The *Decameron* Sixth Day in Perspective

Volume Six of the Lectura Boccaccii

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6 The Tale of Michele Scalza (VI.6)

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The sixth *novella* of Day Six of the *Decameron* has received little attention in Boccaccio scholarship. It is as if there were just so many other longer, more complex, more memorable stories of the over one hundred to write about that even those scholars who focused on one or more of the themes of the Sixth Day barely even mention it.[1] Tucked away in a little niche between the more famous one that precedes it, the fifth about Giotto's mordant remark to Forese da Rabatta, and the seventh, Philippa's memorable defence of her infidelity, the tale of Michele Scalza gets at best a mention in passing, a listing in a footnote. In truth, the tales about Oretta (VI.1), Cisti (VI.2), Chichibio (VI.4), and Brother Cipolla (VI.10) do lend themselves to broader, multilayered approaches, and typically yield penetrating insights into the complex world of Boccaccio's masterpiece. Assuming therefore that most readers don't have it present in their mind, let us summarize what happens in the story, before we attempt a critical reading.

Under the reign of Elissa, who entreats the storytellers to entertain by showing how "exquisite these sayings can be if proffered at the right moment," the tale is being narrated by Fiammetta, who we have learned is characterized as portraying temperance.[2] One of the cardinal virtues, temperance involves sound judgment, self-restraint; indeed prudence meant to avert excess in certain situations by directing attention to what is appropriate in given contexts. In the economy of the

1 Even in Francesco Bruni's thorough study, this tale gets less than a page (387–8). See also brief references in cited works by Petrini, *Nel giardino*; Wallace; Palumbo; Giusti, "La novella"; Olson, *Courtesy Lost*; Martinez, "*Scienze della Cittade*"; Oesch-Serra; and Picone, "Leggiadri motti." We will refer to some of them further down.

2 See Kirkham, *Sign of Reason* 169 et infra.

Sixth Day, Fiammetta sketches for us a scene wherein a group of friends is loitering in the back alleys of Florence, not too far from Santa Maria Novella, and in their playful roguishness end up bandying about which was the most noble and ancient family in the city. Some vouch for the Uberti, and some counter with the Lamberti, who were actually existing but decayed upper-crust families at the time,[3] unlike for instance the powerful clans of the Donati and the Cerchi. In the meantime, the friends end up in someone's house, Piero the Florentine, to continue their rumpus. A Michele Scalza, known to be a jolly party animal and a gossip – as "le piú nuove novelle aveva per le mani" [VI.6.4; he had any number of juicy stories up his sleeve; 395][4] – ready to jump into any boisterous gathering to draw attention and have fun, often at someone else's expense, first listens and then barges in, telling the bunch that they know not what they are talking about. He remarks with a grin that it is the Baronci[5] who are "i più gentili uomini e i più antichi, non che di Firenze ma di tutto il mondo o di Maremma" [VI.8.6; the most noble and ancient of men, not only of Florence but of the whole world and Maremma too; my trans.], a claim backed by invoking the authority of the most prestigious academics of the time, the Schoolmen. This is no small detail, as we will see.

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3 Najemy, *History of Florence* 6 and 60–1, points out that of the great families that practically ruled Florence during the twelfth century – some listed in Cacciaguida's microhistory in *Paradiso* 16 – only a few had survived the banishment of the Ghibellines in 1267–8, and this included the powerful families of the Lamberti and the Uberti, some of whom moved on to Siena and Pisa (Olson, *Courtesy Lost* 140). However, though their reputation as noble and ancient remained in the culture, they were no longer models of ethical behaviour. We recall that Farinata degli Uberti appears in Canto 10 of the *Inferno*, whereas a Mosca dei Lamberti is presented by Dante as a sower of discord in *Inferno* 28.

4 Unless otherwise indicated, I have used the Waldman translation for the English text, but occasionally I have used the McWilliam version or my own translations, as indicated in square brackets. For the original text, I have used Branca's 1976 edition for *Tutte le opere*.

5 In Najemy's register of the old élite (the *grandi* for the Florentines of the period) – characterized by agnatic lineages, inherited wealth, and recurrent inter-family strife vying for prestige – there is no Baronci, but he attests to a Baroncelli clan in early 1300, who were part of an emerging newfangled élite (*History of Florence* 23). In *Paradiso* 16, 104, Cacciaguida lists a "Barucci" among the earlier élites in early thirteenth century. There are almost no sources on the Baronci, other than Branca's remark that they were part of an old bourgeois family (Boccaccio, *Decameron* [1976] 2:1062). In his *Ethics of Retribution*, Nissen writes: "It is evident that the Baronci of Sacchetti's generation were no more highly regarded than their ancestors who were derided in *Decameron* VI.6" (90). There are no records of the next character introduced, Michele Scalza, and a case can be made that he represents the author's critical persona.

The troop snaps back, much like a bunch of East Side Kids or Bowery Boys from the famous Samuel Goldwyn movies of the 1940s, sneering: what do you take us for? We know what you are talking about. I'll prove it to you, counters Michele, but if I win, you will treat me and six other people to supper. Sure of his hand, he further says: "io ne starò alla sentenzia di chiunque voi vorrete" [VI.6.8, I'll accept the verdict of anyone you want]. In such situations, there is always someone who immediately thinks he also can get into the wrangling to his advantage. So Neri Mannini now jumps in, plugging in Piero the Florentine, the host, as a judge, whom some of the troop immediately went to fetch.

Well, asks the newly appointed judge, "come potrai mostrare questo che tu affermi?" [VI.6.10; how are you going to prove your assertion?; 396]. The argument runs as follows:

> Voi sapete che, quanto gli uomini sono più antichi, più son gentili, e così si diceva pur testé tra costoro: e i Baronci son più antichi che niuno altro uomo, sì che son più gentili; e come essi sien più antichi mostrandovi, senza dubbio io avrò vinta la quistione. (VI.6.12)

> [As you know, the more ancient a family, the nobler it is – which is what we were saying a moment ago. The Baronci are a more ancient family than any other, so they must be the noblest. So once I've proved that they're the most ancient, I'm bound to win the argument.] (396)

Now in order to grasp the sense of the rest of Scalza's explanation, the reader should recall that in the previous *novella*, VI.5, featuring Giotto, a reference was made to the fact that one's talents are *not* immediately reflected in one's appearance, and to make the point Panfilo stated that, for instance, Forese da Rabatta, who will become the object of Giotto's final retort in that sketch, "essendo di persona piccolo e isformato, con viso piatto e ricagnato che a qualunque de' Baronci piú trasformato l'ebbe sarebbe stato sozzo" [VI.5.4; was a misshapen little runt of man with a moon-face and a squashed nose, compared with whom even the least favored of the Baronci would have looked an angel; 394]. In other words, in the real socio-historical context of this tale, it was common knowledge, or at least a well-known "rumour" or public embedded belief, or even, if we wish, a spontaneous association, that the Baronci family, noble though they might have been, were physically not good looking. Indeed, in plain vernacular, they were ugly, and could easily be targeted, directly or indirectly, as the butt of jokes, parody, or extemporaneous one-liners. This explains in part why the happy brigade assumes, albeit presumptively, against Michele's claim, that there could be nothing "noble" or "special"

about them, other than the fact that they are powerful and socially estimable. Here then comes the key part of Scalza's little spur:

> Voi dovete sapere che i Baronci furon fatti da Domenedio al tempo che Egli aveva cominciato d'apparare a dipignere, ma gli altri uomini furon fatti poscia che Domenedio seppe dipignere. E che io dica di questo il vero, ponete mente a' Baronci e agli altri uomini: dove voi tutti gli altri vedrete co' visi ben composti e debitamente proporzionati, potrete vedere i Baronci qual col viso molto lungo e stretto, e quale averlo oltre a ogni convenienza largo, e tal v'è col naso molto lungo e tale l'ha corto, e alcuni col mento in fuori e in sú rivolto e con mascelloni che paiono d'asino; e èvvi tale che ha l'uno occhio piú grosso che l'altro, e ancora chi ha l'un piú giú che l'altro, sí come sogliono essere i visi che fanno da prima i fanciulli che apparano a disegnare. (VI.6.13–14)
>
> [What you have to know is that the Good Lord made the Baronci at the time He was learning to paint, while everyone else was made once He actually knew how. You'll see the truth of this if you consider the Baronci and the others. All the others, as you'll have noticed, have well made, suitably proportioned features, but take a look at the Baronci faces: some have long thin ones, others have impossibly fat ones; some have long noses, others stubby ones; some have chins that jut out to meet their noses, some have jaws the size of donkeys; you'll find some with one eye bigger than the other, some with one eye lower than the other – just like the faces children make when they're first learning to draw.] (396–7)

From these premises, which are based on several sets of assumptions, as we will see, the conclusions seem inevitable and are in fact swift:

> Per che, come già dissi, assai bene appare che Domenedio gli fece quando apparava a dipignere, sí che essi son piú antichi che gli altri e cosí piú gentili. (VI.6.15)
>
> [Therefore, as I said, it's obvious that the Good Lord made them when He was learning to paint, which makes them more ancient than any, and consequently more noble.] (396–7)

Piero the judge, Neri the instigator, and the amused band concur, after what we imagine a second or two to let it sink in, that Scalza is quite right and that, in fact, "per certo i Baronci erano i più gentili uomini e i più antichi che fossero, non che in Firenze ma nel mondo o in Maremma" [VI.6.16; the Baronci had to be the noblest and most ancient family not merely in Florence but in the whole wide world this side of the marshes

and beyond; 397]. And this widening of the field at the end of the phrase is not an insignificant detail.

There are several levels of analysis possible to extract layers of meaning out of this little tale, and we will focus on four of them, going from the micro-text to the macro-text. The first concerns the rhetorical-logical structure of the explanation for Scalza's claim about the Baronci's nobility. The second approach links the tale to the general economy of the Sixth Day, dedicated explicitly to witticisms that "bite like a sheep," and looks at the rhetorical-social function of speech in mostly popular, noncourtly, non-literate society. Here some considerations on the role of humour and the comic are in order. In a third frame of analysis we focus on language itself, or rather the "use" of language to obtain a desired effect within a particular context, already heralded in the first level, but here elevated to the level of ideological critique. This introduces a fourth level, which concerns the question of the broader social-political import of what this and some of the other *novelle* may entail in the larger picture of Boccaccio's overall oeuvre and his role and position in the emerging secular humanism. The concluding considerations will be of a general nature about literature and society.

Let us then consider Scalza's little gem of a speech. It takes on the logical structure of a syllogism, in this fashion:

A. The more ancient a family, the nobler it is;
B. The Baronci are the most ancient;
C. The Baronci are the noblest family.

This is the standard categorical syllogism, of the form AAA 1. To make it more formal, it should be rephrased and restructured as follows:

P 1: All ancient families are the noblest families;
P 2: All Baronci are a most ancient family;
C: All Baronci are the noblest family.[6]

The reader may recall the paradigmatic example: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal.[7] But what is of interest

6 I owe this reformulation to my colleague in the philosophy department at Stony Brook, Allegra De Laurentiis.

7 See Capaldi: "in essence [this is] the basic format of all valid syllogistic arguments" (39). The preconditions for the syllogism are met insofar as each of the three terms must appear twice, and the middle term is distributed. See also Cohen and Nagel 84;

here is that Scalza's basis for pulling this apparently unassailable proof is grounded on evidence that has little to do with formal argument, relying rather on established but still circumstantial conditions, and as such it is an enthymeme, so that casting it as a syllogism is ultimately a ruse.[8] The argument is made on the basis of what everyone in that particular social sphere is predisposed to accept as a valid truth, namely, that the most ancient families must of course be the noblest, an assumption become topical on the strength of the fact that it is the upper elites who typically legitimate their status based on recorded or demonstrable genealogies. Indeed, as in the parallel case of claimed Church authority based on the Decretals, it is the documents produced, preserved, and jealously guarded that shore up the valid proof of a claim and legitimate it. This would guarantee its becoming an authority on what is called unquestioned knowledge, sort of a universal proposition, for that community or even society as a whole. The emphasis here, however, is on *that* audience, which in our tale is the fun-seeking gang of friends indubitably aware of the power and lineage of the Uberti and the Lamberti and other families in Florence.

The argument gains strength when Scalza makes a brilliant connection, based on sense evidence, that the Baronci are indeed well known

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Broadie 174–7. Cuomo is one of the few who explores the role and use (and abuse) of the syllogism in Boccaccio, and especially in this particular *novella* (252–4), drawing attention to the fact that it employs the third mood (*darii*) of the first figure. But an argument can be made that Scalza's syllogism falls under a different mood and possibly the fourth figure. Medieval logic was a complex field, and often scholars who expound upon the major philosophers that Boccaccio is sure to have known to some degree, like Scotus, Ockham, Buridan, Peter of Spain, are not in total agreement when it comes to the evolution of the syllogistic mode, and how it was employed by non-experts. Compare Broadie, and Speca, on the much contested developments of modal syllogistic, hypothetical syllogistic, and stoic logic.

8 See Cohen and Nagel: "The fact that logic is concerned with necessary relations in the field of possibility makes it indifferent to any property of an object other than the function of the latter in a given argument" (12). In other words, *deductive* logic may by and large connect with reality, but it doesn't need reality to be formally correct. It is the propositions and the postulates that must necessarily be true on the basis of the assumed and unquestioned axioms and rules. As De Laurentiis confirmed in her email to me: "The criticism against the possible lack of soundness is irrelevant to the validity of the syllogism. Formal validity is independent of Truth or Falseness of premises or conclusion, except in one case, namely when both premises are (factually) True and the conclusion (factually) False (= unsound syllogism). This is not the case here." It is with *inference* that matters change, since this entails a temporal process (Cohen and Nagel 7) and as such bears upon empirical or factual conditions. For the long gestation of the inductive method in the Middle Ages, see Crombie 21–30.

to be unsightly or just plain ugly, and frames another shorter but efficacious syllogism:[9]

A. The Baronci are ugly, therefore not perfect looking;
B. In painting, ugly sketches are made when the artist is still learning;
C. When the Baronci were made, God was still learning.

The ending gains further conviction in the implied retrojected assumption that when God, like any artist, finally learned how to draw well, he made human beings normal, or at least not as grotesque: some with a longer nose, others with a jaw like an ass, and so on. Looking forward to the free supper, the huddle of friends look to Piero and Neri for the verdict on the "amusing argument," which they concede, for Scalza "was quite right," and confirm that, of course, everyone in the whole world knows that the "the Baronci had to be the noblest and most ancient family."

The little tale can now be subjected to further interpretive possibilities. First of all, an important textual clarification, useful when we address the comic: the troop's last witty affirmation in indirect free speech literally says "not only in Florence but in the whole wide world or in the Maremma," which was already uttered earlier in almost identical language in paragraph 6.[10] This builds on Boccaccio's penchant for subtle subversion of expected or orthodox speech patterns, for the mixing of registers is, in itself, already a convention in humour and, we will argue, an index of social critique. Technically, as Bruni points out: "after [mentioning] Florence and the world one expects that the *climax* continues with a substantive of even greater extension (such as 'universe' or something similar); instead the conclusion is no less buffonesque than the demonstration, and after world [*mondo*] the reference to Maremma … interrupts the progression of the hyperbole. The comic effect is reinforced by the disjunctive preposition 'o' (in the sense of *vel*, not *aut*), instead of the conjunction 'e' that one would expect, which suggests the interchangeability of very different signs in the meaning,

9 Cuomo claims this is a first figure syllogism, or *barbara* (254).

10 The first mention reads in Italian: "i più gentili uomini e i più antichi, non che di Firenze ma di tutto il mondo o di Maremma, sono i Baronci" (paragraph 6). The last reads: "per certo i Baronci erano i piú gentili uomini e i piú antichi che fossero, non che in Firenze ma nel mondo o in Maremma" (paragraph 16).

in themselves not interchangeable, such as world and Maremma are" (Bruni 388).[11]

Second, what passes for logic, typically associated with the learning of the, basically implied tongue-in-cheek, "Schoolmen," and therefore authoritative when searching for and demonstrating any lofty truth, is made a mockery[12] – beginning with the fact that the reference to the scholastics is introduced by the spoonerism, "fisofoli" (VI.6.6), or "phisopholers," which is rendered in English by Waldman as "what do you call 'em – schoolmen" (396).[13] For in fact the syllogistic arguments, craftily lodged one inside the other, and formally coherent though they may appear, are employed for the rhetorical purpose of confusing the little brigade to accept an off-the-wall conclusion. They reveal that the art of persuasion relies on what J.L. Austin called the "performative utterance," which is different from the "constative utterance" or the "statement," as it depends on the "appropriate circumstances" in order to trigger an

11 "Ovviamente, dopo Firenze e il mondo ci si attende che il *climax* continui con un sostantivo di estensione ancora superiore (come 'universo' o qualcosa di simile); invece la conclusion non è meno buffonesca della dimostrazione, e dopo *mondo* il riferimento alla *Maremma* (propiziato anche dall'allitterazione) rompe la progressione dell'iperbole; e il comico è rafforzato dalla disgiuntiva *o* (nel senso di *vel*, non di *aut*), invece della congiunzione *e* che ci si aspetterebbe, a suggerire l'intercambiabilità di segni diverssisimi nel significato, e di per sé non intercambiabili, come il *mondo* e la *Maremma*." The expression "che sia nel mondo o in maremma" occurs also in Frate Alberto's tale (IV.2.41), with a comical tone, and may have been a typical expression in the *contado* or implicitly of the lower unsophisticated bourgeoisie.

12 A case can be made that the dart is also aimed at the reforms being introduced in Paris by the nominalists, and the new interpretations of Aristotle that were flourishing. In particular, Leff, chapter 2, makes a case for the beginning of the religion/church divide that would inform the later humanists well into the Renaissance. This cannot be taken up here.

13 Waldman's English appropriately captures the usage of the lower register employed here, where the lectio "s'accordano tutti i fisofoli" is, according to Branca's note to the term, a "popular" way of saying "filosofi," understood as "sapienti." But I suggest translating with "phisopholers," to stay closer to the original and foreground the low-tone jab of the reference. The word was surely used purposefully by Boccaccio to suggest, sarcastically, social class distance if not, perhaps and within the universe of the tale, a thinly veiled diffidence (if contempt is too strong a word) between the actors in the episode and the literati, the intellectuals, or even the courtly establishment that often employed them.

action (5–6).[14] Moreover, the scene also demonstrates that there existed certain external contextual, and at any rate culturally unconscious, beliefs (whether based on faith or superstition or habit is not the point here) that could be leveraged to obtain a desired end. Among these, for instance, that it took six days to create the universe, as everyone in the community is presumed to know the story from Genesis.[15] What our storyteller anchors onto that cultural bedrock, which acts as a *locus communis* that, as we saw, doubles as a logical axiom, is the analogy that, just as an artist takes time to master drawing a figure, so did the Good Lord, with the added embedded analogy, again taken to be self-evident by everyone, that first sketches are infantile, and executed at an earlier age – or, say, earlier days, to stay with the time span of Genesis – so it follows therefore that our Lord drew humans like an infant, misshapen and unproportionate.[16] We will return to this topos further down.

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14 To clarify what Austin means by performative: "The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act (of betting or what not), the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the *sole* thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the circumstances in which words are uttered should in some way, or ways, be *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should also perform certain other actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words" (8, emphasis in original). Statements may be true or false, whereas performatives are more like a pragmatic rhetorical utterances, they interact, are causative, are basically a "doing" (13), and though they may be "parasitic" (22) or used in bad faith (11), that does not impact on their function and use.

15 Martinez draws attention to this detail by pointing out the "patristic accounts of God's six-day-long fashioning of the world in Genesis" ("*Scienze della Cittade*" 59), as part of a critical analysis of the layered symbolism of the number "6" that informs the entire Sixth Day. Further down he notes that the Baronci's deformed face recalls the artistic difficulty of shaping a perfectly sculpted nose (61) as a parallel to the writer's task of framing a rhetorically perfect line, with reference to "Boccaccio's cognizance of the sixth day of the six Horation vices of composition … of the *Ars poetica*" (62).

16 A more serious elaboration of the idea that the Creator took a while to create the perfect human being reappears later in Pico della Mirandola's oration *On the Dignity of Man*. In this paradigmatic text of humanism, we read that the master architect "had adorned the supercelestial region with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls and set the fermenting dung-heap of the inferior world teeming with every form of animal life. But when this work was done, the Divine Artificer still longed for some creature which might comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with awe at its grandeur. When, consequently, all else had been completed (as both Moses and Timaeus testify), in the very last place, He bethought

Looking at the tale in yet another and clearly related perspective, what can we say of Scalza's audience? Briefly, that they are gullible, unsophisticated, lower-class happy-go-lucky youths out to have a good time? And that they tell a humorous off-the-wall story in order to have a laugh at someone else's expense (both literally, the dinner at Piero's, and metaphorically, through the jab at the Baronci's nobility)? Yes, but there is more to it than that. Jokes are a species of utterance of which humour is the larger category. Following Freud for a moment,[17] jokes are made-up linguistic stratagems of the unconscious to release pent-up energy that self-induced inhibitions and social taboos on the vital forces, such as fear, sex, and aggression, keep in check within a society. Jokes utter the opposite of what is the case, satisfy an instinct to break through certain obstacles, and embody a way of obtaining pleasure *in spite of* distressing or unbearable feelings. Without having to make recourse to the distinct types Freud draws up, which involve condensation and unification – and of which two, the tendentious and the cynical joke, appear most frequently in the *Decameron* – what is relevant to our analysis is not solely the fact that, in the microcosm of each tale with

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Himself of bringing forth man." However, in this case the human being, though created last, cannot be based on a "model" or archetype, and clearly God did not have to perfect his art *strada facendo* (Pico seemingly having no sense of humour!). The problem is different and will have far-ranging consequences: the "new man" cannot be created as already perfect. This introduces an uncertainty about an eternist conception of humanity as stemming from the Divine and in his image. Reading the rest of the text, we learn in fact that "all space was already filled; all things had been distributed in the highest, the middle and the lowest orders … At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this *creature of indeterminate image*, He set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him: 'We have given you, Oh Adam … no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, *with premeditation*, select, these same you may have and possess *through your own judgment and decision*. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; *you*, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, *by your own free will*, to whose custody We have assigned you, *trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature* … It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine'" (5–8, emphasis added). That human beings are, even, or perhaps already, for Boccaccio, of an "undetermined nature" ("indiscretae opus imagines"), and can decide *consciously* on their fate, is part of what I am suggesting in this reading.

17 See Freud. The next three sentences basically summarize some of the main concepts in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*.

those particular characters, the witticism permits a saving of psychical expenditure,[18] but the fact that *this is the only way they have to deal with a problem*. In other words, what may be an inhibition in the clinical sense can also be thought of by extension as a set of constraints – taboos, traditions, strong public enforcement – tantamount to repression of expression within the social order, a repression therefore whose cause is a force or forces outside the control of the actors. I believe that in our tale this external referent is clearly the upper crust, the *popolo grasso*. The hostility that belies the repression is unleashed by attacking those traits of the target, i.e., the unattractiveness of the rich family. But this cannot be done directly. Rather, it is achieved by a pseudo-logical story whereby the brigade is told that they, the Baronci, were made that way when the Lord created the universe, though because he was just learning how to make humans, he did not shape them perfectly. The absurdity of the tale gains traction with the interlocutors (*and* readers as the necessary "outside listeners" to the joke),[19] first, by a catalogue of unappealing features,[20] which rhetorically make the case by sheer *accumulatio*, and then by throwing in, to conclude and seal the *demonstratio*, a swift comparison – let us recall that this is the day dedicated to short tales, with "brevity" being a stated aim of the storytellers – that the audience could not not agree upon: just like kids when first learning how to draw. Recall that it is a crucial part of the efficacy of joke-telling that the speakers share the same (at least local) culture[21] and are also pre-prepared for

18 See Freud 114. In essence this means one of two things: I can't deal with the reality around me (because objectively I can't, I am a subaltern, so to speak, or I have to get this obstacle, this person, out of the way *now*), or: I won't deal with the reality around me (because it entails too much work, intellectual or otherwise, a larger commitment towards some resolution). Clearly we are dealing with the first instance, where the utterance lessens the tension. Specifically, we recall that Elissa had stated, at end of Day Five, that the tales were going to be about "quick-witted people resorting to a happy quip or nice repartee to slap down another person or avert some impending disaster … people who, on being teased, give as good as they get, or who avoid danger, embarrassment, or loss by dint of a prompt rejoinder" (381).

19 Freud points out that a joke requires that a third party be present to gain the sympathy and approval of the narrator.

20 "some have long thin [faces], others have impossibly fat ones; some have long noses, others stubby ones; some have chins that jut out to meet their noses, some have jaws the size of donkeys; you'll find some with one eye bigger than the other, some with one eye lower than the other – *just like the faces children make when they're first learning to draw*" (397, emphasis added).

21 Critics have pointed out how the Sixth Day is the least multilingual or multicultural of days, suggesting that the quick-witted retorts did not have to be mediated or "translated," so to speak.

it, as the narrator typically "sets up" the ensuing story, as Scalza does. The reference to children is important in the joke because, as Freud once again argues,[22] the (unconscious) motivation behind the creation of humorous situations is the substitution of "object-associations with verbal associations and the use of absurdity" as ways to make sense out of a nonsensical story, "restoring old freedoms" and "disburdening us from the compulsion of our intellectual education." What's implied is that children do not yet have rational control of their impulses, yet we smile at their untrammelled mental freedom, and we laugh when we let down our rational defences, as when under the influence of a substance or alcohol.

The point here is that, in making sense out of the nonsensical, we are not trying to psychoanalyse the characters, but rather to look at the rhetoric of the story with the support of some mechanisms which, though they may have originated in psychology, can without much distortion be useful to orient reflections towards social and political concerns. In fact, the taboos and inhibitions of the characters, we might say of us all, derive from socially created norms, civil delimitations, laws, censure, strong traditions and rituals, fear of aggression or punishment, and so on. The social space and the condition of an unlettered populace is a recurring presence in the entire *Decameron*, and too often the ironies and parodies perpetrated upon them highlight the fact that they were regularly being taken advantage of. Not that the author cherished some sort of pious Franciscan ethos whereby we are all God's children and we shouldn't make fun of the poor, the unfortunate, the dregs of society.[23] But in order to talk about them, and in fact, to make them speak, the author had to give the whole work a structure, develop a narrative form (the *novella*), a structured sequence (the time-frame of the ten days and the ten stories within each), ultimately an "order," when, in the end, what was supposed to be represented, four levels removed and almost safely further down, was chaos, death, the coming apart of the social and symbolic orders as a result of the plague. Unfortunately, not many in the scholarship have emphasized this aspect, which I consider fundamental. But before turning to the impact of the Black Death, let

22 See Freud 120.

23 See for example Hortis 174–7 et infra, who underscores Bocccaccio's near contempt for the "sciocchi" who are often equated with the *profanum vulgus*, in short with the plebs he has, by the time of the *Genealogie*, left behind. However, this brings out by contrast the heterogeneity of the characters present in the *Decameron*, who hail from all walks of life, as we will remark below.

me gloss what I mean by the four levels removed we have to telescope through, and expand on the earlier levels of analysis proposed above:

A) *a real person*, historically documented to have existed, namely Giovanni Boccaccio, who before the greatest calamity ever known to humankind up to that point in time, a pandemic that devoured about a third of Europe's population within months according to some sources,[24] decides to *write about it*.[25] Though referential in the Introduction, this already sets up one level of distance between *res* and *verba*. Boccaccio is the narrator, an alter "I" directs us to what follows.
B) *fictional accounts*, however realistic the inner frame of reference, in what is called the *Decameron*, a work of the imagination within a tradition. These accounts must be articulated with reference to the metalanguage of the genres of the period, amply studied and which demand adherence to certain codes (and breaking or altering them is still a play with, and within, those institutions).
C) ten fictitious *character*s, the storytellers who rule over each of the ten days, tell "stories" *about other people* after having been "cast" to control the narration *within* the narration, and therefore impact the economy of the language, the sub-genres employed, the tenor of the actions, the range of the ideas expressed. Their electing to leave the city and hide in a mansion that is safe from the chaos and death also signals the erecting of a further barrier, another moat to isolate the blight all around (even if, factually, the writing may have taken place a year or two after 1348).[26]
D) *characters who represent people* in various contexts and situations, some imagined and some retrieved from hearsay, some from mythological and geographical accounts and some perhaps based

24 On the cruciality of this epochal event for the subsequent development of Florentine society, which sets the course for the rise of the *signorie*, see Najemy, *History of Florence* 145–9 et infra; for the broader implications for the entire European world, which will take nearly a century to recover, see McNeill 134–81 and 195–6.

25 I find the older scholarship, such as that of Bergin, no longer tenable: "As a nineteenth-century critic perceptively wrote: 'Between his ambitious poems of his youth and the learned works of his mature years Boccaccio grants himself a moment of relaxion and child-like mischief'" (286). "Perceptive"? This is akin to saying that after Hurricane Katrina a survivor in New Orleans decides to write fairy tales just to "relax."

26 See Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man*; Battaglia Ricci, *Boccaccio*; and Armstrong, Daniels, and Milner for reconstructions of the years just preceding and just following the writing of the *Decameron*.

> on events and accidents the author may have witnessed first-hand during his many travels and stays in different locales. These are given a voice, greatly inspired by oral speech so as to lend more "realism"[27] to their actions and situations.

What we have are *thrice removed narrators/retellings*. This narratological distancing[28] constitutes, in a way, a "safer" way to refer explicitly to what was under everyone's eyes but was not duly acknowledged as symptomatic of a great sudden collapse of society, not in the abstract, but concretely, as it impacted *everything*: the people who were not dying had descended, within a few months, to a pre-civilized interregnum, as we had read in the Introduction. A reminder of this sneaks through at the end of the Sixth Day, when Dioneo prepares for his rule, and wants to focus on some titillating if unsettling aspects of women's behaviour. There is some opposition to that topic, but in justifying his choice, Dioneo says:

> Or non sapete voi che, per la perversità di questa stagione, li giudici hanno lasciati i tribunali? le leggi, così le divine come le umane, tacciono? e ampia licenzia per conservar la vita è conceduta a ciascuno? (VI.Concl.9)

> [Are you not aware that because of the chaos of the present age, the judges have abandoned the courts, the laws of God and man are in abeyance, and everyone is given ample licence to preserve his life as best he may?] (McWilliam 515)

Indeed, at a time where sheer survival is at stake, Dioneo counters that this is no time to be prudish, that is, hold up some veneer of modesty: "chi sapesse che voi vi cessaste da queste ciance ragionare alcuna volta forse suspicherebbe che voi in ciò non foste colpevoli, e per ciò ragionare non ne voleste" [VI.Concl.13; if it ever came out that you avoided this kind of light chat, people might well suspect that your refusal to do so was tantamount to an admission of guilt; 412].

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27 Battaglia Ricci, *Boccaccio* 139.

28 What I call "levels" may also be thought of as "concentric circles" of analysis, as Eugenio Giusti, in *Dall'amore cortese*, does in his rich and revealing reading of some of Boccaccio's works. Giusti emphasizes the built-in critique of his narrative strategies, and his aim at getting a message through the several circles of understanding. See in particular 125–71. One element that I consider brilliant is that Boccaccio is practically ironizing about the ironic, thus eliminating the long-standing tradition of identifying narrator with author.

What were people, and relations among them, like before *Yersinia pestis* hit the Italian peninsula?[29] When all is lost and gone, and people of all stripes are ruined and in constant terror, and what remains is set back years, eons, what do we see? The author of medieval romances could not even begin to say by engaging yet again the earlier genres and their idealized fictions, though we know that by the mid-1340s he was in a different cast of mind. With the arrival of the plague, everything is questioned, everything is up for a rethinking, a reframing, a desperate search for something that would make sense. Facing the unknown and still broaching somehow the full panoply of human reality as it teetered on the edge of this judgment day, the author will pen down sketches, snapshots of situations, anecdotes, micro-récits. In a comic mode.[30]

But what emerges through the comic is that many aspects of the human condition are not so noble after all. Within that frame, the chosen rhetoric is that of humour. I believe the critique of established orders of society, as filtered through humour, is about, first, the long-entrenched violence and presumptuousness of local and regional barons and princes and kings (later in part berated in *De casibus virorum illustrium*); next, the everyday hypocrisies and abuses of the representatives of the various monastic orders and of the Church in general; and finally, the decay of the courtly code.[31] Let us recall that humour is rebellious, it is not resigned, and if it makes hostility acceptable it doesn't cancel the presence of that which is critiqued. Let us also recall that, unlike the comic in general, which can be perceived spontaneously, as something we may encounter even when we are by ourselves, humour is intentional, as the actors, throughout the *Decameron*, devise the "beffa"

29 McNeill refers to it by its older name, *Pasteurella pestis* (164–80).

30 For a general picture of humour in the Middle Ages, see Verberckmoes; and loci in Kleinhenz, ed.

31 See on this Olson, *Courtesy Lost* 56–97, who makes a clear case for a Boccaccio bent on reforming the tradition of *cortesia* to include the new mixed society, the "gente nuova" that had emerged during the author's lifetime. As a set of patterns and norms for social exchange, *cortesia*'s long-entrenched and multifaceted aspects – think of the different meaning it had in Dante's time – need to be contextualized for the changing environment and thus be historicized (7–15) in order to grasp how Boccaccio attempted to broaden its semantic-symbolic range (53–5). This will bear on the underlying ethics of the characters in the sixth tale, but of course also on all of his oeuvre, especially after the 1350s.

whether through action or through words.[32] This element of choice, of exercising judgment, especially present in the Sixth Day when people "give as good as they get," should be explored further, as a topos within and across the novelle, for they indicate that each person, for better or for worse, is capable of dealing with the ostracizing and threatening environment, though often elects to do something at the expense of someone else. We mentioned earlier that the day is under the sign of temperance, which means of proper judgment. The fact is that the plague practically cleared the field of canonical forms of reflection and habitual forms of interpersonal relations. Thus, the social forces that determined the scale of values of the citizenry, and effected a control over them, were suddenly pulled off their anchors. The temperance that assures us of the stability of a given set of mores and adhesion to norms, thus ensuring a predictable, safe social intercourse, is upended: judgment is now about survival, about "me," about getting by, and when possible or necessary, "giving it to them." Rather than direct invective, however, when the destructive forces came from "nowhere," and even God couldn't answer the call for help, the author's choice was to work through exempla, which are in rhetoric what demonstrations are in logic.[33]

Even within these three major areas of critical engagement – the nobility, the Church, and the weight of literary tradition as embodied in the paradigmatic genres[34] – which have been abundantly researched and written upon, what strikes one about the typologies of the individual *novellas* is that not only those in power but even common folk can be, and indeed are, capable of genuine vile and immoral acts, treachery, betrayals, cunning, lying, reciprocal tricking, and injuring, shaping their language-in-use, the pragmatics of the rhetorical act, to suit whatever end is proximate and desired. The good gestures by some

32 According to Aaron Smuts, there are three major types of humour, each expressing an entirely different aspect of the personality: *incongruity*, which harks back to Kant, is when humour is a response to logical impossibility, to irrelevance; *superiority,* which harks back to Hobbes, is when humour arises from a sense of glory and superiority over others; and *relief* theories, associated with Freud, wherein humour is basically a safety valve, escape from repression. What is of relevance here is that in the *novella* we find manifestations of all three kinds.

33 See Carravetta, *Elusive Hermes* 80, 186, et infra for a more detailed and documented version of this argument.

34 Giusti, in *Dall'amore cortese*, underscores the constant "meta-critical" aspect of Boccaccio's writing, which consistently breaks through the established topoi he inherited.

king or sultan or local landlord sound eerily improbable, possible but not likely. In VI.1, Oretta basically tells the knight to shut up, that he is pretentious. In VI.2, Cisti the baker reminds Master Geri of his manners, or lack thereof, of his insensitivity to consider the needs and values of those a station or two below him. Again, a critique of the sclerosis of behaviour patterns of an upper class. In VI.3, Nonna de' Pulci shuts up the bishop by another indirect quip, with the underlying context being that he, an eminence in the hierarchy of the Church, would assume he can take such liberties and even make such allusions. In VI.4, Chichibio gets away with his having broken the barrier of proper behaviour suited to his standing in the hierarchy by means of a quip which signals not so much that Currado is ultimately generous and forgiving as that the latter relieves his own tension by the realization, offered through laughter at the simplistic justification of the missing leg, that perhaps in the (his) real world there are more serious problems at hand. In VI.5, Giotto's retort to Forese's superficial but also offensive observation about the connection between reputation and talent and the looks of a person is doubly violent in its cutting sarcasm, a case of tit for tat, but this is where humour once again reveals its tension and barely suppressed agonism, for in fact we can assume that Forese and Giotto did not like each other at all. Unlike what happens in the parallel situation in VI.9, with Cavalcanti's own supercilious retort, the repartee did not have to be explained. In VI.7, Filippa is supposed to exemplify how saying the right thing, mustering the correct articulation of her case, "can save your life," except that it is so unrealistic that such a situation may actually happen, or have happened especially in those centuries, that one must laugh at the very idea that an adulterous woman could pull that off. In this case, humour may indirectly highlight that people's behaviour is informed also, and sometimes in large part, by their projections, which is to say their daydreaming, their utopias: standard constructs whose mechanisms are not so different from those that create humour to fend off a reality that's just overpowering. In VI.8 there is nothing transcendental to uncover, other than the fact that some people use words but don't know what they are saying, and when required to apply them to their own behaviour or values, they simply "don't get it." If one is thick, then let it be. We may laugh at Fresco's niece, but perhaps because we are relieved that we don't have one of those in our family.

Thus, despite the humour and the jokes and the pranks and the witticism, the *Decameron* is, at a deeper level, no human comedy at all, but rather a profound philosophical exploration of an existentially dramatic human condition. As noted above, Boccaccio in the *Decameron* is not "reporting" what is happening during the plague, beyond the

few pages in the Introduction. As often in literature, different levels of speech coexist simultaneously,[35] but in order to get to the bottom of the human condition on the verge of what must have been experienced and consciously registered as a biblical punishment like the flood, or an impending Apocalypse, with the consequent creation of a newer and even poorer because diseased portion of the population that did not have any chance of being reintegrated into any society,[36] he resorts to the exempla of so many "parables," tesserae of a huge illustrative mosaic of what has preceded the falling apart of the social order and disintegration of human values. And although the logical structure of the entire work has been duly and persuasively studied, to the point that, given its numerological frame, and the entrenched deploy at the time of symbolisms and off-the-shelf allegorical frames of significations,[37] there is an inner tension or force to disrupt this selfsame coherence.

Thus, the humour borne by the linguistic exchanges represents ultimately an amoral response to a world whose demands for a morality are in shambles, foregrounding their contingency, the near impossibility for a normative ethic which is not subject to the foibles of a constantly changing human calculus, and in a way exposing, not some hidden human nature, but the ominous presence of the absence of such a thing. This is an inauspicious yet plausible hypothesis if we recall that the rest of the stories that bracket Day Six make palpable the fact – not to speak of innumerable other ones from the other days and almost independently

35 See, for example, the fine reading of the entire Sixth Day by Oesch-Serra. However, where the author seeks to explain the witticism as "resolving a conflict that often finds its origins in the social diversification of the protagonists" (4, with reference to works by Bosetti and Paolella), I try instead to see how the resolution is no more than a temporary truce, a moment of reprieve until the next story. But the conflict remains.

36 See on this Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, and the prodromes that led to the creation of the outcast, the institutional "reject," those who later ended up on the *stultifera navis*.

37 I am thinking of Kirkham's interpretation, whereby "for all its wit and spice, the jokesters and philanderers among its population, the *Decameron* is a microcosm founded on the principle of reason" (*Sign of Reason* 13). In a different take, Nobili concurs on the strong presence of a logical apparatus in Boccaccio's early works but holds that he veers towards the scholastics much more than, in part following Muscetta, the logicians such as Ockham. Battaglia Ricci argues that Boccaccio wrote "against" both religious people and the philosophical elite (*Boccaccio*). On the relevance of Ockham for the changing intellectual climate in the 1320–40 period, where an actual "paradigm shift" was occurring, see Leff 32–92; Stump 251–69; and Moody 409–53.

of the "frame" within which they were ordered and narrated – that beneath the guise of the wit, the quirky remarks, the double-entendres, equivocations, hilarious escapes, and tongue-in-cheek exploits of some of the characters within each story – again, three times removed from the inexplicable doom of the *actualitas* of the years in which they were penned – there lurks a profound sadness about the human condition *tout court*, about the unredeemable fate of an existence which, stripped of any belief in transcendence, is left only with the immanence of providing for sheer survival, with getting lunch or singing a song or having sex one more time, as if it were the last time, for self and world.

This is some serious humour Boccaccio bequeathed us. He is disclosing the modern human being, a raucous and pretentious actor, but one keenly aware that existence is contingent, situational, and all values built on top of that will forever wobble, as an instability is lodged into the very possibility of organizing a society. A new epoch was about to begin in Italian and European culture, with the marks of severe tensions among the classes, among competing ideas about being human and about what an ideal person, an ideal society, would be like. Humanism has had the most travailed beginnings.