle Ages, namely, the belief that a useful lesson could be derived from every event. The fabliau, although it destroys this belief, does not offer an alternative. (Beyer 1974: 39)

This trait, which the Florentine writer shares with the original French fabliau, offers interesting critical developments. The unfinished tale of Filippo Balducci at the beginning of Day Four in the *Decameron* presents the same characteristics: lacking a conclusion, it does not offer that finiteness prompting the construction of a moral. In both cases the narrations exist for themselves, and the construction of their margins is left to the reader. The preoccupation is therefore not with the moral underpinning the story, or with the exemplary value that may be drawn through a close identification with the appropriate characters, but with the narrative construction and the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from it. In both the *Decameron* and the fabliaux corpus we find instances in which such aesthetic pleasure is highlighted by the narration drawing attention to its own construction. As one critic has noted, «the fabliaux that stage their own genesis are [...] representative of a principle of functionalism – the exposure of the architectonic underpinnings of

⁹ *Les tresces*, NRCF VI, 258. Translation mine.

poetic creation – operative within the genre as a whole [...] the poet himself is a trickster who, in exposing the creation of stories within the story, merely exposes himself» (Bloch 1986: 95-99). The narrative art in the fabliau is both a creation, a trick of invention and ingenuity, and a *folia*, a story told to deceive the gullible. In the *Decameron* there are of course numerous examples of straightforward trickery: Frate Cipolla tricks peasants with his false relics, and even when these relics are stolen and substituted with a heap of coals, finds a new narrative to explain the substitution (VI.10); Calandrino is tricked by his friends Bruno and Buffalmacco into believing himself invisible, and believes in the fantastic country of Bengodi evoked by the two pranksters, who spin him a tale of mountains of cheese and rivers of wine (VIII.3); Ser Cepparello tricks his confessor on his deathbed, and is therefore honoured as a saint afterwards (I.1). Each prank is supported by a story within a story; the reader is not asked to applaud the inexistent morality of each tale, but to marvel at the genesis of narratives within narratives.

This pact with the intended audience brings us back to the cultural context of Boccaccio's tales. Whether or not the *gentilissime donne*, or even the *lieta brigata* that constitutes the primary audience of the tales, were aware of the existence of fabliaux, it seems evident that whenever Boccaccio uses a source or even some material from this genre, he is also staging, on the part of the *lieta brigata*, what he believes to be the appropriate reaction. In this case there are some surprises: for instance in IX.2, one of the tales of probable direct derivation from a fabliau, we find the story of an abbess, who, rising in haste in order to accuse a young nun of fornication, leaves her own lover, a priest, in her bed, and puts on her head, instead of her veil, the priest's own breeches. Once discovered, she will turn her harsh reproaches against the young nun into a justification:

mutò sermone e in tutta altra guisa che fatto non aveva cominciò a parlare, e conchiudendo venne impossibile essere il potersi dagli stimoli della carne difendere; e per ciò chetamente, come infino a quel dì fatto s'era, disse che ciascuna si desse buon tempo potesse; e liberata la giovane, col suo prete si tornò a dormire, e l'Isabetta col suo amante. (755)

[[the abbess] changed her tone, and held quite another sort of language than before, the upshot of which was that 'twas impossible to withstand the assaults of the flesh, and that, accordingly, observing due secrecy as theretofore, all might give themselves a good time, as they had opportunity. So, having dismissed Isabetta to rejoin her lover in her cell, she herself returned to lie with her priest].

This is one of Boccaccio's anticlerical tales: in itself the ferocious sarcasm at the abbess's hypocrisy is no novelty. What is interesting in this passage is the tone: the new *sermone*, the new discourse of the abbess brings the action to a satisfactory conclusion («conchiudendo venne impossibile essere il potersi dagli stimoli della carne difendere»). But such a conclusion is only satisfactory for the actors; it would of course be inadmissible as a *moralitas*. Yet it is explicitly proposed, through the use of the word *conchiu-*

dendo, as a closure to the story; and in the opening lines of the following tale, we read of the listeners' reaction:

Poi che Elissa ebbe la sua novella finita, essendo da tutti rendute grazie a Dio che la giovane monaca aveva con lieta uscita tratta de' morsi delle invidiose compagne, la reina a Filostrato comandò che seguitasse. (756)

[When Elisa had ended her story, and all had given thanks to God that He had vouchsafed the young nun a happy escape from the fangs of her envious companions, the queen bade Filostrato follow suit].

In moral terms, this is perilously close to blasphemy: everybody is thanking God for allowing the young nun to continue her enjoyment of an illicit and sinful liaison. In narrative terms, however, it makes perfect sense: everybody is thanking God because the tale ended so neatly. It is an uncanny reminder of the effect of the *moralitas* in the fabliaux (Brusegan 1980: xiv).

The same principle should also guide the reaction of the secondary audience in the Proem to book IV: the unfinished novella told by the Boccaccio-narrator, apparently inserted in order to answer the attacks of those detractors who maintained he had written his novellas because he wanted to please women, is followed by an anti-*moralitas*:

Ma avere infino a qui detto della presente novella voglio che mi basti e a coloro rivolgermi alli quali l'ho raccontata. Dicono adunque alquanti de' miei riprensori che io fo male, o giovani donne, troppo ingegnandomi di piacervi, e che voi troppo piacete a me. Le quali cose io apertissimamente confesso, cioè che voi mi piacete e che io m'ingegno di piacere a voi. (333)

[But enough of this story: 'tis time for me to cut it short, and return to those, for whose instruction 'tis told. They say then, some of these my censors, that I am too fond of you, young ladies, and am at too great pains to pleasure you. Now that I am fond of you, and am at pains to pleasure you, I do most frankly and fully confess].

Boccaccio openly invites his secondary audience to take pleasure in a narrative construction that steers clear of any form of morality: he counters an accusation («in favor di me») by admitting to its truth, and using this as a pretext to open another narrative space.

It remains to be seen whether the *carissime donne*, Boccaccio's secondary audience, may be said to have existed in historical reality, or whether they are simply one more construction on the writer's part. It seems that there already was a female audience ready for such works: as Padoan underlines, women were a relevant part of the reading public, and could play a pivotal role in the spreading of courtly literature in the town and among the rising bourgeoisie (Padoan 1964: 91). The growing wealth of the Florentine merchants had created a leisured class of (especially female) readers, and the immediate and striking success of the *Decameron* had met their demands. It is indeed, as Vittore

Branca has underlined, the «*commedia umana dell'età comunale*», the humane comedy of the age of the commune;¹⁰ and it intercepts the favour and the response of a clearly defined audience, for whom place-names would be immediately evocative and literary allusions could be shared. It thus plays for and within a group of readers familiar with the courtly literary tradition Boccaccio is drawing from and sometimes parodying. At the same time, this audience is aware of the attempts, on the part of the *nouveaux riches*, to imitate, sometimes with disastrous results, the attitudes and habits of the aristocracy, and thus understands the entertainment value of imitation, travesty and parody. It is therefore plausible to think of Boccaccio's audience as a sophisticated group of townspeople, aware of courtly traditions and of Boccaccio's own parody of the courtly genre, but possibly also of the existence of the *fabliaux* and of their own parodic value (Nykrog 1974: 59-73).

Unsurprisingly, this audience would enjoy the experience of the *fabliau*, a tale in which a «common source of humor is the portrayal of decidedly *uncourteous* characters trying to adopt stereotypically courteous manners» (Sauer 2008: 116). Parodic translation and transformation is a recurring characteristic in Boccaccio's writing, and a number of studies have shown his relationship with authoritative literary genres such as the epic poem, transformed in the case of *Filostrato* and subverted by Boccaccio's translation of «narrative situations into lyrical ones» (Branca 1984: 37). In *Filocolo* Vittore Branca even detects what he calls a *polemical plan* (Branca 1984: 38) in the writing of a little book that would explicitly contrast its material with that offered by Virgil, Lucan and Statius in their great poems: in the prologue to this poem Boccaccio sets this out very clearly, declaring he would use a middle, narrative style, eschewing the high epic style, in order to recount the story of the two young lovers, Florio and Biancifiore (*Filocolo*, V.97). The writer is aware of doing this in order to meet his intended readers' response; as Branca writes,

it would not be written for men of letters but, as later on was the case with the *Decameron*, for maids in love («*giovinette amorose*») who bear love's burning flames in their breasts («*ne' dilicati petti portano l'ardenti fiamme d'amore*») and would not aspire to praise from the learned but merely to give pleasure to the ladies («*solamente piacere alla donna*»), to delight lovely ladies with his pitiful song («*la bella donna con pietosa voce dilettere*»). It would be difficult to find the poet taking a stronger stand in favour of the romance and its typical public (from Francesca to Fiammetta); and it is taken right there in the introduction and conclusion, the part which communicate the author's intention, in authentic narrative poetic theory, in this first, true, original romance. (Branca 1984: 38)

Branca's contention is that this rewriting, aimed at a specific readership, occurs in a number of Boccaccio's works, from the *Amorosa Visione*, preparing the ground for a triumphal genre that Petrarch would make especially famous, to the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, which «offers the first example and model for the purely psychologi-

¹⁰ Branca chooses this title for the introductory essay to his edition of the *Decameron*.

cal romance and even for the modern bourgeois novel, centring as it does on exclusively middle-class characters and everyday events» (Branca 1984: 38).

It may therefore be rewarding to apply the same analysis to the fabliau, which presents a different challenge: not only does it not claim the same weight of authority as the epic poem, or even the romance: it presents itself in its turn as a parody, and by stressing its own performative quality it solicits the audience's immediate response (Picone 2008: 16). Boccaccio evidently appreciates the parodic value of the form, and at the same time develops the performative quality of the text by inviting the implied reader, explicitly (in the case of the primary audience) or implicitly, to take part in the performance, and having, on most occasions, the *lieta brigata* answer or react to each novella.

Boccaccio's choice of the *mezzana via*, of the middle narrative style, asks him to reformulate the fabliaux he chooses to present: if, in fact, this choice can work as a move downwards from the high-style tradition (reducing the epic matter to the vicissitudes of two young lovers, as in the case of *Filocolo*), it can also work as a move upwards, intervening in the fabliau material with a number of changes. The most obvious is an attenuation of the language as concerns explicitly sexual references, together with a more complex articulation of the sentences, helped by the choice of prose rather than verse to develop a Latinate syntax (Auerbach 1953: 203-31). Another, more complex intervention consists in giving narrative and psychological plausibility to the sometimes skeletal joke of the fabliaux: the setting acquires local relevance, the characters plausibility and background. While the fabliaux may be quite generically placed in the French countryside, Boccaccio chooses different and specific settings for his tales, from the Naples of the story of Andreuccio da Perugia (II.5) to the Palermo of Salabaetto (VIII.10), to the Venice of Frate Alberto (IV.2), and of course Florence and its environs for a number of other tales; as the settings are varied and determined, so are the social classes (Auerbach 1953: 213). Auerbach proposes a clear definition of this evolution:

The gulf between the art of the fable and the art of Boccaccio by no means reveals itself only in matters of style. The characterization of the personages, the local and social setting, are at once far more sharply individualized and more extensive. Here is a man whose conscious grasp of the principles of art enables him to stand above his subject matter and to submerge himself in it only so far as he chooses, a man who shapes his stories according to his own creative will. (Auerbach 1953: 213)

Auerbach's statement may be compared with Branca's observations on Boccaccio's treatment of authoritative genres: in both cases we have a free re-handling of existing material, inserted within a dialogue with an optimal readership. In the treatment of high genres, such as the epic poem, Branca speaks of «subverting them from the inside, or, more properly, [...] ironizing them in a subtle but determined way» (Branca 1984: 45). Subversion and irony are already characterizing traits of the fabliaux, and what is fasci-

nating in Boccaccio's treatment is that in his case they are not aimed at the characters and situations described in the text, but at the genre itself.

My final example is from *Decameron* IX.6, the story of Niccolosa and Pinuccio. In this case we have a clear trajectory, in terms of analogues rather than sources,¹¹ from one or more fabliaux to Boccaccio's version to yet another version (possibly indebted to both fabliau and Boccaccio) in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The plotline used in each case varies little: reduced to its bare bones, it is the story of two young clerks who spend the night in the same room as an older man (a miller in some of the fabliaux and in Chaucer), his wife, his grown-up daughter and his baby son. Taking advantage of the darkness, the two clerks manage to bed the women. The central tool of their double trick is the baby's cradle, resting at the foot of the married couple's bed: by moving it, the geography of the sleeping room becomes confused and leads the old man and his wife to error. The wife mistakenly enters the other clerk's bed, and the errors multiply until the final catastrophe (Hertog 1991: 58-84). Peter G. Beidler calls this story «one of the most popular fabliaux in medieval Europe» (2002: 23): the neatness of the cradle-trick played by the two young men may have contributed to its popularity, and to the proliferation of a number of analogous fabliaux across Europe.

In two of the fabliaux, as usual with this genre (Brusegan 1984), none of the characters has a name: the only proper nouns are those belonging to saints invoked at various moments of the narration, but even these exclamations do not help us get a sense of setting. In *Gombert*, the peasant (Gombert himself) and his wife (Gillein) have a name, though not the other characters. In *Le meunier et les II clers* the two young men (*clers* or *povre clerc*) are indistinguishable from each other, and are immediately presented in the opening lines «Dui povre clerc furent jadis. / Né d'une vile et d'un païs» (ll. 1-2; «There once were two poor students born in the same city and the same land».¹² Interestingly, they are also given a very strong initial motive for their actions: while in *Gombert* there is simply lust, here they are driven to the miller's house in their attempt to become bakers in order to escape hunger. *Gombert* plays with a parody of courtly love: after seeing Gillein, one of the young men is «si fous que amer li covint» (l. 8; «so mad that he must love her»), while the other «aama sa fille / si qu'adés i metoit ses euz» (ll. 14-15; «loved her daughter so since he had first seen her»),¹³ but they will win the women by tricks or false

¹¹ The word *sources* should be used with some caution, although most critics agree nowadays that Chaucer did have access to Boccaccio's works, including the *Decameron*, and in particular to the story of Niccolosa and Pinuccio. Boccaccio's tale, together with two of the fabliaux with which it is related, *Le meunier et les .II. clers* Text A and Text B, is included in Beidler (2002: 23-73).

¹² Beidler (2002: 28-29). Beidler's modern English translation is used throughout; quotations are from Berne, Bibl. De la Bourgeoisie, MS 354, fols 164d-167d, transcribed in *NRCF* VII, 289-297.

¹³ For the text of *Gombert*, see *NRCF* IV, 296-301.

bribes, and describe their love-making in almost bestial terms. As for *Le meunier*, in the insistence at the beginning of the fabliau that this is a *mal an*, a year of misery for harvest and for the poor, the text inserts a note of inevitability – hunger, like sexual desire, is a primary need that drives away any shame:

L'an doit tote honte endosser
Por soi de cest mal an giter. (ll. 49-50)

[People should take upon themselves any shame to protect themselves in this misfortune].¹⁴

This explains and partly justifies the two clerks' initial actions, as well as their desire for revenge against the miller once he, abetted by his wife, has stolen their wheat. It also sets a mood of inevitability that makes the clerks' dialogues and reactions almost mechanical: their staccato sentences and exclamations point at stock reactions:

L'uns d'aus a l'autre regardé.
«Qu'est ice? Somes nos robé?»
– Oïl, fait ce l'uns, ce m'est vis!
Pechiez nos a a essil mis!
Chascuns escrie: «Halas, halas!
Secorez nos, saint Nicolas!» (ll. 107-12)

[The one looked at the other. «What's this? Have we been robbed?» «Yes,» said the other, «so it looks to me! Sin has brought us to ruin.» Each one cried out, «Alas, alas! Help us out, St. Nicholas!»]

Similarly, what prompts one of the clerks to seduce the girl is nothing more articulate than immediate urge:

La nuit, qant il furent cochié,
Li clers de li grant garde prist. (ll. 182-83)

[That night when they were abed the student took great notice of her].

The introduction of the motif of sexual desire is, likewise, crudely explicit. The miller's daughter, like all other characters, has no name; but she is «et bele et cointe» (l. 161, «beautiful and graceful»), qualities immediately contrasted with the appearance of the miller: «el ne fust pointe» (l. 162; «[he] wasn't, not a bit»). Her gracefulness is not linked with any action or word on her part, or with the young men's reaction, but rather with the miller's attitude:

¹⁴ I have emended Beidler's translation, which reads *mal an* as «bad year».

En une huche la metoit
 Chascune nuit, o el gisoit,
 Et l'anfermoit par de desus
 Et li bailloit par un pertuis
 La clef, et puis s'aloit cochier. (ll. 163-67)

[[He] put her in a trunk every night, where she lay, and he locked it up on top and gave her, through the keyhole, the key, and then went off to sleep].

Any response to this surprising bit of information is forestalled by the narrator, who immediately adds, «A noz clers devons repairier» (l. 168; «But we should get back to our clerks»). The *huche*, the trunk or hutch where the daughter is locked every night, has raised some perplexity, and in the attempt to defend the realism of the fabliau some scholars have found nothing bizarre in this detail: Philippe Ménard, for instance, writes that «this is not the burlesque invention of our author. Such a custom really existed in certain provinces, in certain families» (1984: 59, translated in Bloch 1986: 6). The point, however, is not whether a contemporary audience would have accepted this element as part of a household's normal routine (though the locking up of the young girl beggars belief): on the one hand, the *huche* underlines the idea of the young girl as property, whether the miller's, or, later in the fabliau, one of the clerks'; on the other, it highlights this particular property as sexual property, relating the trunk in which the girl is locked to the coffers or trunks which, in other fabliaux, symbolize or graphically represent women's most intimate parts.

This use of the plot as a machine that needs minimal motivational prompting has triggered discussions on the realism of the fabliau, and by implication on its intended audience. The theory of the fabliau as a *natural* text, a theory supported among others by Ménard and Per Nykrog (Nykrog 1957), creates the expectation of a *natural* audience, recipients that would obviously and immediately identify with the characters and their primary needs. This critical attitude has allowed scholars such as Joseph Bédier to identify the audience of the fabliau with «the “little people” whose poetry (without poetry) is the fabliaux (*fabellae ignobilium*)» (Bloch 1986: 13), writing that «il y a d'un bourgeois du XIIIe siècle à un baron précisément la meme distance que d'un fabliau à une noble légende aventureuse» (Bédier 1925: 371). The distinction posited by Bédier is perhaps simplistic, and underestimates the little people. It is more useful to think of the fabliau in terms of aesthetic distance: «The author of a serious moral tale wants his reader to understand it literally, to identify with the proper characters, and to draw moral conclusions and parallels; esthetic distance is thus inimical to his purposes. In most fabliaux, by contrast, the author must deliberately avoid reader identification» (Lacy 1974: 107). Given this premise, it is interesting to see how Boccaccio makes use of the fabliau's irony, which offers readers the right distance to enjoy the narrative development and ignore any mor-

alistic reflection, while adding an extra psychological dimension that works as a further challenge for these same readers.

One of the assessments that appear in critical comparisons of Chaucer's Reeve's Tale and Boccaccio's tale of Niccolosa is that «Chaucer's tale is an improved version of Boccaccio's *novella*. It is in any case better motivated» (Tedeschi 1972-73: 854). The question of *motivation*, though, is exactly what both writers have to face as they undertake the manipulation of the fabliau material. In both cases, the two young men are not moved by anything as basic as hunger or lust; with Chaucer, the issue is of pride – the clerks want to demonstrate to themselves and their college that they are not going to be fooled by a notorious swindler. This sets up an atmosphere of reciprocal retaliation; in the context of *quyting* that governs this whole section of the *Canterbury Tales*, it intensifies the spiteful quality of the clerks' action. Trickery and jokes are enjoyed in an atmosphere of keen and malicious antagonism, so that the love-making acquires a pernicious intensity in comparison with what we see in the fabliau: it is «sex as a revenge for the theft instead of on the spot libidinous urges» (Hertog 1991: 59). Boccaccio, on the other hand, decides to opt for a completely different approach: Pinuccio, one of the two young men, is sincerely in love with Niccolosa, and goes to visit her and her father, if not with honourable intentions, at least with a definitive intent – in which, from the start, he is seconded by the girl (Thompson 1996: 190).¹⁵ The miller and the two clerks of the fabliau move somewhat automatically towards their destined goal; Chaucer's Simkin, Aleyn and John patiently try to outdo one another in a game of will and make-believe. But Boccaccio's character move in a mood of, so to speak, social generosity or open-mindedness: Niccolosa's father offers his poor house to lodge two young men who would have otherwise (so he thinks) nowhere to stay; Pinuccio and Adriano, knowing of his poverty, bring a supply of food for the whole gathering; the old man prepares for them the less miserable of the beds, and thoughtfully waits until they are (as he thinks) asleep before going to bed with the rest of his family; the mother, once all is discovered, promptly thinks of a ruse that will save not only her own reputation, but her daughter's. Nor is there any violence: while in both Chaucer and the fabliaux the *dénouement* brings only to angry words and fights, and leaves the young woman alone and presumably forsaken after her one-night stand, in Boccaccio we have an afterlife for the young couple, since Pinuccio and Niccolosa manage to meet again. In fact, as has been observed, «Boccaccio utilizes a well-known farcical narrative but centres it on the problems of a young couple and their inability to

¹⁵ In this passage Boccaccio shows at the same time a closeness to and a distance from *Gombert*: in both cases there is attraction between the two young people, but Jean Bodel underlines the mercenary nature of both (the girl is won by a supposed gold ring, the young man cheats her) and allows no afterlife for the characters.

achieve what they desire in any other way» (Thompson 1996: 191-92). This means that the audience is asked to enjoy a well-performed trick *and* sympathise with its protagonists, though their actions are to all intents and purposes objectionable.

The cradle-trick is the pivotal point of the fabliau and what makes it memorable. It is also a glorious narrative moment: the most economic of actions – moving a cradle from one bed to the other – triggers a number of joyful and catastrophic reactions. In *Le meunier* the trick is played for all it is worth, spelt out in detail and possibly overstated, in that it draws attention to itself:

Uns autres angin li est creüz:
 Sanprés est de son lit chaüz,
 A l'autre lit s'an va tot droit,
 Lá o li muniers se gisoit:
 L'anfant átot lo briez aporte.
 Et quant la dame entre en la porte,
 Li clers tire a l'anfant l'oroille,
 Et l'anfes crie, si s'esvoille.
 Cele ala a son lit tot droit
 Qant ele oï o cil estoit,
 Puis est erraument retornee:
 Au cri de l'anfant est alee. (ll. 237-48)

[Another trick occurred to him. It was near his heated-up bed. He went straight to the other bed, there where the miller lay. He took the child with all his [cradle],¹⁶ and when the lady entered at the door the clerk pulled the child's ear. The infant awoke and cried. The wife went to his bed right off when she heard where the infant was. She turned right away to where the child cried].

Jean Bodel also explains carefully the position of the furniture and the ensuing mistakes. In his turn, Chaucer uses the full weight of this plot turner but with a much lighter touch than the fabliau writers, though the scene has already been set by the numerous allusions in the course of the tale to space being moulded and shaped by imagination and theoretical speculation:

And up he roos, and softly he wente
 Unto the cradel, and in his hand it hente,
 And baar it softe unto his beddes feet. (ll. 4211-13; Benson 1988)

Chaucer may have been writing for an audience who was already familiar with this story and therefore with the cradle-trick; interestingly, he does not give any reason for John's action at this point (Giaccherini 1976: 106). Boccaccio completely eliminates the

¹⁶ Beidler prefers to translate *briez* with *wrappings*, which he explains in a footnote as “swaddling clothes”, though elsewhere the word is translated with *cradle*. Text B presents the word *berz* (l. 231) un-equivocally translatable with *cradle*.

trick, which is turned into pure chance:

Adriano, che a ciò non avea l'animo, per avventura per alcuna opportunità natural si levò, alla quale espedire andando trovò la culla postavi dalla donna, e non potendo senza levarla oltre passare, presala, la levò del luogo dove era e posela allato al letto dove esso dormiva; e fornito quello per che levato s'era e tornandosene, senza della culla curarsi, nel letto se n'entrò. (777)

[At the same time Adriano, not by reason of the noise, which he heeded not, but perchance to answer the call of nature, also got up, and questing about for a convenient place, came upon the cradle beside the good woman's bed; and not being able otherwise to go by, took it up, and set it beside his own bed, and when he had accomplished his purpose, went back, and giving never a thought to the cradle got him to bed].

It seems perverse on the part of the Italian writer to renounce the main (and the most amusing) trick of the whole story. Yet the sacrifice of the cradle-trick saves and reinforces the new focus Boccaccio has given to the story. There is no malice either in Pinuccio or in Adriano, only quickness of wit (admittedly, in the latter rather than the former) at the service of understandable human desire or passion. By attributing the moving of the cradle to chance, Boccaccio allows us to appreciate the promptness of Niccolosa's mother first and then of Adriano.¹⁷ The narrative pleasure, once again, is to be derived not by situational comedy, as in the fabliau, but by witty and verbal comedy: each character will draw his or her own narration, and be applauded (or not) for the way they keep away from trouble thanks to their intellectual prowess.

Nor does the audience disappoint us in answering this challenge. Boccaccio's *lieta brigata* comments by praising, not the story or the nightly tricks, but «l'avvedimento della donna» (781, «the good woman's quick perception»): the appreciation is for the neat and elegant solution of a narrative impasse; this correctly echoes Panfilo, the narrator, who at the beginning of the tale had promised to tell a story in which «vedrete un subito avvedimento d'una buona donna avere un grande scandalo tolto via» (775; «'twill shew you how a good woman by her quick apprehension avoided a great scandal»). *Le meunier*, on the other hand, simply reiterates its former initial justification, as the two clerks, helped by the miller's wife, get back their wheat and thrash the miller:

Il orent l'ostel saint Martin
Et ont tant lor mestier mené
Q'il se sont do mal an gité. (ll. 320-22)

[They had the «St. Martin's hostel»¹⁸ and conducted their affair so well that they earned their keep

¹⁷ Pinuccio is described as «non il più savio giovane del mondo» (778; «not the most discreet of gallants»).

¹⁸ This refers to the free hospitality they received. Saint Martin was the patron saint of *bonne chère*.

for the bad year].

Jean Bodel's *Gombert* offers a little sarcastic reflection:

Ceste fable dist por essample
 Que nus hons qui bele fame ait
 Por nule proiere ne lait
 Jesir clerç dedens son ostel,
 Qu'il ne li face autretel:
 Qui bien lor fet sovent le pert,
 Ce dit le fable de Gombert! (ll. 186-92)

[This fable shows that no man who has a lovely wife should, for any prayer, allow a clerk in his house, or the clerk will do the same. If you benefit them you lose, so says Gombert's fabliau].

In the *Canterbury Tales* the conclusion of the Reeve harks back to his antagonism with the Miller: «Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale» (l. 4324). In its turn, this conclusion prompts the Cook's reaction and his own disgraceful and unfinished tale. None of the participants to the pilgrimage to Canterbury responds to the manner of the tale: given the dis-homogeneous, and by this time inharmonious audience, the effect of aesthetic distance is destroyed and the objective narrative pleasure of the tale is annihilated in the disorderly reactions of the audience, as it was in the prelude of the narrator. Boccaccio and Chaucer thus explore the margins of the genre by putting the fabliau to different uses: they change its narrative setting and function. While Chaucer injects the whole narration with the acrid spirit of its narrator, Boccaccio allows his well-to-do, liberal narrative community the purely aesthetic pleasure of a well-conducted narrative – both by Panfilo and by the participants in the nightly adventure – and a confirmation of their own moral distance from what is being narrated, as the writer underlines in the Conclusion, by using a contrary instance:

Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola: e così come le oneste a quella non giovano, così quelle che tanto oneste non sono la ben disposta non posson contaminare, se non come il loto i solari raggi o le terrene brutture le bellezze del cielo. Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son piú sante, piú degne, piú reverende, che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sí sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto. Ciascuna cosa in se medesima è buona a alcuna cosa, e male adoperata può essere nociva di molte; e così dico delle mie novelle.

[Corrupt mind did never yet understand any word in a wholesome sense; and as such a mind has no profit of seemly words, so such as are scarce seemly may as little avail to contaminate a healthy mind as mud the radiance of the sun, or the deformities of earth the splendours of the heavens. What books, what words, what letters, are more sacred, more excellent, more venerable, than those of Holy Writ? And yet there have been not a few that, perversely construing them, have brought themselves and others to perdition. Everything is in itself good for somewhat, and being put to a bad purpose, may work manifold mischief. And so, I say, it is with my stories].

By implication, the uncorrupted minds of Boccaccio's audience will only draw what is good from his stories; the *carissime donne* for whom the *Decameron* was composed find themselves elevated through a narrative game with both literary and social implications. In the following centuries, the alternating fortunes of this book showed the boldness of its author's move.

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