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Women Bridled and Unbridled: Contagions of Shame and Maladies of Governance in the *Decameron**

Brenda Berenice Rosado

In the *Decameron*'s frame tale, Pampinea leads a group of young adults out of Florence into the Tuscan countryside to avoid the 1348 bubonic plague. There, also under Pampinea's leadership, the company establishes a mini monarchy with rotating kings and queens to ensure their orderly entertainment and allow each member to experience both "il peso e l'onore" ("the weight and the honor")¹ to rule for a day. Ten stories later, Filomena, the newly appointed queen for Day 2, raises the bar on the *novellare* by introducing a rule that restricts the theme for each day of storytelling.² Nevertheless, Emilia, the queen of Day 9, overrules the law established by Filomena. Emilia's reasoning is analogical: after much labor, oxen are released from the yoke and allowed to wander freely wherever they please.³ To Emilia the thematic rule is a burden, hence, she imposes a day of recovery from it. To Emilia, temporarily lifting the thematic yoke imposed by Filomena is a useful and timely relief.⁴ Put differently, temporarily breaking a "certa legge" ("certain law")⁵ is a necessary transgression of government before being placed back under the thematic yoke one last time on Day 10. However, with the temporary freedom of topic choice, Day 9 gradually turns into a day of violent storytelling, most notoriously the beating of a disobedient wife in Queen Emilia's novella. Emilia's allegedly regenerative, yet controversial, government raises eyebrows along some questions: What does it mean to "wander freely" while beating a female character into submission? Why the animal analogy and how does it resurface in the stories of Day 9?

Itself plagued with ill-transmitted discourses that govern the female narrators' demeanor together with their storytelling, the *Decameron* is (and always has been) a scandalous text. In a pandemic year ourselves, the *Decameron* invites us to revisit women's status as the victims of socio-political (rather than bacterial or viral) pandemics.⁶ I argue that the *Decameron* records a dangerous contagion of normative misogynist discourses that define and govern womanhood. I read Emilia's ruling day against Filomena's, evincing the contradictions that arise between these queens and their respective novellas. Furthermore, I show that the inconsistencies that both queens display are symptoms of female shame as defined by Dante. Hence, as the article's title hints, there are two major points of contact herein: First, I read the *centonovelle* as a fiction that

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¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), 43, 1.Intro.96. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

² *Ibid.*, 124, 1.Concl.10–11.

³ *Ibid.*, 1025, 8.Concl.3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1025–1026, 8.Concl.4–5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1026, 8.Concl.4.

⁶ Ironically and tragically, COVID-19 coincided with the 100th anniversary of American women's right to vote, passed and ratified amid the Spanish flu pandemic (1918–20); with the passing of a Supreme Court justice and fierce gender equality advocate, Ruth Bader Ginsburg; and with the first woman voted to the vice presidency of the United States, Kamala Harris.

showcases women's ability to rule even as its misogynist normative discourses at once deny them that very power. Second, I show that women's shame—a laudable fear of dishonor according to Dante's definition—is the epicenter and symptom of a silent epidemic that does precisely that: silence women.⁷

Filomena and Women's (In)Ability to Govern

From the outset, the *Decameron* highlights women's situated vulnerability, that is, the ways in which they are vulnerable to oppression within specific social contexts.⁸ In the Proem, as a pay-it-forward gesture, Boccaccio states that he writes his masterpiece for those who suffer the most and are in most need of compassion and relief: women who, “temendo e vergognando, tengono l'amorose fiamme nascose” (“in fear and shame, keep the love-kindled flames hidden”).⁹ He further describes that, “ristrette da' voleri, da' piaceri, da' comandamenti de' padri, delle madri, de' fratelli e de' mariti, il più del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano e quasi oziose sedendosi, volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora, seco rivolgendo diversi pensieri, li quali non è possibile che sempre sieno allegri” (“restrained by the wants, desires, and commands of their fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, they stay within the confined space of their rooms most of the time. And sitting there almost idle, yearning and not yearning at the same time, they turn over varied thoughts in their minds which cannot possibly be always happy ones”).¹⁰ Boccaccio's inclusion of mothers in the list of disguised oppressors suggests that women themselves can be complicit in the systemic misogyny of the *Decameron*—and Filomena's first remarks confirm this.

In the Introduction to Day 1, immediately after Pampinea urges her entourage of ladies to flee Florence and sojourn to the countryside, Filomena reminds the group of their gendered shortcomings and advises her companions to act cautiously:

Ricordivi che noi siamo tutte femine, e non ce n'ha niuna sí fanciulla, che non possa ben conoscere come le femine sien ragionate insieme e senza la provedenza d'alcuno uomo si sappiano regolare. Noi siamo mobili, riottose, sospettose, pusillanime e paurose: per le quali cose io dubito forte, se noi alcuna altra guida non prendiamo che la nostra, che questa compagnia non si dissolva troppo più tosto e con meno onor di noi che non ci bisognerebbe: e per ciò è buono a provvederci avanti che cominciamo.

⁷ Gender studies and feminist criticism are major lines of investigation around the *Decameron* and other works by Boccaccio. However, no scholar, to my knowledge, has studied the dynamics of female shame in the text and its interconnection with gender politics. In the pages ahead, my analysis builds on and adds to the groundbreaking work of Teodolinda Barolini, Marilyn Migiel, and F. Regina Psaki.

⁸ In the Introduction to Day 1, however, we learn that the vulnerability of seven noble ladies is to the plague in the first place, for which reason Pampinea urges the group to leave Florence.

⁹ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 7, Proem.10. For more on Boccaccio's gratitude and compassion (and the disruption of both *compassione* and *ragione* due to the 1348 plague), see Teodolinda Barolini, “The Wheel of the *Decameron*,” *Romance Philology* 36, no. 4 (1983): 521–538. See also Olivia Holmes, “Pedagogia boccacesca: dall'*exemplum* misogino alla compassione per le afflitte,” in *Boccaccio, entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, eds. Sabrina Ferrara, Maria Teresa Ricci, and Élise Boillet (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2015), 135–149.

¹⁰ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 7–8, Proem.10–11. Here the author seems to suggest that love sickness is also physically threatening.

(Remember that we are all women, and no one here is too young to know very well how women reason with one another and how, without the provision of some man, they rule themselves. We are fickle, rowdy, suspicious, pusillanimous, and fearful; for that reason, if we take no other guidance but our own, I really fear this company will dissolve rather quickly and with less honor than it should. And so, it would be good to make provision before we make a start.)¹¹

Filomena doubts the ladies' capacity to regulate their behavior in the absence of men. Hence, without a man's guidance, women's deeds rarely come to a laudable end. And Elissa doesn't hesitate to echo Filomena's ideas: "Veramente gli uomini sono delle donne capo" ("Truly men are the head of women").¹² Despite the rupture of Florentine society and the abandonment of the ladies by their kinsfolk in fear of an imminent death, the ladies resolve to extend the invitation to three young men—Panfilo, Filostrato, and Dioneo—who initially think themselves the victims of a prank. Although the *Decameron* reveals a world in which noble ladies believe themselves to be inferior to men even in the midst of death, many of their stories subvert this belief. For example, *Decameron* 2.9, paradoxically narrated by Filomena, quintessentially defies the gender stereotypes first recorded in the frame tale.

On Day 2 Queen Filomena inaugurates the thematic law by ordering the *brigata* members to tell of "chi da diverse cose infestato, sia oltre alla sua speranza riuscito a lieto fine" ("those who, plagued by various mishaps, reach a happy ending against all hope").¹³ Her story begins in a Parisian inn, where the merchant Bernabò da Genova brags about his most virtuous and beautiful wife, Zinevra. However, Ambruogiuolo da Piagenza, another merchant, debates him, asserting that all women are easily seduced during their husbands' prolonged absences—and that Zinevra is surely no exception. Confident that his wife would not be seduced, Bernabò unfortunately initiates a bet with his opponent, who in turn raises the price, confident he will be able to sleep with Bernabò's wife. But once Ambruogiuolo realizes that Zinevra's chastity is truly unbreakable, he cheats and manages to obtain "proof" of an affair that never took place. Confronted with such convincing "evidence," Bernabò orders a servant to kill his innocent wife. Fortunately, Zinevra convinces her executioner to let her live and tailors a new identity for herself—dressed as a man, she becomes Sicurano da Finale. She, now a he, roams the Mediterranean safely, *non infestata*. In disguise, (s)he impresses and advises powerful men on their affairs. Until one day, having learned about the bet by chance, Sicurano tricks Ambruogiuolo into confessing, thus bringing about the wicked merchant's punishment and Zinevra's vindication. Now free from blame, Zinevra forgives her husband and, with the sultan's permission and financial support, returns with Bernabò to Genoa, where she lives happily-ever-after "di gran virtù e da molto [...] reputata" ("highly esteemed and considered most virtuous").¹⁴

This novella unveils a contradiction between Filomena's stated lack of faith in women's ability to survive their sojourn without a man's guidance and Zinevra's dexterity in navigating a

¹¹ Ibid., 37, 1.Intro.74–75. For more on the pervasive defective image of women and women's speech, see F. Regina Psaki, "Voicing gender in the *Decameron*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, eds. Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101–118.

¹² Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 38, 1.Intro.76. Elissa asserts that, without men's governance ("l'ordine loro"), women's deeds rarely come to a laudable end.

¹³ Ibid., 129, 2.Intro.1.

¹⁴ Ibid., 301, 2.9.74.

much more dangerous world at sea, while advising men of authority.¹⁵ This tension is first detected in the long “philosophical” debate between the merchants that results in the chastity wager. Bernabò describes his wife as “la più compiuta” (“the most accomplished”)¹⁶ based on what she can do very well, including activities reserved for men (e.g., “cavalcare un cavallo” [“ride a horse”]),¹⁷ and what she would never do (i.e., break her marriage vows) given her unwavering chastity. In response to this grand statement, Ambruogiuolo questions Bernabò’s intelligence with a naturalistic discourse.¹⁸ He states that man is the most noble animal created by God (woman being runner-up) and, on the basis of deeds, man is also “più perfetto” (“more perfect”)¹⁹ than woman. Therefore, Ambruogiuolo concludes that man is more constant, whereas “universalmente le femine sono più mobili” (“women are universally fickle”).²⁰ And since man, with all his perfection, cannot contain his carnal appetites, a woman’s inconstancy is a given. “[C]he spero tu,” Ambruogiuolo presses on, “che una donna, naturalmente mobile, *possa fare a’ prieghi, alle lusinghe, a’ doni, a’ mille altri modi che userà uno uom savio che l’ami? credi che ella si possa tenere?*” (“What do you expect that a woman, fickle by nature, *could possibly do* against the pleas, the compliments, the gifts, and the thousand other methods a clever man in love with her will employ? Do you think *she can hold herself back?*”).²¹ To which Bernabò replies that, contrary to foolish women, “nelle quali non è alcuna vergogna” (“for whom it’s no shame”) to be *mobili*, wise women “hanno tanta sollecitudine dello onor loro, che elle diventan forti più che gli uomini, che di ciò *non si curano*, a guardarlo; e di queste così fatte è la mia” (“care so much about their honor that they become stronger than men, *who don’t care* to look after theirs; and my wife is made just like them).²² To Bernabò—and to Filomena for that matter—Zinevra belongs to the group of the wise. Hence, Filomena not only *proves* the innocence, cleverness, and dexterity of her immaculate female character but also showcases her own craftiness in weaving a novella anchored around a single figure—Zinevra²³—while perfectly complying with her topic mandate. Indeed, by renaming her protagonist Sicurano da Finale, Filomena not only renders Zinevra *sicura* (someone who *looks after* her honor and safety, as opposed to men who “non si curano dello onor loro” [“do not look after their honor”] nor Zinevra’s²⁴) but also captures the theme she imposed for her ruling day: she escapes death, takes care of herself and, indirectly, restores her reputation and Bernabò’s finances, resulting in a *lieto fine*.

In her crafty design, however, the queen makes sure Zinevra does not transgress in her transvestism.²⁵ Filomena sets out to subvert Ambruogiuolo’s defense of men’s “fermezza” (“steadfastness”) and accusation of women’s “mobilità” (“fickleness”). To do so, Queen

¹⁵ To complicate things further, Zinevra-Sicurano is the object of transactions between powerful male figures, moving from the service of a Catalan to the service of the sultan of Alexandria.

¹⁶ Ibid., 285, 2.9.8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 286, 2.9.10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 287, 2.9.13: “tu hai poco riguardato alla natura delle cose, per ciò che, se riguardato v’avessi, non ti sento di sì grosso ingegno” (“you haven’t observed carefully the nature of things, but if you have, I don’t take you to be a man of great intellect”).

¹⁹ Ibid., 287, 2.9.15.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 287–288, 2.9.16, emphasis mine.

²² Ibid., 288, 2.9.18.

²³ Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 94.

²⁴ Migiel also observes that Bernabò’s description of men who “non si curano,” anticipates Zinevra’s new name (Sicurano), thus proving that a man can actually look after his own honor. See pages 104–105 in *A Rhetoric*.

²⁵ See chapter four “To Transvest Not to Transgress” in Migiel, *A Rhetoric*, 83–108.

Filomena establishes the wisdom of her “onesta e casta” (“honest and chaste”) Zinevra precisely through the contamination of both male and female qualities: *fermezza* and *mobilità*.²⁶ Throughout her journey, Zinevra remains *ferma/constant* as the honorable, married woman she is. Nevertheless, in her cross-dressing, she is also *mobile*, travelling all around the Mediterranean as a man (contrasting Alatiel in 2.7). Certainly, Filomena strategically portrays her character as a passive agent, thus preserving the married woman’s constancy. In other words, even after having adopted a male identity and mobility, Zinevra remains servile, obedient, and suppliant to authoritative men. For instance, although Sicurano tricks Ambruogiuolo into telling the truth and, hence, clearing Zinevra’s name publicly, it is the sultan of Alexandria who acts as the active agent of Zinevra’s vindication.²⁷ In short, Zinevra remains “ferma” within Sicurano’s mobility.

Taking all factors into consideration, from the frame tale to this novella, what is truly *inconsistent* is the narrator’s psyche. It is Filomena, the woman who claimed that men were needed to proctor the group of ladies so as to prevent its disintegration, who creates the self-sufficient Zinevra. Queen Filomena’s rubric for crafting her novella—the Italian proverb “lo ’ngannatore rimane a piè dello ’ngannato” (“the deceiver ends at the feet of the deceived”)²⁸—foreshadows Filomena’s self-defeat. That is, she challenges her own convictions regarding women’s inability to reason, lead, and survive by themselves. Filomena deceives herself with her own proverb. An avid deceiver in her story, the queen is also self-deceived in that Zinevra subverts Filomena’s stereotypical speech in the frame tale. Despite the clash between Filomena’s cautionary speech in the frame tale and Zinevra’s deeds in 2.9, Filomena’s moral philosophy emphasizes *holding oneself back* for the sake of one’s honor and safety. If there’s an Italian proverb that can encapsulate Filomena’s prime concern it would be: “Meglio prevenire che curare” (“Prevention is better than cure”) or, in English, “Better safe than sorry.”

Queen Emilia: Hold Your Horses! Better Safe than Sorry!

In this section, I show that Filomena-Zinevra’s cautious agency is both supported and threatened by Emilia’s government. Not only does Emilia threaten women’s safety as a *preventative* measure against disobedience, but she also unleashes her narrative power to “cure” a wife of her *unbridled* nature with a beating. Hence, similar to Filomena’s case profile, we will see how Emilia’s lax government on Day 9 is challenged by the moral of her own novella.

In Day 9, several violent stories precede and build up to the queen’s brutality, and novella 9.3 is the first to show potential for domestic violence. Filostrato tells of a prank on Calandrino, who is convinced he is pregnant and must take some special medicine to abort. The naïve

²⁶ See Teodolinda Barolini, “Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron* (Decameron 2.9, 2.10, 5.10),” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 281–303.

²⁷ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 298–301, 2.9.59–74. Never fully the executor (“*quasi esecutore del soldano*” 2.9.61), Zinevra’s vindication and future depends on the sultan’s authority, for it is he who commends Zinevra’s virtues (“la constanzia e i costumi e la virtù di Ginevra commendò”); provides her with women’s clothes (“*fattile venire onorevolissimi vestimenti femminili*”); pardons Bernabò (“secondo la dimanda fatta da lei a Bernabò perdonò la meritata morte”); orders Ambruogiuolo’s punishment (“Il soldano appresso comandò che incontanente Ambruogiuolo... fosse al sole legato a un palo e unto di mele”) and ultimate death; throws a party to honor and reward Zinevra with riches (“fatta apprestare una bellissima festa, madonna Zinevra sí come valorosissima donna onorò, e donolle che in gioie, e che in vasellamenti d’oro e d’ariento e che in denari”), and allows the couple to return to Genoa (“gli licenziò di potersi tornare a Genova”). Hence, it is Zinevra’s constancy that saves her husband and restores his financial stability.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 284, 2.9.3.

Calandrino blames his wife because of her preferred sexual position: “Oimé, Tessa, questo m’hai fatto tu, che non vuoi stare altro che di sopra” (“Alas, Tessa! You did this to me, because you only want to be on top”).²⁹ If he were not so sick, Calandrino would get up to beat her and break her to pieces.³⁰ Later in 9.5, Calandrino, having been caught with another woman, is attacked by his wife.³¹ Then, in 9.7, Pampinea tells how Margherita, in disbelief of her husband’s prophetic dream and cautionary advice, goes into the woods, is attacked by a wolf, and is disfigured for life.³²

In 9.9, Emilia continues the physical violence characteristic of 9.5, 9.7, and 9.8³³ and applies it to *donne ritrose* (obstinate women), like Margherita (9.7), to teach them a lesson. Emilia justifies her topic in a long preamble to her story, and this is only a part of it:

—Amabili donne, se con sana mente sarà riguardato l’ordine delle cose, assai leggermente si conoscerà tutta la universal moltitudine delle femine dalla natura e da’ costumi e dalle leggi essere agli uomini sottomessa e secondo la discrezione di quegli convenirsi reggere e governare, e però, a ciascuna, che quiete, consolazione e riposo vuole con quegli uomini avere a’ quali s’appartiene, dee essere umile, paziente e ubidente oltre all’essere onesta, il che è sommo e special tesoro di ciascuna savia. E quando a questo le leggi, le quali il ben comune riguardano in tutte le cose, non ci ammaestrassono, e l’usanza, o costume che vogliamo dire, le cui forze son grandissime e reverende, la natura assai apertamente cel mostra, la quale ci ha fatte ne’ corpi delicate e morbide, negli animi timide e paurose, nelle menti benigne e pietose, e hacci date le corporali forze leggiere, le voci piacevoli e i movimenti de’ membri soavi: cose tutte testificanti noi avere dell’altrui governo bisogno. E chi ha bisogno d’essere aiutato e governato, ogni ragion vuol lui dovere essere obediante e subgetto e reverente al governor suo: e cui abbiam noi governatori e aiutatori se non gli uomini? Dunque agli uomini dobbiamo, sommamente onorandogli, soggiacere; e qual da questo si parte, estimo che degnissima sia non solamente di riprension grave ma d’aspro gastigamento. E a così fatta considerazione, [...] pur poco fa mi ricondusse ciò che Pampinea della ritrosa moglie di Talano raccontò, alla quale

²⁹ Ibid., 1051, 9.3.21.

³⁰ “Ben veggio che io sono morto per la rabbia di questa mia moglie [...] ma così fossi io sano come io non sono, ché io mi leverei e dare’le tante busse, che io la rompere’ tutta” (“Well I see that I am deadly ill because of my wife’s rabid madness [...] but if I were healthy, which I’m not, I would get up and punch her so much that I would totally break her). See Ibid., 1051, 9.3.23–24, emphasis mine. See also F. Regina Psaki, “Women Make All Things Lose Their Power’: Women’s Knowledge, Men’s Fear in the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*,” *Heliotropia* 1, no.1 (2003): 1–13.

³¹ “Mona Tessa corse con l’unghie nel viso a Calandrino... e tutto gliela graffiò; e presolo per li capelli e in qua e in là tirandolo ...” (“Tessa ran straight to Calandrino’s face and... scratched it all with her nails; and *grabbing him by the hair*, pulling him here and there...”). See Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1071, 9.5.63, emphasis mine. Emilia will appropriate “presolo per li capelli” in her own novella, as I will show shortly.

³² Pampinea’s novella responds to those of Panfilo (9.6) regarding dreams and Fiammetta (9.5) regarding quarrelsome wives.

³³ In 9.8, “Biondello fa una beffa a Ciacco d’un desinare, della quale Ciacco *cautamente* si vendica facendo lui sconciamente battere” (“Biondello plays a trick on Ciacco about a dinner, after which Ciacco *cleverly* avenges himself by having Biondello receive a gross beating”). My emphasis. See Ibid., 1084, 9.8.1. Notice that in the description of this novella, while “cautamente” denotes “caution,” it also connotes “craftiness” and “deceit,” which reminds us of Zinevra’s crafty caution.

Idio quello gastigamento mandò che il marito dare non aveva saputo: e per ciò nel mio giudicio cape tutte quelle esser degne, come già dissi, di rigido e aspro gastigamento che dall'esser piacevoli, benivole e pieghevoli, come la natura, l'usanza e le leggi voglion, si partono.

(Amiable ladies, if the order of things shall be observed with a sound mind, quite quickly it shall be known that the universal multitude of women, as decreed by Nature, customs, and laws, is subordinated to men and, according to the discretion of the latter, it is suitable to control and govern them. However, any woman who wants to have consolation, peace and quiet with the men to whom she is bound must be humble, patient and obedient, in addition to being honorable, which is the greatest and most special treasure of every wise woman. And when the laws, which look after the common good in all things, do not train us for this, nor habit—or, as we prefer to call it, custom—whose power is great and revered, Nature proves it to us very openly, for She has made us soft and delicate in body; timid and fearful in spirit; benign and compassionate in mind. And She has provided us with little corporal strength, with pleasant voices, and with graceful bodily movements—all of which testify to our need of another's government. And those who need to be aided and governed with all reason must be obedient, submissive, and reverent to their governor. And whom do we have as our aiders and governors except men? To men, therefore, we must yield, honoring them greatly; and she who wanders off from this order of things would very much deserve not only serious admonition but also harsh punishment. And I was led to make this point by what Pampinea told us a little while ago about Talano's obstinate wife, to whom God sent the punishment that her husband had not known to inflict on her. For this reason, as I already said, it is my judgment that all those women who divert from being pleasant, benevolent, and compliant—as Nature, custom, and laws want us to be—are deserving of rigid and harsh punishment.)³⁴

Emilia crafts her speech around customary shared beliefs and civic laws that have “decreed” women's subservience to the opposite sex because “Nature” has deprived them of the aptitude to rule. In other words, women must always be kept in check by men and, consequently, *wise* women must be compliant if they want to keep “quiete [...] e riposo” (“peace and quiet”) with their rulers. Interestingly, in passing, the queen denounces a certain kind of man in the figure of Talano d'Imola (Margherita's husband in 9.7): he who does not know how to govern his woman. Indeed, Emilia's cautionary speech and tale are directed to both inadequate male rulers and their unruly female subjects.

Emilia's analogy between human and non-human animals (i.e., between the “burdened” *brigata* members and oxen)³⁵ resurfaces in the form of yet another Italian proverb, though one typically only used by men:

³⁴ Ibid., 1092–93, 9.9.3–6. For a study on Emilia's speech and her justification of male legal authority, see Michael Sherberg, *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the Decameron* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 100–106.

³⁵ For a contamination of human and non-human animals in the *Decameron* in terms of contagion, see Eleonora Stoppino, “Contamination, contagion and the animal function in Boccaccio's *Decameron*,” in *Critica del testo XVII*, no. 3 (2014): 93–114.

Per che m'agrada di raccontarvi un consiglio renduto da Salomone, sí come utile medicina a guerire quelle che cosí son fatte da cotal male; il quale niuna che di tal medicina degna non sia reputi ciò esser detto per lei, *come che gli uomini un cotal proverbio usino*: «Buon cavallo e mal cavallo vuole sprone, e buona femina e mala femina vuol bastone». Le quali parole chi volesse sollazzevolmente interpretare, di leggier si concederebbe da tutte cosí esser vero; ma pur vogliendole moralmente intendere, dico che è da concedere. Son naturalmente le femine tutte labili e inchinevoli, e per ciò a correggere la iniquità di quelle che troppo fuori de' termini posti loro si lasciano andare si conviene il baston che le punisca; e a sostentar la vertú dell'altre, ché trascorrer non si lascino, si conviene il bastone che le sostenga e che le spaventi.

(It pleases me to tell you about advice given by Solomon as useful medicine to cure those women that are made in that way from this illness. May no woman undeserving of such medicine conclude that this advice is meant for her, *although it's a proverb that men use*: “Good horses and bad horses want the spur; good women and bad women want the rod.” And who might want to interpret these words amusingly, it would be granted by all women to be true. But even if one might want to understand them morally, I say that it is to be granted, for all women are naturally labile and yielding, and so, when they let themselves go too far outside the bounds of their station, the rod is suitable for their punishment and correction of their iniquity. And to preserve the virtue of the other women, so that they may not give in to transgression, the rod is suitable to support and frighten them.)³⁶

As with Filomena's approach to 2.9, Emilia relies on a proverb to remind all women—disobedient or not—of their place on earth. And as the spokesperson of the “naturali ragioni” (“natural reasons”) that make women allegedly more *mobili/fickle*—to quote Ambruogiuolo (and Filomena and Elissa for that matter)—Emilia *ventures out* to “moralize” this sexual (and sexist) proverb by prioritizing the literal sense, both displaying her (paradoxical) wisdom and subscribing herself to Solomon's authority.³⁷ Moreover, Emilia's medical language (“utile medicina a guerire quelle [...] da cotal male” [“useful medicine to cure those women from this illness”]) reminds us of Calandrino's sickness and Tessa's *rabbia* (rabid madness) in 9.3, where women may never be physically on top, for that is a sign of *malattia* (malady)—of Tessa's *rabbia sessuale* (sexual rage).³⁸ Therefore, in her ruling day, Queen Emilia is also judge, lawyer, sage, interpreter, doctor—an impressive combination indeed—thus letting herself “go too far outside the bounds of [her] station.” In her increasingly mobile/male capacities and desire to cure “ill” women, however, Emilia *capitalizes* on Calandrino's menace to beat and break his wife.

³⁶ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1094, 9.9.9, emphasis mine.

³⁷ See Albert R. Ascoli, “Solomon and Emilia, or the King and I: A Reading of *Decameron* 9.9,” in *The Decameron Ninth Day in Perspective*, eds. Susanna Barsella and Simone Marchesi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming). See also chapter seven “Domestic Violence in the *Decameron*” in Migiel, *A Rhetoric*, 147–159.

³⁸ See notes 29–30 above. For the inversion of gender identities in 9.3 and 9.5 (and wife-beating in 8.3), see Ascoli, “Solomon and Emilia.”

In the queen's tale, Giosefo beats his "moglie [...] ritrosa e perversa" ("perverse and obstinate wife")³⁹ into compliance because—paradoxically like the (*im*)mobile Zinevra—his wife is *immobile* in her ways: "la quale egli né con prieghi né con lusinghe né in alcuna altra guisa dalle sue ritrosie *ritrar poteva*" ("he couldn't pull her back from her reluctance with neither pleas nor compliments nor any other tactic").⁴⁰ His violent solution comes after "deciphering" Solomon's cryptic advice. He is told "Va al Ponte all'Oca"⁴¹ ("Go to the Goose Bridge") where Giosefo and his travelling companion Melisso arrive on horseback by chance. There they witness how a muleteer beats his mule for its reluctance to cross the high-trafficked bridge.⁴² In response to criticism from the two travelers, the muleteer answers with a sharp remark: "Voi conoscete i vostri cavalli, e io conosco il mio mulo: lasciate far me con lui" ("You know your horses, and I know my mule: let me deal with him").⁴³ And the man continues hurting the beast until it crosses at last—"il mulattiere vinse la pruova" ("the muleteer overcame the challenge").⁴⁴ At learning the bridge's name and seeing that the man's tactics made the beast move at last, Giosefo realizes Solomon's advice could be good: "io non sapeva battere la donna mia: ma questo mulattiere m'ha mostrato quello che io abbia a fare" ("I didn't know to beat my woman, but this muleteer has shown me what I must do").⁴⁵ And that is precisely what Giosefo does at the first sign of reluctance from his wife:

Giosefo, trovato un baston tondo d'un querciuolo giovane, se n'andò in camera, dove la donna per istizza da tavola levatasi, brontolando se n'era andata; e presala *per le trecce*, la si gittò a' piedi e cominciolla fieramente a battere con questo bastone. La donna cominciò prima a gridare e poi a minnaciare; ma veggendo che per tutto ciò Giosefo non ristava, già tutta rotta cominciò a chieder mercé per Dio che egli non l'uccidesse, dicendo oltre a ciò di mai dal suo piacer non partirsi. Giosefo per tutto questo non rifinava, anzi con piú furia l'una volta che l'altra, or per lo costato, ora per l'anche e ora su per le spalle battendo forte, l'andava le costure ritrovando, né prima ristette che egli fu stanco: e in brieve niuno osso né alcuna parte rimase nel dosso della buona donna, che macerata non fosse.

(Having found a round rod from a young oak tree, Giosefo went into the bedroom where the woman had gone after getting up from the table, grumbling. And grabbing her *by the braids*, he flung her down to his feet and began beating her ferociously with this rod. The woman first started screaming, and then threatening, but seeing that no matter what Giosefo wouldn't stop, completely

³⁹ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1095, 9.9.12.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Notice how Giosefo's discourse follows very closely Ambruogiuolo's in 2.9: "che speri tu che una donna naturalmente mobile, possa fare a' *prieghi*, alle *lusinghe*, a' doni, a' *mille altri modi* che userà uno uom savio che l'ami? credi che ella si possa tenere?" ("What do you expect that a woman, fickle by nature, could possibly do against *the pleas, the compliments, the gifts, and the thousand other methods* a clever man in love with her will employ? Do you think she can hold herself back?"). Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1096, 9.9.15. Melisso had embarked on a trip to Jerusalem, seeking Solomon's advice on how to deal with a serious problem. On his way there, in the outskirts of Antioch, he meets Giosefo, who was also seeking Solomon's wisdom.

⁴² Ibid., 1096, 9.9.17. "[P]resa una stecca [...] lo 'ncominciò a battere perché 'l passasse" ("Having grabbed a stick he started striking him to make him cross over").

⁴³ Ibid., 1097, 9.9.20.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.9.22.

battered, she started begging for mercy, in God's name, that he wouldn't kill her, saying on top of that that she would never again go against his wishes. But for all that, Giosefo wouldn't stop. On the contrary, with greater fury each time, he went on beating her hard, now on the ribs, now on the hips, and now on the shoulders, like a tailor aiming at her seams. Nor did he stop until he grew weary. In short, not one bone, nor any part of the good woman's back, remained that wasn't beaten to a pulp.)⁴⁶

Most translations read “*presala per le trecce*” as “grabbing her *by the hair*,” but I contend that this phrase deserves a literal translation: “*by the braids*.” Emilia's specification of the victim's hairstyle is deliberate, for the braids become a convenient device to pull the woman back—to *rein* her in. Her “*trecce*” allude to horses' and mules' reins on which riders depend to exert control over their animals. Hence, Giosefo interprets the muleteer's remark—“*Voi conoscete i vostri cavalli, e io conosco il mio mulo: lasciate far me con lui*”—as the only way to discipline his wife. That Queen Emilia recounted this novella on the very day that she eliminated the mandate that all stories follow a theme must cause the reader to question her attempted thesis, of the necessity of the physical abuse of both “unruly” women and domestic animals. Contrary to the restorative freedom Emilia preaches at the beginning of her ruling day—that is, overruling Filomena's thematic law for the sake of the company's repose—in her novella neither women nor domestic animals get to wander freely and do as they please. There is no doubt Emilia is an active participant in the systemic misogyny of the fourteenth century; however, she is both prey and predator.⁴⁷

Women's *Voto* of Honor: Shame and “Laudable Fear”

Although “*voto*” in Italian means “vow” and “vote,” the only “*voto*” to which women were entitled before women's suffrage was granted by men in the 20th century was “devotion” to chastity in the larger context of medieval Christianity (i.e., their vow of chastity within the institutions of church and marriage. While some women took a vow of abstinence to enter the cloister, others were obliged by law and custom to remain sexually chaste outside of marriage and sexually faithful within it.⁴⁸ Hence, they had no access to public power and authority, the rare exception being a queen regnant. In the fourteenth century, the weight of their only *voto* is upheld by Filomena and Emilia who excessively patrol female behavior to preserve women's honor at all costs. However, in her desire to outdo her peers' stories, Queen Emilia openly transgresses gender-specific roles in her novella, negating the wisdom she first displayed at

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1098–1099, 9.9.28–30, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Subservient to the biased “facts,” Emilia's brutal efficacy evinces the dark side of marriage, law, and politics, with no limits on women's keepers, inside and outside the fiction. Indeed, female speech was *reined in* for centuries. Shamed publicly, women were exhibited as bridled animals, in great discomfort and physical pain, as punishment for their transgressive behavior. Also known as the witch's or brank's bridle, the use of the scold's bridle (first recorded in 1567 in Scotland) spread to other European countries, including England, Germany, and Brussels. See “Scold's bridle: instrument of torture and punishment,” *Wellcome Collection*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7IGsWO5R10>, and Part One of *The Story of Women and Power* (2018), a documentary developed by Jacqui Hayden, in which historian Amanda Vickery guides us through women's long road to suffrage and equality in Britain.

⁴⁸ In Dante's *Paradiso* 3, however, we read how even the religious *voto* was violently taken away from Piccarda Donati, a medieval noblewoman who was forced to renounce to her vow of chastity within the church and marry Rossellino della Tosa.

giving the *brigata* the freedom of storytelling and undoing the *voto* of wise women like Zinevra. I claim that in the *Decameron*, the contradictions that arise between *narratrice* and her novella and between *narratrici* and their novellas are symptoms of shame as defined by Aristotle and Dante. In fact, the *brigata* noblewomen make sure to maintain an unbreakable honor-shame bubble despite the plague, and the first description of women in the proem “temendo e vergognando” is Boccaccio’s rubric for his *Decameron*. But, as seen earlier, the female narrators observe their honor-shame either by acting stealthily (Filomena) or by freely subjecting themselves to male violence and endangering a woman’s life (Emilia). This section further explores this conundrum.

In Thomas Aquinas’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Ethics*, shame is defined as “fear of disgrace” and, more generally, it is established that shame is not a virtue but a passion that can be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the age of the person, and that shameful acts should be avoided altogether.⁴⁹ In Book 4 of the *Convivio*, Dante further develops the Aristotelian account of shame in a rather oblique manner. That is, in explaining the meaning behind his own verses, Dante argues that nobility, “che bene è vera salute” (“which indeed is true welfare”),⁵⁰ can extend into places where virtue does not exist, such as the shame of women and youths, “la quale vergogna non è virtù, ma certa passione buona” (“[which] is not a virtue but a particular good emotion”).⁵¹ Thereafter, Dante clarifies why their shame is a sign of nobility by citing Aristotle:

però che, secondo che vuole lo Filosofo nel quarto dell’Etica, “vergogna non è laudabile né sta bene nelli vecchi e nelli uomini studiosi,” però che a loro si conviene di guardare da quelle cose che a vergogna li conducano. Alli giovani e alle donne non è tanto richesto di cotale [opera], e però in loro è laudabile la paura del disnore ricevere per la colpa: che da nobilitade viene e nobilitade si puote credere [e] in loro chiamare, sì come viltade e ignobilitade la sfacciatezza. Onde buono e ottimo segno di nobilitade è, nelli pargoli e imperfetti d’etade, quando dopo lo fallo nel viso loro vergogna si dipinge, che è allora frutto di vera nobilitade.

(since, according to what the Philosopher affirms in the fourth book of the *Ethics*, “a sense of shame is not praiseworthy or appropriate in the elderly or the virtuous,” since they should turn away from anything which would make them feel ashamed. Such a task is not as expected of young people and women, and so the fear of being dishonored on account of some fault is praiseworthy in them; and this derives from nobility and can be regarded as nobility in them, and referred to as such, the way shamelessness can be regarded as baseness and ignobility. Thus, it is a good and excellent sign of nobility in children and those who are not yet mature that after committing some wrong their face be painted with shame, because that is a fruit of true nobility.)⁵²

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 274.

⁵⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Dante: Convivio*, ed. and trans. Andrew Frisardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 304–305, 4.19.8. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 304, 306–307, 4.19.8–9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 306–307, 4.19.9–10.

Hence, shame in men has an age cap, after which they should avoid shameful acts and therefore the shame that accompanies them, whereas shame in women has no expiration date. With no age limitation on their shame and their vow of chastity (or “l’essere onesta”) being their “greatest and most special treasure,” as Emilia would put it, women’s fear of dishonor is a constant in their lives, and the verses Dante writes and comments on strongly suggest so: “E noi in donna ed in età novella / vedem questa salute, / in quanto vergognose son tenute” (“In women and in those of young age / we see this state of well-being / for they are prone to feeling shame”).⁵³ However, in *Decameron* 9.9, as seen earlier, in women “laudable fear” is *not* a state of “vera salute” but a state of subjugation—under the yoke—fearful of physical violence.

Dante also distinguishes between three types of shame—*stupore*, *pudore*, and *verecundia* (awe, modesty, and shame as such)—which are morally foundational in the first period of life, “Adolescenza,” which lasts until age 25. And though all three shame-related emotions are formative, Dante denies “la volgare gente” (“the common people”) the ability to discern among the three types of shame.⁵⁴ Using Dante’s age-, class-, and gender-specific definition of shame, I contend that Boccaccio makes noble women’s shame and poor women’s shamelessness central themes in the fictions of his storytellers—male and female alike. Indeed, Boccaccio appropriates and manipulates female shame and its connotations through questions of age and class. From the outset, the author emphasizes the nobility and youth of the *brigata*: of the women “niuna il venti eottesimo anno passato avea né era minor di diciotto” (“none had gone past age 28 or was younger than 18”)⁵⁵ whereas among the gentlemen “meno di venticinque anni fosse l’età di colui che piú giovane era di loro” (“less than 25 years was the age of the youngest”).⁵⁶ However, the noble ladies’ sense of shame can be either good or bad: good when the valence shame-modesty (*vergogna-pudore*) protects their vows of chastity, bad when their blushing (*vergogna-rossore*) exposes their understanding of sexual innuendos. And since women are ostensibly more susceptible to shame, it is no coincidence that the *brigata* ladies outnumber their male companions—seven ladies to three young men—and that the latter continually provoke the young women with their stories.

⁵³ Ibid., 212–213, *Le dolci rime d’amor ch’i’ solia*, vv. 105–107; my translation. In the first chapter of the Fourth Book Dante tells the reader that he wrote *Those sweet lyrics I have long been wont* in order to lead those who “per mal cammino andavano” (“were walking on a bad path”) in direction of the “diritta via” (“right way”) by exposing what true nobility is. And, like Emilia, Dante sets out to elucidate not the figurative but the literal meaning of his *canzone* since it is appropriate “per via tostana questa medicina [dare], acciò che fosse tostana la sanitate” (“to give this medicine directly for the sake of a rapid return to health”). See Ibid., 218–219, 4.1.9–11.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 332–333, 4.25.4: “per vergogna io intendo tre passioni necessarie al fondamento della nostra vita buona: l’una si è Stupore; l’altra si è Pudore; la terza si è Verecundia; avegna che la volgare gente questa non discerna. E tutte e tre queste sono necessarie a questa etade per questa ragione: a questa etade è necessario d’essere reverente e disideroso di sapere; a questa etade è necessario d’essere rifrenato, sì che non transvada; a questa etade è necessario d’essere penitente del fallo, sì che non s’ausi a fallare. E tutte queste cose fanno le passioni sopra dette, che vergogna volgarmente sono chiamate” (“by a sense of shame I mean three emotions necessary for the foundation of our good life: the first is awe; the second is modesty; the third is shame as such; even if common people do not make these distinctions. And all three are necessary in this period of life for these reasons: at this age it is crucial to be reverent and eager to know; at this age it is crucial to be restrained, so as not to transgress limits; at this age it is crucial to feel sorry for wrongdoings, so that wrongdoing does not become a habit. And all of these things comprise the emotions named above, which commonly are called the sense of shame”). Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 29, 1.Intro.49.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38, 1.Intro.78.

Boccaccio's deployment of female *vergogna* is best exemplified in the stories of Day 7. Inspired by the argument between two servants (Licisca and Tindaro)⁵⁷ at the beginning of Day 6, King Dioneo determines that for Day 7 they should tell stories about “beffe le quali o per amore o per salvamento di loro le donne hanno già fatte a' lor mariti, senza essersene essi o avveduti o no” (“the tricks that women, either for love or for self-preservation, have played on their husbands, whether the latter became aware of it or not”).⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, the topic causes commotion among the ladies who rebel against the sovereign's mandate. Dioneo eventually calms their anxiety, convincing them that their honor will not be stained by their storytelling. He adds that, given the apocalyptic times brought by the Black Death, any indecency in the novellas is simply meant for delight, *not* for imitation. Here, Dioneo differentiates between *favellare* and *operare*—between storytelling and doing. However, *Decameron* 7.2 challenges this distinction and shows that *favellare* and *operare* are inseparable—and it does so in extraordinarily sexual terms. Filostrato tells us the story of Peronella, a straying wife who hides her lover inside a “doglio” (“a large clay pot”) when her husband returns home unexpectedly. In the beginning the distressed wife, a “giovinetta [...] di bassa condizione” (“young girl of lowly condition”) lacks a natural aptitude for quick ideas, however, it is precisely her inexperience that makes her trick so impressive.⁵⁹ Peronella thinks of a solution “quasi in un momento di tempo” (“almost in an instant”). Pretending her lover is interested in buying the pot, Peronella has her husband get into the *doglio* and scrape out the wine residue that has built up over time. Meanwhile, the potential buyer/lover, who is now outside, initiates intercourse with Peronella from behind. Once satisfied, he pays what he owes for the *doglio* and walks out of there with the cuckolded husband, who carries the *doglio* to his house. Not only does Peronella save her skin (like Zinevra), but she also turns her mishap into a profit for the household, thus satisfying her sexual needs and providing for her husband simultaneously. Hence, in Day 7 and elsewhere, the inseparability of *favellare* and *operare* balances the uneven distribution of male and female roles at the expense of the noble ladies' *vergogna*.

This progressive novella, however, is short-lived and undone the next day, particularly in 8.1, when Neifile tells the novella of Ambruogia. On Day 8, the narrators recount “quelle beffe che tutto il giorno o donna a uomo o uomo a donna o l'uno uomo all'altro si fanno” (“the tricks that women play on men, or men on women, or men on men, all day long”).⁶⁰ But unlike the stories of Zinevra and Peronella, the tricks that women play on men leave the tricksters with their tails between their legs.⁶¹ Neifile tells the story of Gulfardo, who falls in love with Madonna Ambruogia, the wife of Guasparruolo—a rich Milanese merchant. Implored by Gulfardo to reciprocate his love, Ambruogia yields to him under two conditions: that no one ever find out about their affair and that he gave her 200 gold florins—all in exchange for her constant “servigio” (“service”). Irritated by her demand of money, which he views as greed and vileness,

⁵⁷ Notice that Dioneo seems to place the guilt on two characters of lower class and not on himself, however, he had already incited women's sexual liberation with *Decameron* 2.10. Barolini analyzes 2.10 as Dioneo's rewriting of 2.9, focusing on women's right to sexuality (i.e., inconstancy not as female inferiority but as female strength), anticipating the novellas of Day 7. See “*Le parole son femmine*,” 287–300.

⁵⁸ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 776, 6.Concl.6.

⁵⁹ Julia Gaisser, *The Fortunes of Apuleius and the Golden Ass* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 102.

⁶⁰ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 887, 8.Intro.1.

⁶¹ At best, in 8.4, we read of a woman who successfully tricks a man aided, however, by her brothers. Hence, her trick is reliant on male authority. See Marilyn Migiel, “The Untidy Business of Gender Studies,” in *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, eds. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki, *Studi e Testi* Vol. 8 (Chapel Hill, NC: *Annali d'Italianistica*, Inc., 2006), 224.

Gulfardo (whose love almost turns into hatred) tricks Ambruogia instead. Gulfardo first borrows the 200 florins from Guasparruolo, who then goes on a long business trip. Then, in Guasparruolo's absence, and with a friend to witness the transaction, Gulfardo gives Ambruogia the florins. As promised, she gives *servigio* in return. Days later, once Guasparruolo is back from his travels, Gulfardo pays him a visit and gives Ambruogia a payback:

«Guasparruolo, i denari, cioè li dugento fiorin d'oro che l'altrier mi prestasti, non m'ebber luogo, per ciò che io non potei fornir la bisogna per la quale gli presi: e per ciò io gli recai qui di presente alla donna tua e sí gliele diedi, e per ciò dannerai la mia ragione».

Guasparruolo, volto alla moglie, la domandò se avuti gli avea; ella, che quivi vedeva il testimonio, nol seppe negare ma disse: «Mai sí che io gli ebbi, né m'era ancor ricordata di dirloti».

Disse allora Guasparruolo: «Gulfardo, io son contento: andatevi pur con Dio, ché io acconcerò bene la vostra ragione».

Gulfardo, partitosi, e la donna rimasa scornata diede al marito il *disonesto prezzo* della sua cattività: e così il sagace amante *senza costo* godé della sua avara donna.

("Guasparruolo, I didn't need the money, the two hundred gold florins you lent me the other day, because I was unable to close the business for which I borrowed them. And so, I immediately brought them here and presented them to your wife and gave them to her, so you will cancel my account.")

Turned to his wife, Guasparruolo asked her if she had received them. Seeing the witness there, she didn't know how to deny it, but she said: "Yes, certainly I got them, but I hadn't yet remembered to tell you."

Guasparruolo then said: "Gulfardo, I'm paid. Go with God, for I'll put in order your account."

Gulfardo left, and the woman, having been fooled, gave her husband the *dishonest price* of her wickedness. And so, the astute lover enjoyed his greedy lady—*free of charge*.)⁶²

Marilyn Migiel observes that all the tales in Day 8 are governed by "the forces of economic exchange and accountability (*ragione*) [that] work to exclude women."⁶³ And because this exclusion is collectively endorsed by the *brigata*, the threat to women is omnipresent.⁶⁴ Indeed, ladies and gentlemen alike deny women the right to engage in financial transactions, for these are the domain of men.⁶⁵ In the tale's ending above, Gulfardo puts Ambruogia back into the patriarchal structures by making her appear as a "damaged merchandise" that has been returned and whose cost has been cancelled by the merchant-husband.

However, Neifile's language in describing the anticipated and "well-deserved" punishment of a *cattiva donna* is both ambiguous and intriguing. In her opening remarks, Neifile reminds us of and even pardons Madonna Filippa's adultery as narrated in 6.7 (because she was ostensibly

⁶² Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 893–894, 8.1.15–18.

⁶³ Migiel, "The Untidy Business of Gender Studies," 232.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 220–221. In *Decameron* 8.2.2, all members commend what Gulfardo did to Ambruogia.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 221–222.

dissatisfied with her husband and had a surplus of sexual energy), yet Neifile does not hesitate to shame any woman who violates her chastity in exchange for money:

Avvegna che, chi volesse più propriamente parlare, quel che io dir debbo non si direbbe beffa anzi si direbbe *merito*: per ciò che, con ciò sia cosa debba essere onestissima e la sua castità come la sua vita guardare né per alcuna cagione a contaminarla conducersi (e questo non possendosi, così apieno tuttavia come si converrebbe, per la fragilità nostra), affermo colei esser degna del fuoco la quale a ciò per prezzo si conduce; dove chi per amor, conoscendo le sue forze grandissime, perviene, da giudice non troppo rigido *merita* perdono, come, pochi dí son passati, ne mostrò Filostrato essere stato in madonna Filippa osservato in Prato.

(It happens that, to speak in the strict sense of the word, what I must tell you shouldn't be called a trick, but rather *a just desert*, for a woman must be very honorable and guard her chastity like her own life, nor for any reason should she bring herself to taint it. And unable to do this to the full, as it should be observed, due to our fragility, I declare that a woman who brings herself to do it for a price deserves to be burned at the stake, whereas a woman who gives in for Love, knowing how great its power is, *deserves* to be pardoned by a judge that is not too rigid, just as a few days ago Filostrato showed what had been observed in the case of Madonna Filippa in Prato.)⁶⁶

Neifile condemns women who, driven by money (“per prezzo si conduce”), yield their bodies to men, but the meaning of *merito/merita* ought not be taken at face value. From Latin *merere*, Italian *meritare* means, on one hand, to *earn* (i.e., a living), *win, gain, deserve, merit* and, on the other, to *serve* as a soldier or as a whore. The last two definitions certainly turn the tables. While Neifile could be implicitly classifying Ambruogia as a *meretrix* (prostitute) and not so much a greedy woman, she is also critiquing Gulfardo’s trade (and ethnicity): “Fu adunque già in Melano un tedesco al soldo, [...], pro’ della persona e assai leale a coloro ne’ cui servigi si mettea, il che rade volte suole de’ Tedeschi avvenire” (“There was once a German mercenary in Milan, a valiant man who was very loyal to those in whose service he enrolled, which rarely happens with Germans”), she begins. A German mercenary (from the related Latin *merx, mercis*, for reward and merchandise), Gulfardo is not a patriot but a paid soldier, whose body is a commodity in his occupation and whose primary concern is to make money at the expense of ethics.⁶⁷ Indeed, Ambruogia is not the only one who offers “servigio” (i.e., the body) in exchange for florins. Hence, to Neifile Gulfardo and Madonna Ambruogia *deserve* each other, for they are equally greedy. Moreover, while Neifile’s xenophobia is evident in her choice of trade for Gulfardo, her misogynist treatment of Ambruogia extends to the character’s name alone. Ambruogia not only alludes to the name Ambrugiolo (in 2.9) but also matches Ambrugiolo’s certainty of wives’ extramarital affairs during the long absences of husbands. Thus, it’s no coincidence that Ambruogia’s husband travels to Genoa (a trade hub and Bernabò’s

⁶⁶ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 890, 8.1.3–4, emphasis mine. I thank one of the peer reviewers for suggesting “a just desert” (an old English phrase for “deserved reward or punishment”) as translation of *merito*.

⁶⁷ For the problematic commercial exchange of mercenaries (and “courtly” love) in 8.1, see also Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 190–192.

hometown) for business. This attention to business invites us to read this tale against Filostrato's Peronella.

Monetary transactions are indeed salient features in the tales both of Peronella and of Ambruogia. If we compare Neifile's story to Filostrato's (about Madonna Filippa), Neifile critiques Ambruogia for selling her body intentionally. But when it comes to Peronella, her *doglio*/body sale was accidental, for she had to improvise a transaction to save the day.⁶⁸ I argue that Peronella's triumph is also linked to class, shamelessness, and, particularly, the sexual revolution previously inaugurated in 2.10 and in Licisca's and Madonna Filippa's claims in Day 6. In fact, Filostrato alludes to Licisca's female neighbors: "Marito, marito, egli non ci ha vicina che non se ne maravigli e che non facci beffe di me [...] L'altre si danno buon tempo cogli amanti loro, e non ce n'ha niuna che non abbia chi due o chi tre, e godono e mostrano a' mariti la luna per lo sole" ("Husband, husband, there's not one neighbor who doesn't marvel [at my hard work] and makes fun of me [...] the other women have a good time with their lovers, and there's not one here who doesn't have two or three, and they enjoy themselves, showing their husbands that the moon is the sun").⁶⁹ It is striking how Filostrato gives the impoverished Peronella license to be an avid businesswoman, whereas Neifile denies Ambruogia such a skill.

From the start, we learn that both Peronella and her husband are a lower-class couple living in Naples and whose joint labor barely makes ends meet.⁷⁰ Without Peronella's work, they would not survive; in fact, her improvised sale of the *doglio* made her the month's breadwinner.⁷¹ Ambruogia, on the other hand, is married to a rich merchant who implicitly is not tending to her material needs, for she asks Gulfardo for a determinate quantity of florins for something she required: "che ella avesse per alcuna sua cosa bisogno di fiorini dugento d'oro, voleva che egli, che ricco uomo era, *glielle donasse*" ("she wanted him, who was a rich man, to gift her two hundred gold florins which she needed for something"),⁷² Neifile specifies. While *donasse* (from *donare*: to donate or give a present) at first seems to imply magnanimity (or charity), at the moment of giving, however, Neifile's rhetoric transforms a gift into a payment: "si credette che egli il facesse acciò che il compagno suo non s'accorgesse che egli a lei per via di prezzo gli desse" ("she believed that he [Gulfardo] had spoken in that way so that his companion didn't think that he was giving her the money by way of payment").⁷³ With this turn of phrase, Ambruogia believes Gulfardo is protecting her honor before his witness, pretending that the "gift" is actually a payment for her husband. Despite Ambruogia's confusion at the moment of transaction, the protagonist blurs the distinction between gift and exchange economy, problematically changing the nature of gifts when she first requests the florins.

⁶⁸ For a reading that sees Peronella's sale as her own transformation into a *meretrix*, see Ronald L. Martinez, "Apuleian Example and Misogynist Allegory in the Tale of Peronella (*Decameron* VII.2)," in *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, eds. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki, *Studi e Testi* Vol. 8 (Chapel Hill, NC: *Annali d'Italianistica*, Inc., 2006), 201–216.

⁶⁹ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 801, 7.2.15, 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 799, 7.2.7: "un povero uomo [...] che era muratore, e ella filando, guadagnando assai sottilmente, la lor vita reggevano come potevano il meglio" ("a poor man who was a mason, and she [Peronella] a spinner, earning very little, they sustained their life as best they could").

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 801–802, 7.2.20. At her husband's early return, Peronella scolds him for not wanting to work ("di che viverem noi? onde avrem noi del pane? [7.2.14]), but he had not come home empty handed, for he had sold the *doglio* for 5 *gigliati* which guaranteed "del pane per più d'un mese" ("bread for more than a month"). So Peronella improvises her personal sale with a higher bidder, her lover Giannello.

⁷² Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 892, 8.1.7. Emphasis added.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 893, 8.1.13. For a study on the economic transformations of the fourteenth century, see Kristina M. Olson, *Courtesy Lost: Dante, Boccaccio, and the Literature of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

To complicate things further, elsewhere in the *Decameron*, we read of male characters, such as Nastagio degli Onesti (5.8), who unsuccessfully spend their riches in order to win the favor of noble ladies. Of interest here is men's willingness to spend money to gain the love of such ladies while they do not believe women of the mercantile and lower classes worthy of financial investment. Looking closely at 8.1, we get two different evaluations of women, as described by Neifile's *cattiva donna* and Gufardo's *valente donna*, both of whom are measured against a monetary rubric. Neifile is unforgiving of women who sell sex because a *valente donna* needs not be persuaded with riches ("isdegnato per la viltà di lei la quale egli credeva che fosse una *valente donna*, quasi in odio transmuto il fervente amore" ["outraged by the vileness of the lady, whom he thought to be a *worthy* woman, his fervent love transformed into almost hatred"]).⁷⁴ Put differently, Neifile-Gufardo appraises Ambruogia as not *valente/worthy* of investment, for she is not nobility. And since Ambruogia is not *valente* enough to win her favors through "gifts," Gufardo feels entitled to trick her into sex free of charge.

Misogynist thinking in the *Decameron* is an untidy business, to echo Migiel's description of gender studies. Some noble *narratrici* distance themselves from lower class female characters, laughing at them and letting go of strict patriarchal expectations of moral behavior. Other female narrators seem to find personal fulfillment in the agency of female characters, though such agency is only possible through passive role-playing before patriarchal figures. All in all, women's shame-honor and shame-dishonor are always at stake.

***Decameron* 9.10: A Coda to Queen Emilia's Tale**

As seen in Dante's elaborate illustration of nobility in youths' and women's shame in the previous section, issues around age, class, and gender emerge, all of which are prominent in the *Decameron*. With 9.10, we fully enter the realm of the poor in the social spectrum, with no noble characters around—at least not explicitly. However, Dioneo's tale has been analyzed more for its sexual metaphors than for the economic hardship of its characters.⁷⁵ While some scholars see 9.10 as a correction to 9.9, others have focused on the ambiguous sexual implications due to Boccaccio's tricky erotic language.⁷⁶ I claim that Dioneo, while abiding by Emilia's unwillingness (rather than her failure) to read a male proverb as a sexual metaphor, applies the sexual proverb not to noble but to poor women. Nevertheless, in Boccaccio's appropriation and manipulation of an ancient, human-equine sexual analogy, 9.10 lays bare, beyond any sexually-charged figurative language, the rape culture of the medieval period.

Dioneo tells of a poor priest, Donno Gianni di Barolo, and, a poorer man, Pietro da Tresanti, who become friends as they travel to markets all over Apulia to sell and buy merchandise, carrying their goods on a mare and an ass respectively. Over time they host each other the best they can. The priest hosted Pietro in his poor church in Barletta, and Pietro used to lodge the

⁷⁴ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 892, 8.1.8.

⁷⁵ On the centrality of poverty in the plot of 9.10, see Tobias Foster Gittes, "'Dal giogo alleviati': Free Servitude and Fixed Stars in *Decameron* 9," *Annali d'Italianistica* 31 (2013): 381–416, especially 406–410.

⁷⁶ For instance, regarding the former scenario, Ascoli evinces in passing how Emilia's "moralized" interpretation of the proverb, "Good horses and bad horses want the spur; good women and bad women want the rod," is then appropriated and literalized by Dioneo in 9.10. See Ascoli, "Solomon and Emilia" and, on Dioneo's literality, Janet Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta: The Narrator as Lover* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 191–192. Regarding the latter scenario, Migiel analyzes women's responses to novellas whose eroticized figurative language is predominantly male. With Boccaccio's complex language, Migiel argues, it is difficult to know whether the female narrators are indeed laughing about sexual innuendos. See Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 123–146.

priest and his mare in Tresanti, in his little stable, on a pile of straw, next to Pietro's ass ("come poteva [...] l'onorava" ["he honored him the best he could"]).⁷⁷ Pietro's young and beautiful wife, Gemmata, insisted that Donno Gianni sleep inside their little cottage and share the bed with Pietro since she could sleep at the neighbor's. Donno Gianni refuses the invitation every single time. One of those times, however, the priest said "Comar Gemmata, non ti tribolar di me, ché io sto bene, per ciò che quando mi piace *io fo questa cavalla diventare una bella zitella* e stommi con essa, e poi, quando voglio, *la fo diventar cavalla*; e per ciò non mi partirei da lei" ("Comar Gemmata, don't trouble yourself about me, I'm just fine, because whenever I please, I make this mare turn into a beautiful maid and stay with her. And then, whenever I want, I make her turn into a mare. And that's why I wouldn't part from her").⁷⁸ In her naïveté, Gemmata believes Donno Gianni and convinces Pietro to ask his friend to teach him the incantation so that she herself could be turned into a *cavalla* and help him earn double the money, carrying things to and from the fairs. Since the priest could not talk Pietro out of this foolishness, he agrees to perform the incantation for Pietro's learning and memorization, under the condition that Pietro remain silent—no matter what he sees or hears—for the magic to work. Hence, Donno Gianni instructs Gemmata to strip naked and stand on her two hands and feet on the ground, like a mare. Little by little Donno Gianni touches Gemmata's body parts, invoking the parts of the mare but, at touching the woman's breast, the priest's phallus, uninvited, "turns up." When it was time to invoke the tail of the mare, Gianni penetrates Gemmata from behind, at once saying "E questa sia bella coda di cavalla" ("And let this be a fine mare's tail"),⁷⁹ at which point Pietro exclaims "O donno Gianni, io non vi voglio coda, io non vi voglio coda!" ("Oh, Donno Gianni, no tail! I don't want a tail there!").⁸⁰ Pietro's disruption, therefore, "ruined" the incantation, not without Gemmata's rebuke: "Bestia che tu se', perché hai tu guasti li tuoi fatti e' miei? qual cavalla vedestú mai senza coda?" ("Oh, you beast, why did you ruin your deeds and mine? Which mare have you ever seen without a tail?").⁸¹

Hence, in 9.10, rape culture is presented to us in the form of a "funny" tale in which the metamorphosis of Gemmata into a *cavalla* fails, apparently implying that Dioneo does not take rape culture too seriously. Matters look different if we consider the biblical subtext of Boccaccio's equine imagery from the Book of Tobit: "tunc angelus Rafahel dixit ei audi me et ostendam tibi qui sunt quibus praevalere potest daemonium hii namque qui coniugium ita suscipiunt ut Deum a se sua mente excludant et suae libidini ita vacent *sicut equus et mulus in quibus non est intellectus* habet potestatem daemonium super eos" ("Then the angel Raphael said to him 'listen to me and I will show you those over whom the devil can prevail. For they who in such manner receive matrimony, as to shut out God from themselves and from their mind and to give themselves to their lust, *as the horse and the mule, which do not have understanding*, over them the devil has power.'")⁸² This excerpt is only a glimpse of a religious text of Hebrew scripture. In it, the angel Raphael, in human form, tells Tobias, son of Tobit, why the demon

⁷⁷ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1101–1102, 9.10.8–9, emphasis mine.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1102, 9.10.11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1104, 9.10.18.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.10.19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1104–1105, 9.10.23.

⁸² *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, ed. Roger Gryson, (Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 682–683, Liber Tobiae 6:16–17; emphasis mine. In the preface to the Book of Tobit, Saint Jerome writes that his source was a Rabbi's translation into Hebrew of an Aramaic text which he then translated into Latin in one day. See Joseph L. Ponessa and Laurie Watson Manhardt, *Exile and Return: Tobit, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Maccabees* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2013), 43.

Asmodeus had the power to kill each of Sarah's seven husbands before the marriage could be consummated: because, "like the horse and the mule," those men lacked self-restraint, yielding to their lust instead of God's teachings. In 9.10, it is a priest (not Gemmata) who lacks self-control⁸³ and, to the couple's misfortune, Pietro and Gemmata fall victim to both their underdeveloped intellect and Donno Gianni's unbridled lust. The couple's experience, however, reflects their status as victims of oppression as promoted in yet another subtext: Andreas Capellanus *De amore* (12th century).⁸⁴

In his imitative eclecticism, Boccaccio exposes a pernicious discourse that originates in and is spread by a handbook that allegedly teaches the art of love. In a very brief chapter, Capellanus denies poor farmers (being at the bottom of the social strata) the courtly ways of loving, asserting confidently and forcefully that "naturaliter sicut equus et mulus ad Veneris opera promoventur" ("they are impelled to [the works of Venus] in the natural way like a horse or a mule").⁸⁵ The force with which he installs the imagery of equine lovemaking is carried out further, when he advises those who are tempted to seek the love of peasant women: they ought to begin with lavish praise—in the courtly fashion—however, they ought "to take them with a violent embrace" ("violento potiri amplexu") as soon as they find the appropriate spot. The deponent verb alone ("potiri") spurs the male reader to get possession of peasant women, to acquire and master them. And although the author ends this chapter persuading no one into "loving" a peasant woman, Capellanus' brief account is practically a how-to-guide for raping women who belong to a vulnerable social group in view of their poverty.

Poverty is a key theme in 9.10 but, if read against Capellanus' account on "loving" peasant women, so are nobility and its "sophisticated" customs implicitly. Therefore, through Dioneo, Boccaccio transforms the chaplain's text into a parody of a priest's unregulated carnal appetite. Moreover, the author also parodies a courtly custom practiced by the poor trio, namely their hospitality gestures within their material limitations. Nevertheless, in the process, Gemmata's economic, intellectual, and sexual powerlessness is staged and turned into a spectacle for her husband's "lesson." Certainly, such a lesson is also meant for noble women in response to Emilia's appropriation of the male proverb, for she excludes wise noble women, together with their shame-honor, from getting the male "stick."⁸⁶ Hence, the power dynamics around the *cavalla's* tail and "failed incantation" make this story extremely complex.⁸⁷

⁸³ The similarity in names, Gianni in this novella and Giannello (Peronella's lover) in 7.2 is no coincidence, for the latter takes Peronella, yielding to his lust like a *sfrenato cavallo*. See Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 803–804, 7.2.34.

⁸⁴ Composed of three books that teach the art of love, how to keep it, and how to survive heartache, this manual imitates Ovid's works on love. Hence, Capellanus fashions himself as the Italian Ovid before Petrarch.

⁸⁵ Andreas Capellanus, *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, ed. and trans. by P. G. Walsh (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1982), 222–223, 1.11. I amended Walsh's translation by replacing "acts of love" with a more literal translation: "the works of Venus."

⁸⁶ In the preamble to his novella, Dioneo assures that he will make the ladies' virtue shine brighter with his imperfection ("faccendo la vostra virtù piú lucente col mio difetto"), hence, he tells a story in which he shows himself as he is ("un nero corvo"), an unwise man ("un men savio," "scemo"), like Pietro; Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1100, 9.10.3–4.

⁸⁷ I analyze this tale against its various subtexts and within Emilia's government in order to address the violence committed against women, the poor, and the uneducated in the *Decameron*. Most importantly, if the readers wonder whether Boccaccio's fiction questions the culturally established misogyny by exposing it or it actually reinforces it, I would point out that Boccaccio's (im)modest creation portrays vulnerable groups and their oppressors, which allows us to identify social injustices.

Coda: Poetic Contagions of Shame and the *Tre Corone* Variants

There is more to shame than meets the eye, and we have seen how women's shame and its connotations—constancy, modesty, honor, and, especially, fear of dishonor—are the governing principles of the *brigata* ladies and are pervasive motifs both in the *cornice* and in the novellas. However, through a comparative analysis of the ladies' mindset and their respective novellas, tensions arise between what is said in the frame tale and what is actually narrated. Hence, the storytellers' inventiveness is also marked by the poetics of female shame-(dis)honor, simultaneously bringing into stark relief and challenging the systemic misogyny inside—and outside—the *Decameron's* fiction. Put differently, the *Decameron* is a bold literary creation for its time, founded on a gendered concept of shame in which female characters have much more to lose than male characters. Nevertheless, theories on literary imitation and originality rarely engage with Boccaccio's authorship and genre innovation.⁸⁸ In response to this absence, this article ends with a coda that exposes another major contagion of shame-modesty in Boccaccio's very own authorship.

Indeed, Italian vernacular writers were not immune to expressions of modesty and even shame about their own status and that of their works. At the dawn of vernacular literatures, dignifying vernacular Italian as a literary language was a bold move at a time when Latin and prestigious classical texts were *the* literary authority.⁸⁹ Hence, any authorial autonomy sought by aspiring poets was conditioned by the authority of venerated models, such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Imitation of the Latin authors was at the heart of Italian literary production, whose novelty had to be modestly, if not shamefully, manifested. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—the three crowns of Italian literature—were no exception.⁹⁰

Both Dante-pilgrim and Petrarch-lover stage their feelings of shame from the outset of their vernacular masterpieces. In *Inferno* 1, Dante's shame is physically visible when he first encounters Virgil: “Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte / che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?” / rispuous' io lui con vergognosa fronte” (“Now are you that Virgil, that fountain which / spreads forth so broad a river of speech?” [to him] I replied / with shamefast brow”).⁹¹ Later, in canto 2, Dante modestly questions being chosen for such a supernatural journey: “Ma io, perché venirvi? / o chi 'l concede? / Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono; / me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede” (“But I, why come there? or who grants it? I am / not Aeneas, I am not Paul; neither I nor others /

⁸⁸ As far as I am aware, lyric poetry, pastoral, epic, and chivalric romance have been discussed extensively in the theorization of authorship in Italy and abroad whereas Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the novella tradition have not. See, for instance, Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) on lyric poetry (namely Petrarch's) and, on epic and chivalric romance, see David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). By contrast, despite having its own tradition, Guido Mazzoni reduces the novella to a subgenre of the modern novel in *Teoria del romanzo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011).

⁸⁹ For the evolution of the concepts of author and authority, see Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3–44.

⁹⁰ My research evinces the centrality of shame(lessness) in the conversation of literary imitation and originality, as well as in Boccaccio's exposure and subversion of Dantean and Petrarchan subtexts, specifically in *Decameron* 5.8, the novella of Nastagio degli Onesti, told by Filomena. I will address Boccaccio's subversion of his fellow Italian crowns in another publication.

⁹¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30, 1.79–81. I amended Durling's translation to replicate with more accuracy the way in which Dante cleverly juxtaposes himself with the Roman poet Virgil (“io lui” vs. “him I”).

believe me worthy of that”).⁹² Petrarch, on the other hand, recalls feeling ashamed for being the subject of much gossip in the proemial poem of his *Rime sparse*: “Ma ben veggio or sì come al popol tutto / favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente di me medesimo meco mi vergogno // et del mio vaneggiar vergogna è ’l frutto” (“But now I see well how for a long time I was the talk of the crowd, for which often I am ashamed of myself within; and of my raving, shame is the fruit”).⁹³ Embarrassed indeed, both Dante and Petrarch justify their innovative poems as they acknowledge deviation from the right path: In the first *terzina* of the *Inferno*, Dante tell us that in his midlife he had lost the straightforward way⁹⁴ and, in the proemial sonnet of the *Scattered Rimes*, Petrarch takes us back to his first youthful error.⁹⁵ Of the *tre corone*, however, Giovanni Boccaccio appears to stand outside of this authorial shame hotspot—or at least he has us believe so initially.

In the *Decameron’s* Proem, Boccaccio exposes his vulnerability—free of shame—as a man who survived the pain caused by the great fire of his “poco regolato appetito” (“poorly regulated appetite”).⁹⁶ Out of gratitude, Boccaccio delights in offering relief to those who would welcome it the most: gracious women who, “dentro a’ delicati petti, *temendo e vergognando*, tengono l’amorose fiamme nascose” (“*in fear and shame*, keep the love-kindled flames concealed within their delicate bosoms”).⁹⁷ Therefore, it is not the poet’s shame but the shame of his addressees—distressed women—that is interpolated. Later, in the conclusion of his book, Boccaccio assures us of two things: that he was not the *inventore* but rather the scribe of the *novelle* and that, had he been the *inventore*, he would not feel ashamed of the not-so-beautiful stories because only God has made everything “bene e compiutamente” (“well and perfectly”).⁹⁸ In his statement, however, there are two opposite forces at play. On the one hand, Boccaccio minimizes his role in the composition of the *Decameron* (“lo inventore [...] che non fui” [“the inventor I was not”]), and, on the other, he shamelessly admits that not all the novellas are beautiful (“dico che io non mi vergognerei che tutte belle non fossero”).⁹⁹ If the latter is true—that is, if he is truly

⁹² Ibid., 42, 2.31–33. In his modesty, however, not only does Dante explicitly compare his travel to the afterlife to that of the legendary and epic personage Aeneas and of St. Paul, but he also implicitly compares himself to two great historical figures as authors: St. Paul and Virgil.

⁹³ Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The Rime sparse and Other Lyrics*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 37, 1.9–12.

⁹⁴ Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 26, *Inf.* 1.2–3: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / ché la diritta via era smarrita” (“In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to / myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost”).

⁹⁵ Petrarca, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, 37, 1.1–4: “Voi ch’ ascoltate in rime sparse il suono / di quei sospiri ond’ io nudriva ’l core / in sul mio primo giovanile errore, / quand’ era in parte altr’ uom da quel ch’ i’ sono” (“You who hear in scattered rhymes the sound of those sighs with which I nourished my heart during my first youthful error, when I was in part another man from what I am now”).

⁹⁶ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 6, Proem.3, emphasis mine.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 7, Proem.10.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1258, Concl.16–17, emphasis mine: “Saranno similmente di quelle [donne] che diranno qui esserne alcune [novelle] che, non essendoci, sarebbe stato assai meglio. Concedasi: ma io non pote’ né doveva scrivere se non le raccontate, e per ciò esse che le dissero le dovevan dir belle e io l’avrei scritte belle. Ma se pur prosuppor si volesse che io fossi stato di quelle e lo *’nventore* e lo scrittore, *che non fui*, dico che *io non mi vergognerei che tutte belle non fossero*, per ciò che maestro alcun non si truova, da Dio in fuori, che ogni cosa faccia *bene e compiutamente*” (“Similarly, there will be those who will say that it would’ve been much better to leave out some [novellas] included herein. I’ll give you that, but I could—I had to—write down only the stories that were narrated. And so, had the narrators told beautiful stories, I would’ve written beautiful ones. But if people were to assume that I was *both the inventor and the scribe* of the novellas—but I wasn’t—then *I wouldn’t be ashamed that not all of them were beautiful*, because there is no master, besides God, capable of making everything well and perfectly”).

⁹⁹ See full passage and translation in note 98 above.

unashamed—why is Boccaccio reluctant to identify himself as the *inventore* of his *Decameron*? Why even distinguish between *inventore* and *autore*? Deserving its own thorough analysis, this is a tale for another time.

Hence, a third point of contact, though absent in this article, is the Three Crowns' shame as a precondition for their innovative literary works. For instance, in shame, Dante and Petrarch portray themselves overwhelmed by their objects of desire—Beatrice in *Vita nova* and Laura in *Rime sparse*, respectively—both of whom are inaccessible as the impeccable ladies they are. Conversely, Boccaccio portrays himself as women's best friend, dedicating his *Decameron* to unhappy, constrained women.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, in the fiction, female shame—their “laudable” fear of dishonor—is ubiquitous and challenged. As gendered social norms limit women, the *Decameron*'s backdrop of a devastating plague—one capable of disrupting any sense of normalcy and propriety and of promoting shamelessness—allows Boccaccio's creativity to challenge the literary conventions exemplified by Dante and Petrarch.¹⁰¹

Lastly, I would like to add a reflection given our own pandemic years. As the coronavirus disrupted and slowed down our lives at the beginning of 2020, Boccaccio's *Decameron* became newly relevant. Attention-grabbing online articles described people's ways of discovering and reconnecting with Boccaccio's fiction.¹⁰² In academia, the American Boccaccio Association inaugurated *The Virtual Brigata*, a free online lecture series in fall 2020. During Italy's first lockdown, Zheng Ningyuan founded 4xDecameron, a digital project that (re)connected *sinoitaliani* in Italy and China and voiced the social issues experienced by *italo-cinesi*.¹⁰³ Hence, the *Decameron* not only offers a set of stories to read for distraction but also provides us with the opportunity to engage with current social issues about power and (racial) identity.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, with the commemoration of US women's suffrage also in the background of 2020, the *Decameron* reminds us that the contagion of anti-woman discourses and disguised misogyny—in one form or another—is still with us, in the era of social media, at a time when the complex interconnection between public and private life is newly changing. It might be tempting to think that Boccaccio's fiction is about the past, but let us keep on reading closely nonetheless.

¹⁰⁰ Consequently, “[u]mana cosa è avere compassione degli afflitti” (“it is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer”) are the author's first words in the *Decameron*.

¹⁰¹ My research shows that, while Dante and Petrarch stage their personal feelings of shame in the *Commedia* and *Rime sparse*, respectively, Boccaccio is shameless at simultaneously exposing and avoiding the poetic innovations of his fellow crowns, by tapping into women's silencing shame and liberating shamelessness. Hence, Boccaccio's choice of *inventore* is intentional, to signal the creation of something *new*.

¹⁰² See, for instance, Trish Hall, “Six Centuries Later, *The Decameron* Is Suddenly the Book of the Moment,” Books, *Vogue*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/why-is-everyone-reading-the-decameron>; Alison Flood, “Margaret Atwood to edit collaborative modern *Decameron* for the Covid era,” *The Guardian*, Friday March 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/19/margaret-atwood-edit-modern-decameron-covid-fourteen-days-an-unauthorised-gathering>; Dan Turello, “Craft your own renaissance with tips from Boccaccio's *Decameron*,” *Psyche*, April 12, 2021, <https://psyche.co/ideas/craft-your-own-renaissance-with-tips-from-boccaccios-decameron>. An enthusiast of the *Decameron* myself, with this article I join the multifarious (re)connections with Boccaccio's masterpiece in the wake of COVID-19.

¹⁰³ Lala Hu recounts Ningyuan's virtual activism in *Semi di tè* (Busto Arsizio: People S.R.L., 2020). For more on Hu, see the interview included in this volume of *California Italian Studies*: Lala Hu, “Sino-Italian Dissent and the Documentation of Crisis: An Interview with Lala Hu,” interview by Alice Fischetti, *California Italian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2022).

¹⁰⁴ For instance, while *Decameron* 7.2 and 9.10 suggest prejudice against women from the South (Peronella in Naples and Gemmata in Puglia), 9.9 displays brutality against an unnamed woman (Giosefo's wife) from Antioch and whose identity is most likely Jewish given her husband's Hebrew name. See Gittes, “Dal giogo alleviati,” 403–406.