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Chapter 5: Coming Together: Consolation and the Rhetoric of Insinuation in Boccaccio's *Decameron*

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This chapter examines how Boccaccio in the *Proemio* and *Conclusione* of the *Decameron* subverts the normative medieval discourses of consolation as found within the Italian vernacular traditions of the *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *ars dictaminis* to serve a wholly different and erotically-charged function. By exploiting the mediating function of written texts, Boccaccio-narrator seeks to console by imagining a transition from being in touch literally to literally being in touch. In the process he parodies Boethius's and Dante's journeys of meditative ascent, offering in their place the fantasy of a pedestrian journey which climaxes in an erotic 'rendez-vous'.

In the *Proemio* to the *Decameron*, Boccaccio famously explains how he had been saved from the pains (*noia*) of unrequited love and possible death by the "piacevole ragionamenti d'alcuno amico e le sue laudevoli consolazioni" ["agreeable

conversation and the admirable expressions of sympathy offered by friends"].[i] In order to express his gratitude, he states his intention to offer his book as a gift to those friends to whom he felt indebted for his current wellbeing and healthy state of mind. Building upon the theme of recovery, he goes further in noting his desire to dedicate his book to all those still under the thrall of love, and especially women who had less access to the range of activities, such as hunting, riding, fishing and gambling, which enabled men to more readily overcome their melancholy. From the outset, therefore, Boccaccio as narrator plays on the relation between love, suffering and the gendered nature of behavioural norms to create the fantasy of a desiring female readership excluded from the consoling communities of affect available to men. It is into this space that he proposes to launch his text, drawing his imagined women readers into a fictive community which promised to perform a similar consolatory function. The gift of a book is particularly suited to this task, due to the ability of vernacular literature to overcome such cultural and spatial restrictions and reach a constituency characterised by the author as largely sedentary, listless, and confined within the domestic realm; factors, he adds, which merely serve to increase their suffering.[ii]

Given this spatial constraint, Boccaccio-narrator's remedy for such lovesickness is predicated on the deployment of literature as a psychological rather than a physical form of *divertimento*, literature performing a metaphorical 'diversion' rather than a literal 'dis-placement' as a means of taking the mind off things. It was precisely the susceptibility of women to such metaphorical transport that interested Boccaccio. The avowed purpose of the text, therefore, was to supplant the melancholic thoughts (*ragionamenti*) of these suffering women with new, more enjoyable and consolatory ones. The author concludes the *Proemio* by declaring himself ready to undertake the task at hand and minister to these women's needs

having himself been freed by Love "il quale liberandomi da' suoi legami m'a conceduto il potere attendere a' lor piaceri" ["which in freeing me from its bonds, has granted me the power of making provision for their pleasures"].[iii]

To date, those who have sought to analyse the *Proemio* of the *Decameron* have tended to locate it within the literary register of the Ovidian *Remedia amoris* and the romance narratives of the chivalric epics, an association encouraged by the subtitling of the text as 'prencipe Galeotto.'[iv] In the process, however, the relation of the text to more mundane forms of communicative practice as experienced in late medieval communal Italy has been largely overlooked or simply taken for granted. For Boccaccio's text is typical of the dialogic nature of much literary and poetic writing produced in communal Italy with its emphasis on collective association, reunion and the overcoming of separation.[v] Indeed a prime concern of Boccaccio's vernacular literary output was the mediating function of literature and its relation to affairs of the heart.[vi] It is somewhat incongruous, therefore, that the *Proemio* remains one of the least-studied parts of the *Decameron* when it actually testifies to the cultural obsession in communal Italy with the protocols of correct salutation and decorous address, as reflected in the manuals of the *ars dictaminis* and the various paraphrases and translations of Ciceronian classical rhetorical theory.[vii][viii]

It is within this communal context and the associated culture of textual production that I wish to locate my analysis of the *Decameron*'s rhetoric of consolation.[ix] The dedication of the text to women suffering in love places it squarely within the late-medieval genre of consolation literature, which is itself a by-product of communal life. Indeed, the narrator's description of women in love as suffering prisoners who "il più del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano" ["spend most of their time cooped up within the narrow confines of their

rooms”] (*Proemio*, 10) is far more redolent of one of the most translated and commented-upon texts of the late medieval period in Italy, namely Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, than it is to courtly literature with its highly visible, if untouchable, women.

The perceived relevance of Boethius’s text to the late medieval communal context is reflected in its reception history. Indeed, it was amongst the most widely available and commented upon Latin texts of the period.[x] Two popular Tuscan vernacular translations were already in circulation by mid-century, the 1332 version by the Florentine notary Alberto della Piagentina and the 1343 translation by the Sienese Grazia di Meo which was completed in Avignon but produced for the Florentine patrician Niccolò di Gino Guicciardini.[xi] The text was also used as a bridge between the minor and major authors in the teaching of grammar within the peninsula’s schools.[xii] Boccaccio’s familiarity with the text is apparent from his earlier works including the *Amorosa visione* (VI, 83) and especially the *Filocolo*, in which Biancifiore is figured as an imprisoned lover in a clear adaptation of the Boethian trope.[xiii] Not only did he own a copy of the *Consolation*, he also transcribed a copy in his own hand which is still extant (MS Vat. Lat. 3362), whilst his friend, Pietro da Muglio, gave public lectures on the *Consolation* which served as the basis for one of the two Latin Trecento commentaries on the text.[xiv]

The parallels between the *Proemio* of the *Decameron* and the *Consolation of Philosophy* are striking. The imprisoned women are described as involved in the kind of internal dialogue embarked upon by Boethius the prisoner, “volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora, seco rivolgendo diversi pensieri, li quali non è possible che sempre siano allegri” [“wishing one thing and at the same time wishing its opposite, and reflecting on various matters, which cannot always be pleasant to contemplate”]

(*Proemio*, 10). Where it is Philosophy that comes to the aid of the prisoner in the *Consolation*, in the *Decameron* it is the book itself which assumes the role, its 'nuovi ragonimenti' seeking to displace any melancholic thoughts through a combination of *novelle* and *canzonette* (*Proemio*, 13), a form reminiscent of the Consolation's own *prosimetrum*. In addition, both texts seek to offer a palliative to the inconstancy of Fortune, the first by reconciling the prisoner to the contingency of all things she grants, the second by seeking to rectify the negligence of Fortune in her failure to grant them any favours on account of her preference for men, the text being written "acciò che in parte per me s'amendi il peccato dela fortuna" ["in order that I (Boccaccio-narrator) may to some extent repair the omissions of Fortune"] (*Proemio* 13). Similary both texts characterise the protagonists in need of consolation as inert, Boccaccio's suffering women being "sat in idleness" ("quasi oziose sedendosi") (*Proemio* 10) whilst Boethius prisoner is diagnosed by Philosophy as suffering "from lethargy, a sickness common to deluded minds" ("lethargum patitur communem inlusarum mentium morbum") (I. ii. 10).

In a rare recognition of the parallels between the two texts, the Italianist Millicent Marcus, has noted that the *Decameron* could equally be subtitled 'The Consolation of Storytelling' such was its debt to the Boethian model, but the question remains concerning what kind of consolation the narrator is offering.[xv] For Marcus, the *Decameron* is proof that Boccaccio the author "has welcomed the normative responsibilities of his art and composed a work of true consolation, dramatizing his faith in the human power to recreate the self and the world in the best tradition of Boethius."[xvi] However, this explanation is not altogether convincing, not least because Boethius' text can easily be read as a satire on the limits of philosophical consolation.[xvii] It is this satiric mode which I wish to stress through examining

Boccaccio's ingenuity in adapting the trope of imprisonment, originally used to describe a state of male political marginalisation to describe a state, or fantasy, of female social isolation.[xviii] The exploration of the erotic possibilities resultant from this adaptation lie at the heart of Boccaccio-narrator's consideration of what it means to console his female readers, for it simultaneously poses the question of what it means to be available to minister to women's pleasures, and alerts us to the text's subtitle which clearly aligns the author with another legendary fictive pander.[xix] For by implicating the text within such processes of exchange between friends, Boccaccio-narrator conflates the libinal and social economies of *amicizia* and *clientelismo* and demands we question the nature of the bonds of mutual relation such gift-giving seeks to establish. It is therefore instructive to set such textual strategies within the context of contemporary practices of address and correspondence, and examine their relation to spatial issues of distance and separation, for Boccaccio's *Proemio* clearly plays with the conventions of the Italian medieval form of the *ars dictaminis*.

Boccaccio was clearly versed in the compositional conventions of late medieval epistolography, the rudiments of which he would have learnt during his schooling in Florence and refined during his canon law training in Naples. In this context, Boccaccio's ability to write letters, be they personal or business related, were a constituent part of a skill set which also covered the accounting processes expected of an "arismetrica instructus."[xx] The interpellation of such textual practices into his more overtly literary works comes as no great surprise given the verisimilitude of his realist fiction and it is in the modified Italian form of the *ars dictaminis* that we can trace the roots of what we may term Boccaccio's rhetoric of insinuation as manifest within the *Decameron*, specifically in relation to exordia and forms of address.

In many *ars dictamina*, the origins of epistolarity are traced to the need to overcome, or at least alleviate, some of the anguish caused by separation for letter writing provided a means of keeping in touch notwithstanding being apart. The communication of desire over distance was then the determining factor that led to the invention of the letter as a literary form. Written and sealed, they could also contain secrets that were not known to the bearer, who was more a carrier than a messenger. These characteristics of epistolary exchange were neatly summarised by the Bolognese *dictatore* Guido Faba in his influential *Summa dictaminis* (1228-29),

> Et ideo (the letter) non immerito fidelis nuntia dicitur secretorum, que crimen amici celat, verecundiam tegit, et absentes quantumcumque remotos inducit tamquam simul essent presentia corporali.[xxi]

[And thus not without reason is it (the letter) called a faithful messenger of secrets, which conceals the trespass of a friend, covers shame, and unites those absent, no matter how distant from each other, as if they were bodily present together.]

In this respect the *ars dictaminis* was the secular counterpart to the *ars orandi* which furnished principles for effective communication with God.[xxii] In both cases the aim was to persuade through forms of mediation that sought to overcome separation and, ultimately, bring about union. As arts, or practices, both disciplines were rhetorical, not solely in the terms of constituting repertories of stylistic figures and tropes but also in the sense of being situated performances in which the situation was one of separation. The aim of both these mediating arts, therefore, was to foreclose the gap and bring the correspondents closer together through the medium of language. These

are exactly the terms in which Boethius-prisoner prepares to address God in Book III of the *Consolation of Philosophy*: “We must call upon (*Invocandum*) the Father of all things”, I said, “for if this is omitted no beginning (*exordium*) can be rightly and properly based.” (III, 103-5). Such an approach, therefore, had to be appropriately fashioned if it was to elicit a fitting response.

Understood in these terms, the way in which Italian late medieval writers of the *ars dictaminis* modified the early French tradition of letter writing is highly significant, not only in terms of understanding the relation between cultural practices and literary forms but also to provide the framework for a more nuanced reading of Boccaccio’s *Proemio* in the *Decameron*. My contention is that Boccaccio adapts the conventions of rhetorical openings as presented within classical rhetorical theory to address a late medieval social constituency not imagined within the classical texts.[xxiii]

The principal innovation of the Italian school was the increased prominence given to the discussion and exposition of the Ciceronian exordium as found in the two most famous texts of classical rhetorical theory known in the medieval period, the *De Inventione* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, more commonly referred to as the *Rhetorica vetus* and the *Rhetorica nuova*.[xxiv] Instead of focusing upon due recognition of social status through finely differentiated forms of the salutation, the return to the Ciceronian exordium marked a reorientation of practices of address which paid greater attention to the performative situation of the speech act and its intended audiences.[xxv] By stressing the importance of gauging the audience as a preliminary to the process of persuasion, greater emphasis was placed on rhetorical invention and argumentation within dictaminal and rhetorical writings of the late medieval communal period. In this respect it could meet the needs of communal speakers and writers who participated in deliberative assemblies, communal

parlamenti, and inter-communal diplomacy, practices which required the debating of issues prior to voting or the establishing of consensus.[xxvi] Bene da Firenze, writing in the 1220s, for instance, noted in his *Candelabrum* how Cicero had no use for salutations on account of the controversial nature of his rhetoric, the assumption being that each issue, or cause to be debated, had two sides. [xxvii]

This more adversarial rhetorical paradigm is most clearly evidenced in the attention paid to the different forms of rhetorical exordium, or introduction, and specifically in relation to discussion of the closed, or indirect, exordium which was termed *insinuatio*. In the *Ad Herennium* the author differentiates between two forms of introduction, "the Direct Opening, in Greek called the *Prooimion*, and the Subtle Approach , called the *Ephodos*" ("principium, quod Graece prooemium appellatur, et insinuatio, quae ephodos nominator").[xxviii] The choice of type of exordium is conditioned by the nature of the issue (*causae*) being addressed, of which there were four types: "the honourable, discreditable, doubtful, and petty" ("honestum, turpe, dubium, humile").[xxix] The use of the subtle approach, *insinuatio*, was best suited to the pursuit of dishonourable causes. The author then treats insinuation at considerable length and in considerable detail before moving to discuss the next part of an oration, what translators have rendered as the 'statement of facts,' in Latin 'narrationem'– narrative. Of the three forms of narrative he proposes, it is the first which is of most interest: "It is one type when we set forth the facts and turn every detail to our advantage (*ad utilitatem nostram*) so as to win the victory, and this kind appertains to the causes on which a decision is to be rendered."[xxx] The combination of assuming a subtle approach in constructing a narrative that seeks personal profit through persuading others to pursue discreditable courses of action is a suggestive combination when seeking to understand the Boccaccio-narrator's intentions in

seeking to 'console' his female readers. This is certainly apparent by the time we reach the *Conclusione dell'autore*.

The suspicion is increased when we return to the *Ad Herennium*'s discussion of when to use this indirect or subtle approach. Here he gives us a detailed description of the forms of writing that can engender laughter and help raise the spirits of those who are tired of listening to other voices. The passage is worth quoting at length as the echoes we find in the *Decameron Proemio* are telling:

> If the hearers have been fatigued by listening, we shall open with something that may provoke laughter –a fable, a plausible fiction, a caricature, an ironical inversion of the meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo, banter, a naïvety, an exaggeration, a recapitulation, a pun, an unexpected turn, a comparison, a novel tale, an historical anecdote, a verse, or a challenge or a smile of approbation directed at some one.[xxxi]

(Si defessi erunt audiendo, ab aliqua re quae risum movere posit, ab apologo, fabula veri simili, imitatione depravata, inversione, ambiguo, suspicione, inrisione, stultitia, exsuperatione, collectione, litterarum mutatione, praeter expectationem, similitudine, novitiate, historia, versu, ab alicuius interpellatione aut adrisione.)

Boccaccio-narrator's positioning of his own narrative as a potential remedy for all those love-sick women cooped up in their rooms, exhausted by listening to their own voices, and in need of consolation seems to share distinct parallels with the Ciceronian rhetorical strategy of *insinuatio*. His intention to recount "cento novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie che dire le vogliamo" ["a hundred tales or fables, or

parables or stories or what you will"] (*Proemio*, 13) which might proffer some "utile consiglio" (profitable advice) concerning what to pursue and what to avoid places his text within the deliberative rhetorical framework established in the *Ad Herennium*'s discussion of indirect narrative openings, their aims, and how those aims condition their mode of address.

What is significant concerning Boccaccio's application of this framework to a literary setting is that the vast majority of Italian writing on the Ciceronian exordium and insinuation had been applied to the political realm where resistance and hostility were understood in political terms. This was certainly the case with the rhetorical and political writings of Brunetto Latini nearly a century earlier in both his *Trésor* and *Rettorica* where the trope of insinuation receives extensive commentary and amplification, although Latini shows a rare literary interest in the third form of narration noted above in his *Trésor*.[xxxii] This domestication of a previously civic rhetorical device is highly original and focuses attention on the manner in which Boccaccio transposes feelings of hostility and resistance from the political to the personal sphere, at the same time giving the transposition a gendered twist in configuring women as the suffering exiles/prisoners rather than displaced men. Significantly, as will be demonstrated, it also adds a dimension to a previously established tradition of generic adaptation in relation to the *ars dictaminis* and the art of addressing women.

In this respect Boccaccio overcomes one of the key limits of Italian medieval Ciceronianism: its wholly political and male bias. Ciceronianism, as a republican-, or communally-orientated corpus of rhetorical doctrine, furnished no guidance on the composition of the kind of consolation literature that exile itself provoked.[xxxiii] The failure of Latini to complete his *Rettorica*, itself a commentary on the *De Inventione*,

has been seen by some critics as a direct consequence of Latini's inability to reconcile the exclusively public and adversarial Ciceronian rhetorical model with the more broad ranging *Ars dictaminis* tradition that encompassed the private realm of personal correspondence and friendship, precisely the domain addressed by consolation literature.[xxxiv] The widespread dissemination of vernacular translations of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* can therefore be read as meeting a demand which admitted to the possibility of removal from the political realm and to the social reality of exile. The evolution of the tradition of consolation literature in late medieval and Renaissance Italy actually runs parallel to the rhetorical republicanism of civic discourse, and in many ways constitutes its shadow side. This is most clearly illustrated by Albertano da Brescia's authoring of the *Liber de doctrina dicendi et tacendi* in 1245, a foundational text which examined the economy of the spoken and written word within a communal context, followed by his *Liber consolationis et consilii* the year after in 1246.[xxxv] In keeping with Albertano's judicial background the consolatory text is presented in the form of a deliberative dialogue which domesticates the genre of legal *consilia* in proffering advice on how best to overcome the grief suffered on the death of a relative in factional feuding, drawing extensively on Stoic and legal sources.[xxxvi] Boccaccio himself contributed to this genre of consolation literature in 1361 when he penned a *Consolatoria* to his friend Pino de' Rossi who had been exiled from Florence on account of his perceived involvement in a political plot. It was a text which enjoyed considerable popularity throughout the fifteenth century, as witnessed by the high number of copies included in Florentine miscellanies.[xxxvii]

Yet as a rule these texts were written by men and exchanged between men. The tradition of writing to women within the parameters of the *ars dictaminis*

tradition is much less studied and less evident, but nonetheless is present amongst the rhetorically sophisticated teachers of the art in medieval Bologna, and specifically in the work of one of its most renowned practitioners, Boncompagno da Signa (c.1170-1240). Although Boncompagno claimed never to have read Cicero, there is no doubt he was familiar with both the *Rhetorica novus* and *Rhetorica vetus*, and certain characteristics of his adaptation of the *ars dictaminis* would seem to bear this out, especially in relation to his use of *insinuatio* and its relation to the possibility of 'consoling' women readers. In his *Rhetorica novissima* of 1235, which contains a number of model letters, he illustrates the figure of *transumptio*, a figure primarily concerned with displacement and transport, by suggesting how a nun might seek to address her lover by appropriating the scriptural dictum 'Virga tua et baculus tuus, ipsa me consolata sunt" ("They rod and thy staff they comfort (console) me").[xxxviii] Such usage is perfectly in keeping with the *Ad Herennium*'s advice that the indirect approach can be made through "an ironical inversion of the meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo" as noted above. Indeed, in classical rhetorical theory metaphor in this sense was also used for the sake of avoiding obscenity, a theme glossed in several of the Trecento vernacular renditions of the *Ad Herennium*.[xxxix]

Boncompagno took this play even further in his *Rota veneris*, a dictaminal tract which is exclusively concerned with the use of metaphors in persuading and dissuading within epistolary exchanges between lovers as suggested in the title *Tractatus amoris carnalis*.'[xl] A form of *summa dictaminis de arte amandi* the text has Venus appear to the protagonist "arrayed in richly broidered cloth-of-gold" and "like a queen she wore a crown and in her right hand held a regal sceptre, in a manner most befitting a great lady."[xli] The parody of Philosophy's appearance to the prisoner in the *Consolation of Philosophy* is suggestive; the dress is neither torn nor dusty, the crown

is in place, and the sceptre is held in the left rather than the right hand (I, I, 24-25). Significantly, there is not a book in sight. That lovers are all bound to wheels which turn in a circle would seem to collate the figure of Fortune with the figure of Venus in this instance. Yet for the purposes of establishing the significance of this text and this playful adaptation of epistolary exchange and verbal play to Boccaccio's *Proemio* in the *Decameron*, it is Venus' rebuke to the protagonist/fantasist which is most important. Upon greeting him "she emphatically declared that she was the goddess Venus, and at the same time demanded wherefore I had composed no greetings (*salutationes*) and delectable phrases (*delectabilia dictamina*) which seem so suitable for use by lovers."[xlii] Suitably chided the protagonist takes up his pen and authors the tract.

My contention is that Boccaccio's *Proemio* stands within such a tradition of allusive amorous address, and that his use of metaphor and displaced meanings affords the latitude required if the narrator's indirect approaches to women were to be successful, either in terms of reaching a female readership or indulging a male fantasy of reaching such a constituency. Nowhere is this clearer than in the punning found in the author's conclusion where Boccaccio returns to the issue of consolation and correct address: "Nobilissime giovani, a consolazion delle quali io a così lunga fatica messo mi sono..." ("Noble young ladies, for whose solace I undertook this protracted labour…").[xliii] In this epilogue, which forms the concluding part of the text, Boccaccio-narrator anticipates the criticism that he has taken inappropriate liberties ("troppa licenzia") in having his female protagonists say and hear words unbecoming to honest women. The term he uses is again a rhetorical one associated with unseemly address, namely *licenzia*, licence or speaking out of turn.[xliv] Yet to be granted "licenzia" by the communal authorities also meant being given permission to move

about unimpeded, and in legal terminology “licenziato” meant literally to be freed. The sense of the term, therefore, has both a spatial and linguistic performative dimension, and it is this duality that is played upon in Boccaccio-narrator’s far from convincing denial of his use of linguistic insinuation within, and through, the text. His assertion that words literally mean what they say may offer a simple repost to any possible criticism, but the sheer weight of his metaphorical discourse suggests otherwise. It is metaphorical language, understood as a register in which signifiers are granted licence and freed from signs, which permits the communication of non-literal, and socially untoward, meanings.

The need to adopt insinuation as a linguistic and spatial tactic was in fact necessitated by the changed social conditions between the ‘then’ of the narrated events and the ‘now’ of their belated recording within the text. In the introduction to Day 1, the situating part of the cornice-narrative, Boccaccio-narrator presents us with a portrait of Florence during the plague in which the affective social bonds that were constitutive of society and community (illustrated in the Ciceronian foundation myths of the *De Inventione*) were systematically unpicked, and in which the conventions of decorous socialisation and address were abandoned: “E lasciamo stare che l’uno cittadino l’altro schifasse e quasi niuno vicino avesse dell’altro cura e i parenti insieme rade volte o non mai si visitassero e di lontano” [“It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance”].[xlv] The matrix of family, friends and neighbours is dissolved as brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, wives their husbands and, worst of all, parents their offspring. One consequence of this abandonment which is significant for the current argument is the narrator’s observation that suffering

women showed few scruples in revealing their bodies to male servants, a previously inconceivable practice. During the plague, therefore, the approach to women's bodies was direct and not oblique, whereas in the 'now' of the narrative writing subsequent to the reinstatement of laws and cultural norms, a more subtle tactic is required by those seeking to serve suffering women, the very subject position which Boccaccio-narrator assumes in the *Proemio*. That the parallel was in the forefront of the narrator's own mind is implicit in the observation that those women who participated in such revelatory practices and actually survived the plague were subsequently less chaste: "il che in quelle che ne guarirono fu forse di minore onestà, nel tempo che succedette, cagione" ["and this explains why those women who recovered were possibly less chaste in the period that followed"][xlvi] Indeed, the reassertion of cultural norms is read as coterminous with the re-establishment of the protocols of decorous address, which necessitates the re-naming of the protagonists in order to preserve their reputations. Understood as a metaphor itself, what the plague serves to illustrate is the ambivalence of social aggregation as simultaneously a source of strength and a source of vulnerability as the benefits of contiguity are haunted by the spectre of contamination. Coming together in such conditions, therefore, had potentially erotic but also potentially fatal consequences.

Once the licence afforded by the plague was past, however, and culture was re-established, those seeking union with their objects of desire had to resort to indirect forms of approach both linguistically and spatially, the very realm of insinuation. And this was the time frame, the 'now', within which the *Decameron* as text was authored. The text itself, therefore, can be read as an indirect approach to women readers, real or imaginary, a literary strategy in which linguistic insinuation seeks to contaminate the minds of its readership in the same way that the plague contaminated their bodies.

Such thought processes were regularly addressed within contemporary handbooks on monastic meditation in which such ill-disciplined wandering thoughts were identified with the sin of curiosity and characterised as mental fornication.[xlvii] The suggestion has already been made by Boccaccio-narrator that the plague had the effect of creating a female constituency more open to such suggestion and less risk-averse, more 'curious' even. There is little doubt such a constituency appealed to our consoling author, yet culture dictated that the means of communicating such intentions had to be masked. The text, therefore, sought to elicit curiosity in the mind of the reader in the absence of the authorial body. Irrespective of the gender of the reader, metaphorical language was the ideal medium for such forms of communication, for the fantasy was one in which absence became presence and words became deeds, the text preparing the way for the coming together of reader and writer.

This dynamic is implicitly alluded to in the final section of the author's epilogue at the very end of the text where Boccaccio-narrator plays on the double sense of 'lingua' in Italian as both language and tongue. Read literally there is nothing untoward about suggesting his text was a written version of his own speech. In a mid-Trecento Tuscan *volgarizzamento* of the most well known Bolognese dictaminal tract from the early Trecento, Giovanni di Bonandrea's *Brieve introductione a dittare*, the definition of a letter is given as follow: "Epistola è orazione facunda \ cioè ornate \ vicaria della humana lingua" ["The letter is a fulsome oration, that is ornate, and acts in place of the human tongue"]. The term 'vicaria' is then glossed in the margin as follows: "vicaria cioè che quello che l'uomo direbbe colla linghua se fosse presente, la epistola dicie per lui e così è vacaria della linghua però che fa il suo uficio" ["vicaria: since that which the man would say with his tongue if present the letter says for him and hence it is the messenger of the tongue since it fulfils its function"].[xlviii]

As deployed by Boccaccio-narrator in the epilogue to the *Decameron*, however, both senses of the word come together: the words of the text end and insinuation is imagined as a physical rather than a linguistic activity, a weaving of bodies rather than words:

> Confesso nondimeno le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento, e così potrebbe della mia lingua essere intervenuto; la quale, non credendo io al mio giudicio, il quale a mio potere io fuggo nelle mie cose, non ha guari mi disse una mia vicina che io l'aveva la migliore e la più dolce del mondo.

["I will grant you, however, that the things of this world have no stability, but are subject to constant change, and this may well have happened to my tongue. But not long ago, distrusting my own opinion (which in matters concerning myself I trust as little as possible), I was told by a lady, a neighbour of mine, that I had the finest and sweetest tongue in the world"][xlix]

The obscene allusion is clear, the fact that the lady in question was a neighbour adding to the sense of both spatial and linguistic insinuation, a fact reflected in the literal and figurative senses of the term itself. For literally a modern definition of 'insinuation' means "to penetrate, insert gradually into a tight space…usually with caution and skill" ("far penetrare, intodurre a poco a poco in uno spazio angusto…per lo più cautamente e con abilità")[l] Figuratively it means "to inculcate in the spirit or in the mind of somebody a thought, an idea, a conviction" ("inculcare nell'animo eo nella mente di qualcuno un pensiero, un idea, una convinzione"). This sense is further

glossed as "to suggest, hint, refer to, make it understood, disclose, seek to persuade, advise (*consigliare*), bring to the attention of (in a more or less veiled or allusive manner)" ("suggerire, accennare, riferire, fare capire; palesare, cercaree di persuadere, consigliare, mettere sull'avviso –più o meno velatamente o allusivament)." Coming together is here understood in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, addresser and addressee closing the physical space of separation and thereby overcoming the temporal belatedness of literary composition and reception. Hermeneutic closure is secured through the consensus of sexual communion in which acts replace words, both minds and bodies joining in a simultaneous and reciprocal dialogue.

In contrast to the Boethian and Dantean narrators, therefore, the Boccaccian narrator seeks, or claims to seek, bodily rather than spiritual union. The fantasy of physical access was privileged over that of metaphysical ascent, the joys of embodied pleasures consequent on coming together take precedence over the union with the divine and transcendental bliss. For reaching out to meet our maker, rather than a lover, is predicated and depends on the demise of the body, the mortification of the flesh. True happiness quenches all desires because it fulfils all lack. This is the perspective assumed by Boethius: "Now that is good which, once a man attains it leaves no room for further desires" ("Id autem est bonum quo quis adepto nihil ulterius desiderare queat") II, 5. This state of bliss is only realised upon union with our maker, our Christian duty being to free the mind from its earthly prison, "terreno carcere," as it searches for its heavenly home (II, 85).[li] Boccaccio's homes were far more tangible, and as we have seen, even next door.

Using the same methods employed by preachers who largely relied upon their female congregations to insinuate the message of the gospels into the home and the minds of their menfolk, Boccaccio's insinuating text addressed the women in the

house offering an alternative route to paradise.[lii] The textual narrative of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and especially its *Proemio* and *Conclusione,* is therefore rhetorical rather than grammatical as Todorov would have us believe.[liii] For the subtlety of rhetoric permits us to circumvent the structures of grammar and the grammars of structuralism. The rhetoric of the authorial frame in the *Decameron* imagines its audience as being in a particular place and in a particular mental state. The book is sent on its way anticipating resistance, its closed exordium approaching obliquely, creeping under cover of metaphor as it works its way towards its intended audience. Hence the text is part of a larger socially situated communicative act which subverts the normative discourse of consolation as its seductive rhetoric seeks to reach places other stories cannot reach. As a communicative act the text is constitutive of its participants, both the writer and the reader, the seducer and the object being seduced.[liv] Boccaccio in the very process of literary production creates a fantasy of literary consumption which privileges and empowers without compromising the male sender of the text as missive.[lv]

The irony, however, lies in the temporal ordering of the imagined acts. Rather than speaking on behalf of the sender as if present, the traditional characterisation of texts as surrogates, Boccaccio's book has already arrived and been consumed. The imagined coming-together therefore postdates the production and consumption of the text in a sequencing that does not require that the sender speaks but rather that the consumer address the now present sender to establish the meeting of minds prior to the possibility of the meeting of bodies. The question that concerns the writer is whether his morally dubious counsel, his *utile consiglio*, has persuaded his deliberating audience; whether he has made himself clear; whether they've got his meaning. Only then will the reader as critic, knowing they are an object of desire, be

able to decide whether to flee or follow: "in quanto potranno cognoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare" ["for they will learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued"] (*Proemio*, 14). The *utile consiglio* empowers through teaching women how to subvert the paradigm of patriarchal *dominio* to facilitate coming together and seek relief from *noia*, a strategy which is as seductive to male fantasy as it is to any nominal female readership. In place of compounding melancholic lethargy, the text encourages activity in appealing to the senses as well as the intellect. Whilst reading as an activity was one means of avoiding melancholy, most medieval medical writings advised it as part of a balanced regime of activities which also included the need for movement and the stimulation of the senses.[lvi] Such coming together of different parties, then, is active and consensual. The "weak women" ("delicate donne") imagined by the author of the *Decameron* are granted agency both spatially and linguistically in such opportunistic combining. As newly discerning readers, they dis-cern, in the literal sense of 'prise apart', the gap between signs and signifiers, opening a space for the making of meaning. Boccaccio-narrator seeks out his idealised readership and through his oblique strategies aims to establish an affective bond with them and win them over through the medium of literature. In this respect he himself becomes a 'familiar author' or even, if Fortune permits, an over familiar author whose consoling arm readily becomes a passionate embrace.[lvii] The verisimilitude of his realist fiction is predicated on the belief in the cognitive function of story telling. Such playful fantasies of male and female empowerment and complicity and their location within the sensescape of late medieval Italian society is what renders Boccaccio's narrative 'argumentum' so convincing.[lviii]

Notes

[i] See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, 12 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), IV, proemio 4. All subsequent references will be to this edition. Translations are taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. and ed. G. H. McWilliam (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

[ii] *Decameron*, Proemio, 10: "Esse dentro a' dilicati petti, temendo e vergognando, tengono l'amorose fiamme nascose, le quali quanto più di forza abbian che le palesi coloro il sanno che l'hanno provate" ["For the ladies, out of fear or shame, conceal the flames of passion within their fragile breasts, and a hidden love is far more potent than one which is worn on the sleeve, as everyone knows who has had experience of these matters"].

[iii] *Decameron*, Proemio, 15.

[iv] See, for example, Georges Güntert, *Tre premesse e una dichiarazione d'amore. Vademecum per il lettore del 'Decameron'* (Modena: Mucchi editore, 1997) and Victoria Kirkham, *The Sign of Reason in Boccaccio's Fiction* (Florence: Olschki, 1993), pp. 117-19.

[v] Claudio Giunta, *Versi a un destinatario: saggio sulla poesia del medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

[vi] See Francesco Bruni, *Boccaccio: L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990).

[vii] A notable exception is Robert Hollander. See his 1993 essay "The *Proem* of the Decameron," in his collection of essays *Boccaccio's Dante and the Shaping Force of*

Satire (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 89-107. Even Hollander states (p. 90) "in the group of those who do not understand it I unhesitatingly include myself." He makes a similar reading in his more recent study "The *Decameron* Proem" in *The "Decameron" First Day in Perspective*, ed. Elissa B. Weaver (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 12-28.

[viii]

[ix] For an example of an historical materialist reading of Dante which sets his work in an identical socio-political milieu see Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in late Medieval Italy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), esp. pp. 171-79. Although a number of recent studies have sought to engage with the text's rhetorical strategies it is noticeable how rhetoric has been used as a synonym for discourse with little sense of its relation to the repertory of classical rhetorical forms found in late medieval Italian Ciceronianism and the *ars dictaminis*. This is a marked aspect of much Boccaccio criticism. See Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the "Decameron"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) and Pier Massimo Forni, *Adventures in Speech: Rhetoric and Narration in Boccaccio's "Decameron"* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), neither of whom engage with medieval rhetorical doctrine.

[x] See the Introduction to this volume for a survey of the text's medieval European diffusion.

[xi] On the vernacular tradition of Boethius see Silvia Albesano, *"Consolatio Philosophiae" volgare: Volgarizzamenti e tradizione discursive nel Trecento italiano*, Studia Romanica 132 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006). For an edition of Grazia di Meo's text see Helmuth-Wilhelm Heinz, *Grazia di Meo. Il libro di Boeçio de chonsolazione (1343)* (Frankfurt, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1984).

[xii] See Robert Black and Gabriella Pomaro, *La 'Consolazione della filosofia' nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento italiano* (Florence: SISMEL, 2000).

[xiii] See Stephen Grossvogel, *Ambiguity and Allusion in Boccaccio's "Filocolo"* (Florence: Olschki, 1992), pp. 33-55.

[xiv] On Boccaccio's ownership of the *Consolation of Philosophy* see Giovanni Boccaccio, *Amorosa visione*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), pp. 296-97. For the Latin commentaries see Pierre Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire: Antécédents et postérité de Boèce* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1967), p. 326.

[xv] Millicent Joy Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the 'Decameron'* (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1979), pp. 110-25.

[xvi] Marcus, *An Allegory of Form*, p. 125.

[xvii] Joel C. Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius' "Consolation." With a contribution on the medieval Boethius by William E. Heise* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

[xviii] For Boccaccio as satirist and parodist see Hollander, *Boccaccio's Dante*, and Luciano Rossi, "Ironia e parodia nel *Decameron*: da Ciappelletto a Griselda," in *La novella italiana: Atti del Convegno di Caprarola, 19-24 Settembre 1988*, ed. Enrico Malato, 2 vols (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1989), I, 365-405.

[xix] On Galeotto see Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 102-6.

[xx] For Boccaccio's schooling and professional training see Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man and his Works*, trans Richard Monges (New York: Harvester Press, 1976), pp. 3-40.

[xxi] Cited in Martin Camargo, “Where’s the Brief?: The *Ars dictaminis* and Reading/Writing Between the Lines,” *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 1-17 (2, 15).

[xxii] On prayer, see Marianne G. Briscoe and Barbara H. Jaye, *Artes praedicandi / Artes orandi*, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 61 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1992), pp. 79-115.

[xxiii] In this respect I disagree fundamentally with the argument put forward by James A. Schultz, “Classical Rhetoric, Medieval Poetics, and the Medieval Vernacular Prologue”, *Speculum* 59:1 (1984), pp. 1-15 (p. 15) where he argues that the prologue tradition developed quite independently of the classical rhetorical tradition. The fact he considers only French and German cases, and overlooks Italy, where the classical and civic tradition was probably stronger, undoubtedly conditioned his conclusions.

[xxiv] See Martin Camargo, *Ars dictaminis / Ars dictandi*, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 60 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1991).

[xxv] James R. Banker, “Giovanni di Bonandrea and Civic Values in the Context of the Italian rhetorical tradition,” *Manuscripta* 18 (1974): 3-20.

[xxvi] See Virginia Cox, “Ciceronian Rhetoric in Italy, 1260-1350,” *Rhetorica* 17 (1999): 239-88. These themes are also dealt with in Virginia Cox “Ciceronian Rhetoric in Late Medieval Italy: The Latin and Vernacular Traditions” and Stephen J. Milner, “Communication, Consensus and Conflict: Rhetorical principals, the *ars concionandi* and social ordering in late medieval Italy”, both in *The Rhetoric of Cicero in its Medieval and Renaissance Commentary Tradition*, ed. Virginia Cox and John O. Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 109-43 and pp. 365-408 respectively.

[xxvii] See *Bene Florentini Candelabrum*, ed. Gian Carlo Alessio (Padua: Antenore, 1983), p. 128 (3, 55): “Moreover, Cicero only dealt with the complete parts of an oration, or, if you will, did it this way because the salutation has no place in

controversies, to which Cicero reduced all rhetoric" ("Ipse (Tullius) autem de solis perfectis partibus orationis tractabat vel ideo fecit quia salutatio locum in controversiis non habet ad quas ipse totam rethoricam reducebat.").

[xxviii] [Cicero], *Ad C. Herennium. De Ratione Dicendi (Rhetorica Ad Herennium)*, Trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), I, iv, 6-7.

[xxix] [Cicero], *Ad C. Herennium*, I, iii, 5.

[xxx] [Cicero], *Ad C. Herennium*, I, viii, 12: "Unum est cum exponimus rem gestam et unum quidque trahimus ad utilitatem nostram vincendi causa, quod pertinet ad eas causas de quibus iudicium futurum est."

[xxxi] [Cicero], *Ad C. Herennium*, I, vii, 11.

[xxxii] See the excellent illustrative material on *insinuatio* in Virginia Cox and John O. Ward, "Appendix: The Commentaries in Action", in *The Rhetoric of Cicero*, pp. 430-45.

[xxxiii] See Stephen J. Milner, "Exile, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Civic Republican Discourse," in *At the Margins: Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*, ed. Stephen J. Milner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 162-91.

[xxxiv] See Ronald G. Witt, "Brunetto Latini and the Italian Tradition of *Ars Dictaminis*", *Stanford Italian Review* 2 (1983): 5-24.

[xxxv] See the edition *Albertano da Brescia, Liber de doctrina dicendi et tacendi. La parola del cittadino nell'Italia del Duecento*, ed. P. Navone (Florence: SISMEL, 1998). A resource site maintained by Angus Graham contains updated information on editions and secondary bibliography relating to Albertanus' work. See http://freespace.virgin.net/angus.graham/Albertano.htm

[xxxvi] See Enrico Artifoni, "Prudenza del consigliare. L'educazione del cittadino nel *Liber consolationis et consilii* di Albertano da Brescia (1246)," in *"Consilium".*

Teorie e pratiche del consigliare nella cultura medievale, ed. C. Casagrande, C. Cristiani, S. Vecchio (Florence: SISMEL, 2004), pp. 195-216.

[xxxvii] See Boccaccio, "Consolatoria a Pino de' Rossi", ed. Giuseppe Chicchi in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccia*, V, pp. 617-51.

[xxxviii] See the edition Boncompagni da Signa, *Rhetorica Novissima*, ed. Augusto Gaudenzi, Bibliotheca Iuridica Medii Aevi, 3 vols. (Bologna: Piero Virano, 1892), II, 249-97 (284) and the discussion in Josef Purkart, "Boncompagno of Signa and the Rhetoric of Love," in James J. Murphy, *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 319-31 [329].

xxxix See [Cicero], *Ad C. Herennium*, IV, xxxiv, 45: "Obscenitatis vitandae causa, sic: 'Cuius mater cotidianis nuptiis delectetur'." For a discussion of the relation between metaphor / *transumptio* in Boncompagno's *Rhetorica Novissima* and its use to underline extreme obscenity in the *Corbaccio* see Guyda Armstrong, "Boccaccio and the Infernal Body: the Widow as Wilderness," in *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, Studi e testi 8, ed. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki (Chapel Hill, NC: Annali d'Italianistica, 2006), pp. 83-104 [87-93]. I'd like to thank Dr. Armstrong for bringing this piece to my attention and for her insightful observations on the final draft of this piece.

xl See Boncompagno da Signa, *Rota Veneris*, ed. and trans. Josef Purkart (Delmar, New York: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975).

[xli] Boncompagno, *Rota veneris*, fol. 2r, ll 13-14 and 16-18; translation p. 73: "Ecce virgo in vestitu deaurato circumamicta varietatibus ex insperato comperaruit […] Ad modum siquidem regine speciosam habebat coronam regine sceptrum in manu dextra dominabiliter deferendo venerat."

[xlii] Boncompagno, *Rota veneris*, fol. 2, ll. 20-23; translation p. 73: "Illa vero interrogata firmiter asseruit se deam esse Venerem addendo pariter cur salutationes et delectabilia dictamina non fecissem que viderentur ad usum amantium pertinere."

[xliii] *Decameron*, Conc. aut, 1.

[xliv] See for example the discussion of 'licenzia' in Bono Giamboni, *Fiore di rettorica*, ed. Giambattista Speroni (Pavia: Università degli studi di Pavia, 1994), pp. 31-33.

[xlv] *Decameron*, I, Intr., 27.

[xlvi] *Decameron*, I, Intr., 229.

[xlvii] See Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 82-84.

[xlviii] Giovanni di Bonandrea, *Breve introductione a dittare*, Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 2323, fol. 1r. For the Latin text see the edition of Iohannis Bonandree, *Brevis introduction ad dictamen*, ed. Silvana Arcuti (Lecce: Congedo editore, 1993).

[xlix] *Decameron*, Conc. aut, 27.

[l] *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, ed. Salvatore Battaglia, 21 vols (Turin: UTET, 1961-2002), VIII, 120-21.

[li] Boethius, II, 83-86: "If however a mind fully aware of its own nature, loosed from its earthly prison, is free to seek its heavenly home, will it not despise all earthly affairs, and in the joy of heaven rejoice to be freed from earthly things?" ("Sin vero bene sibi mens conscia terreno carcere resolute caelum libera petit, none omne terrenum negotium spernat quae se caelo fruens terrenis gaudet exemptam?").

[lii] See Kate Cooper, "Insinuation of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992),

150-64 and Sharon Farmer, “Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives,” *Speculum* 61:3 (1986), 517-43.

[liii] Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron* (The Hague : Mouton, 1969).

[liv] See the suggestive observations in Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 205-33.

[lv] For a contemporary literary critical examination of the multiple readers and audiences constructed through the text see Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*.

[lvi] See G. Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the later Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 175.

[lvii] On the subject of ‘familiar authors’ see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in theLlater Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), pp. 211-17.

[lviii] On medieval theories of narrative see Päivi Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics: “Historia”, “Argumentum,” and “Fabula” in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-Century Latin Poetics of Fiction* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996).