

## Figurative Language and Sex Wars in the *Decameron*

In “Men, Women, and Figurative Language in the *Decameron*” (chapter 6 of my recently published book, *A Rhetoric of the “Decameron”*), I argued that, given the ideological prescriptions regarding the kinds of language “proper” to men and women, a certain kind of figurative language about sexuality in the *Decameron* is marked as the prerogative of men.<sup>1</sup> In coming to this conclusion, I took into account factors that other readers had not considered, such as sex, gender, and class. I first examined how the narrators, both in their interactions with each other and in their novellas, use figurative language to speak about the act of sexual intercourse. I showed that the metaphorical language about sex that has become a hallmark of the *Decameron* is overwhelmingly the province of the three men, Dioneo, Filostrato, and Panfilo. (Think of putting the devil into hell, hearing the nightingale sing, and worshiping Saint Peter Big-in-the-Valley.) I also showed that even where it appears women exercise control over metaphorical language, a story can ensure that figurative language remains the prerogative of men. As the analysis developed, I turned my attention to the very crucial role that the *reader* plays in the *Decameron*'s sex wars. I found that the *Decameron* calls upon its readers to be participants — not just spectators — in the sex wars that the *Decameron* stages at the site of figurative language. Unwittingly, the readers can end up doing service for a gender ideology they may not have signed up to defend. How can this happen? Characters, narrators, and implied Author can make statements that readers grasp less precisely than they ought to. Often it seems we are encouraged to interpret these moments in a given way, but when one looks more closely, one often finds that readers have projected their own ideological (and gender) schemas onto these passages.<sup>2</sup> The Au-

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Migiel, “Men, Women, and Figurative Language in the *Decameron*,” in *A Rhetoric of the “Decameron”* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The term “gender schemas” is taken from Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998), whose central thesis is that “a set of implicit, or nonconscious, hypotheses about sex differences plays a central role in shaping men’s and women’s professional lives. These hypotheses, which I call *gender*

thor of the *Decameron* could well say to us: if you make my work say something that it does not explicitly say, who is at fault?

In my most recent thinking about figurative language and sex wars in the *Decameron*, then, I have found it increasingly important to consider the role that we as readers play. I believe that our task as readers is to evaluate the persuasiveness and pervasiveness of each particular rhetorical situation. This means attempting to understand the power — extensive or limited — that a rhetorical moment has had in shaping our own views of the world. However, it also means attempting to understand where, as an audience, we must take responsibility for our own views, either because we have been excessively eager to privilege certain moments or too unresponsive to others.

In thinking about these issues here, I would like to focus on *Decameron* I.10, a story about the elderly Maestro Alberto from Bologna who sees a beautiful young widow named Malgherida at a social gathering, whereupon he immediately falls in love with her and seeks whenever possible to pass by her house in order to be able to lay eyes on her again; soon Malgherida and her companions take notice of his frequent passings; they call him in to the courtyard and make fun of this seventy-year-old in love; he responds with a witty remark about women and vegetables apparently designed to show this lady up; she and her lady friends now back off; Maestro Alberto leaves with a smile on his face.

Told by Pampinea, the person responsible for the group and its eldest member, this novella — like others that she tells — appears designed to promote male authority. (Compare Pampinea's II.3, III.2, VI.2, VIII.7, IX.7, and X.7.) The authority depends on the efficacy of Maestro Alberto's witty retort, the key section of which is as follows:

La speranza, la qual mi muove che io vecchio ami voi amata da molti giovani, è questa: io sono stato più volte già là dove io ho vedute merendarsi le donne e mangiare lupini e porri; e come che nel porro niuna cosa sia buona, pur men reo e più piacevole alla bocca è il capo di quello, il qual voi generalmente, da torto appetito tirate, il capo vi tenete in mano e manicate le frondi, le quali non solamente non sono da cosa alcuna ma son di malvagio sapore. E che so io, madonna, se nello elegger degli amanti voi vi faceste il simigliante? E se voi il faceste, io sarei colui che eletto sarei da voi, e gli altri cacciati via. (I.10.15–18)<sup>3</sup>

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*schemas*, affect our expectations of men and women, our evaluations of their work, and their performance as professionals" (2).

<sup>3</sup> The Italian text is taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Vittore Branca, ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1985); the English translation is from Giovanni Boccaccio, *The*

The hope that moves me, an old man, to love you, who are loved by many young men, is this: I have often been in places where I have observed ladies eating a light meal of lupini beans and leeks. While no part of the leek is good, its head is less objectionable and more pleasing to the palate. But drawn by some perverse appetite, you ladies generally hold the head in your hand and eat the leaves, which are not only useless but taste terrible. And how do I know, my lady, if in choosing your lovers you will not make the same mistake? If that's the case, then I would be your chosen lover, and the others would be cast away. (My translation)

Readers tend to normalize what Maestro Alberto is saying, undoing its logical contortions. This is perhaps most notable in my undergraduate students, who, when I ask them to articulate for me the figural and literal correspondents of Maestro Alberto's analogy, claim that he is saying that he is like the white part of the leek, which is better to eat, and the young lovers are like the green part, which he claims tastes bad.<sup>4</sup>

It is not just the youngest and greenest readers who are giving Maestro Alberto a helping hand, however. More experienced readers rush to his defense as well.<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, Michelangelo Picone.<sup>6</sup> At first, he

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*Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: Penguin [Signet Classic], 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Although the tendency is most marked in as yet inexperienced readers, I do not mean to make sweeping generalizations. Readers even younger than undergraduates are indeed capable of reading carefully and precisely, as I discovered in a Telluride Association Summer Program for rising high-school seniors ("He Said, She Said: The Battle of the Sexes in Medieval and Renaissance Writing") that Kathleen Perry Long and I taught during the summer of 2004. Jennifer Green, one of our students in that seminar, was immediately able to articulate the terms of Maestro Alberto's metaphor for me, and I had no indication that any of the other fifteen students in the room would have given a different answer.

<sup>5</sup> Some translators restyle Maestro Alberto's response, changing the degree of pleasure that he would appear to offer women. Maestro Alberto states that "come che nel porro niuna cosa sia buona, pur men reo e più piacevole alla bocca è il capo di quello" (I.10.17). For this, I would offer the following translation: "while no part of the leek is good, the head of it is, however, less objectionable and more pleasing to the palate." Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella render this as "while no part of the leek is truly good, its root part happens to be less distasteful and more pleasing to the palate"; see *The Decameron*, Musa and Bondanella, trans., 67. In doing so, they shield us from the original, which tells us that *no part of the leek is good*. Apparently, to Musa and Bondanella, "if no part of the leek is truly good," then there might at least be a part that would *appear* to be good. These translators also domesticate the meal by substituting "lentils and leeks" for the lupini beans and leeks of the original. That path of argumentation seems to be the one that, along a slippery slope, leads even Millicent Marcus to talk about the "savory white head" (222) and the "tasty white head" (230); see Marcus,

translates the encoded message more or less as I would: Maestro Alberto observes that women prefer not the head of the leek but the leafy green part, and then asks, “Who can say that they might not do the same thing with their lovers, choosing the less good (the elderly) over the others (the young)?” At that point Picone, noting that the author of the *Decameron* uses the “same metaphor” in the Introduction to Day IV in order to defend his love of younger women by saying that he has a “white head” but a “green tail,” tells us — completely counter to the evidence provided by the text of *Decameron* I.10 — that “Anche maestro Alberto (pure in questo *figura auctoris*) si vuole paragonare ad un porro, la cui testa è sì bianca, ma la cui ‘coda’ rimane sempre verde” (“Maestro Alberto — ever a figure of authorship and authority — also wishes to compare himself to a leek, whose head is white but whose ‘tail’ is still green”).<sup>7</sup>

Aldo Busi, contemporary Italian author responsible, among other things, for an original translation of the *Decameron* entitled *Decamerone da un italiano all'altro*, contributes further to Maestro Alberto's success:

Sono stato spesso a fare merenda con le donne e le ho viste mangiare lupini e porri, e anche se il porro non è buono da nessuna parte, la capocchia è ancora il meno peggio da tenere in bocca. Ma siccome voi, sedotte e ingannate dall'appetito, tenete la capocchia in mano e mangiate il gambo, che non solo non vale niente ma ha anche un sapore perfido, cosa ne so io, signora, se lei non fa altrettanto scegliendosi gli amanti? E se lei lo facesse con discernimento, sarei io il prescelto e gli altri cacciati via. Tutto qua.<sup>8</sup>

I have often taken a light meal with women and I have seen them eating lupini beans and leeks. Although there is nothing good at all about the leek, its head is the less disagreeable part. But you women, seduced and deceived by your desire, hold the head in your hand and you eat the stalk, which not only is worthless but tastes really nasty. So who am I to say, madam, that you don't do the same as you choose your lovers? And if you were to do this judiciously, I would be the chosen one and the others would be sent away. (Translation mine)

Not only does Busi smooth out the twists and turns of Maestro Alberto's logic, but he renders the sexual innuendoes more prominent, both in the

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“The Tale of Maestro Alberto (I.10),” in *The “Decameron” First Day in Perspective*, Elissa B. Weaver, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 222–40.

<sup>6</sup> Michelangelo Picone, “Le ‘merende’ di maestro Alberto (*Decameron* I.10),” *Rassegna europea di letteratura italiana* 16 (2000): 99–110.

<sup>7</sup> Picone, 102.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio - Aldo Busi, *Decamerone da un italiano all'altro*, 2 vols. (Milan: Rizzoli, 1990), I: 75.

passage that I have just cited and in a conclusion that makes it clear that the woman has gotten screwed over: “Così la signora, non sapendo chi aveva voluto prendere in giro, sicura di avere la meglio, fu invece messa sotto, seppure solo in senso figurato. Capito, furbette mie?” (“And so this woman, not realizing who she had wanted to mock, convinced that she would succeed, got it stuck to her, even if only in a metaphorical sense. See that, my clever little friends?”).<sup>9</sup>

Millicent Marcus also, by means of selective translation, recasts Maestro Alberto’s metaphorical language. Early in her essay, as she provides an account of *Decameron* I.10 for her readers, she states:

When asked how he dares compete with the lady’s many young admirers, Alberto answers with a witticism about senior male sexuality. He points out the ladies’ erroneous preference for the green leaves of the leek, whose flavour is decidedly inferior to that of the savoury white head. Chastened by Alberto’s witty defence of sex with a septuagenarian, Malgherida accedes to his suit.<sup>10</sup>

Already here, Marcus is setting up the metaphor so that we misread its terms, taking senior sex to be equal to the “savoury white head.” Later, when she cites the Italian text of Maestro Alberto’s remark, she leads the reader to believe that the remark ends with, “Che so io, Madonna, se nello eleggere degli amanti, voi vi faceste il simigliante?”, which Marcus translates as “How do I know, madam, if you do the same in choosing your lovers?”<sup>11</sup> By stopping one sentence short of the crucial punch line — in which Alberto points out that if Malgherida were to do choose lovers as she chooses parts of the leek, she would choose him — Marcus eliminates the potentially problematic terms of the analogy.

At this point, I would ask that we consider how complicated a story this is and how complicated our response to it should be. I grant you that we might appropriately feel compassion for Maestro Alberto and, in keeping with that, we might not wish to side too soon with Madonna Malgherida. Does he really deserve harsh treatment? Was what he was doing so bad? She isn’t married, so we can’t compare Alberto to the king of France who, four novellas earlier, becomes infatuated with a married woman. Maestro Alberto does not seem to be pestering Malgherida for sex, which various men of the *Decameron* — particularly men of the clergy — are likely to do when they become infatuated with women in later stories. It seems all he’s

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<sup>9</sup> Boccaccio - Busi, I: 75; my translation.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus, 230.

doing is trying to gaze upon her. On the other hand, I would also say that we might not wish to condemn Madonna Malgherida as hastily as others have done. Isn't she getting a bad rap? Aren't Maestro Alberto and his supporters going too far? Was what she was doing so bad?

Let's read the words before us. Maestro Alberto is not saying that he is like the white part of the leek and therefore the ladies ought to choose him over younger (and greener) lovers. Rather, he is saying that he is like the green fronds of the leek; then he argues that since women tend to eat these greens out of some perverse desire, who knows that a woman might not make the same sort of mistake and select him? This man's remark is pushing at the bounds of logic. There is no reason for this woman to be put in her place, except for the fact that some professional readers have told us that Maestro Alberto is waving his vegetables apotropaically. Why do these professional readers see him as successful? For Luigi Russo and Mario Baratto, Maestro Alberto reaffirms a stilnovist cultural ethic.<sup>12</sup> For Michelangelo Picone, Maestro Alberto reaffirms both the stilnovist cultural ethic and a comic-realist ethic, since he sees love here as a force that even if exalted always reveals its sensual nature ("seppur mitizzato rivela sempre la sua natura sensuale").<sup>13</sup> Aldo Busi makes it clear that Maestro Alberto has dominated sexually, even if only metaphorically speaking. For Millicent Marcus, who grants that the novella does not clearly speak either the language of love we inherit from the stilnovists or the language of love from other literary registers where, as she notes, "sex organs masquerade as vegetables," Maestro Alberto still masterfully teaches these women, "through figurative language, that sexuality, like textuality, demands a superior understanding — one that goes beyond the letter to the hidden meaning of words, and one that goes beyond the obvious physical appeal of youth to the subtler attractions of older lovers."<sup>14</sup>

Something about this does not entirely convince me. First of all, in thinking about the treatment of Malgherida, I would point out that earlier on Day I, witty remarks are used to curb hypocrisy (I.4 and I.6), lust (I.5), avarice (I.7 and I.8), and apathy (I.9). The crowning witty remark of the Day is used to put a woman in her place refusing a gift of amorous attention. What is going on here? Although Pampinea claims that Madonna

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<sup>12</sup> Luigi Russo, "Maestro Alberto da Bologna (I, 10)," in *Lecture critiche del "Decameron"* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), 136–39; Mario Baratto, *Realtà e stile nel "Decameron"*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1993), 333–35.

<sup>13</sup> Picone, 106–7.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus, 227.

Malgherida doesn't know how to speak well, it seems the real issue is that Malgherida has no right to say anything that would undermine a suitor's self-esteem or sense of male superiority.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it seems that Malgherida has no right to refuse amorous attention. A case in point is Michelangelo Picone who staunchly reaffirms Maestro Alberto's "right to love" and praises Madonna Malgherida as a "first exemplary model" of a woman completely willing to dedicate herself to the practice of love.<sup>16</sup> Here we are dangerously close to the logic of the infernal Francesca da Rimini who proclaims the supremacy of "Amor, ch' a nullo amato amar perdona" ("Love that permits no one to say no to a lover")<sup>17</sup> and to the logic of male stalkers who believe that their right to "love" trumps a woman's right to say no.

We are not limited to the view of male-female power relations that emerges in this story. At least one other text provides us with an alternate perspective. As an astute and discerning reader of Dante, Boccaccio is recalling one of the most striking scenes from the *Vita nuova*, the scene in chapter XVIII where some well-spoken companions of Beatrice make fun of Dante, both for how he experiences his love and how he expresses it.<sup>18</sup> It is worth our while to look closely at this passage:

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<sup>15</sup> Migiel, 117: "It is not that Madonna Malgherida lacks the instruments to speak effectively; it is that she does not respect the rule of male superiority."

<sup>16</sup> Picone, 107, 110. The English translations of Picone's Italian formulations are mine.

<sup>17</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* 5.103. The English translation is mine.

<sup>18</sup> For yet another reading of Maestro Alberto's situation, see the passage in Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), found at "15 maggio 1915" (in Part VIII, "Psico-analisi"), where the elderly Zeno, infatuated with a young girl named Teresina, represents his own bumbling courtship of her in light of the novella of Maestro Alberto. Svevo's handling of this moment reveals, once again, that the situation need not be resolved in favor of the elderly male lover. Indeed, a closer look at the passage suggests that we might not necessarily be convinced by Pampinea's exhortation to side with Maestro Alberto who, after all, does not achieve his desired goal. That is what Zeno notes when he considers how he might be able to use the force of Maestro Alberto's rhetoric to try to get the girl he wants: "Avrei voluto dare una lezioncina a Teresina e cercai di ricordarmi come da Boccaccio «Maestro Alberto da Bologna onestamente fa vergognare una donna la quale lui d'esser di lei innamorato voleva far vergognare». Ma il ragionamento di Maestro Alberto non ebbe il suo effetto perché Madonna Malgherida de' Ghisolieri gli disse: «Il vostro amor m'è caro sí come di savio e valente uomo esser dee; e per ciò, *salva la mia onestà*, come a cosa vostra ogni vostro piacere imponete sicuramente»" ("I would have liked to teach Teresina a little lesson. I tried to remember how in Boccaccio, 'Maestro Alberto da Bologna justly shames a woman who tried to shame him because he was in love with her.' But Maestro Alberto didn't succeed because Madonna Malgherida de' Ghisolieri said to him, "Your love is as dear to me as the love of a wise and worthy man should be; and

Con ciò sia cosa che per la vista mia molte persone avessero compreso lo secreto del mio cuore, certe donne, le quali adunate s'erano diletlandosi l'una ne la compagnia de l'altra, sapeano bene lo mio cuore, però che ciascuna di loro era stata a molte mie sconfitte; e io passando appresso di loro, sì come da la fortuna menato, fui chiamato da una di queste gentili donne. La donna che m'avea chiamato era donna di molto leggiadro parlare; sì che quand'io fui giunto dinanzi da loro, e vidi bene che la mia gentilissima donna non era con esse, rassicurandomi le salutai, e domandai che piacesse loro. Le donne erano molte, tra le quali n'avea certe che si rideano tra loro. Altre v'erano che mi guardavano, aspettando che io dovessi dire. Altre v'erano che parlavano tra loro. De le quali una, volgendo li suoi occhi verso me e chiamandomi per nome, disse queste parole: "A che fine ami tu questa tua donna, poi che tu non puoi sostenere la sua presenza? Dilloci, ché certo lo fine di cotale amore conviene che sia novissimo." E poi che m'ebbe dette queste parole, non solamente ella, ma tutte l'altre cominciaro ad attendere in vista la mia risponsione. Allora dissi queste parole loro: "Madonne, lo fine del mio amore fue già lo saluto di questa donna, forse di cui voi intendete, e in quello dimorava la beatitudine, ché era fine di tutti li miei desiderii. Ma poi che le piacque di negarlo a me, lo mio signore Amore, la sua merzede, ha posto tutta la mia beatitudine in quello che non mi puote venire meno." Allora queste donne cominciaro a parlare tra loro; e sì come talora vedemo cadere l'acqua mischiata di bella neve, così mi pareva udire le loro parole uscire mischiate di sospiri. E poi che alquanto ebbero parlato tra loro, anche mi disse questa donna che m'avea prima parlato, queste parole: "Noi ti preghiamo che tu ne dichi ove sta questa tua beatitudine." Ed io, rispondendo lei, dissi cotanto: "In quelle parole che lodano la donna mia." Allora mi rispuose questa che mi parlava: "Se tu ne dicessi vero, quelle parole che tu n'hai dette in notificando la tua condizione avrestù operate con altro intendimento." Onde io, pensando a queste parole, quasi vergognoso mi partio da loro, e venia dicendo fra me medesimo: "Poi che è tanta beatitudine in quelle parole che lodano la mia donna, perché altro parlare è stato lo mio?" E però propuosi di prendere per materia de lo mio parlare sempre mai quello che fosse loda di questa gentilissima; e pensando molto a ciò, pareami avere impresa troppo alta materia quanto a me, sì che non ardia di cominciare; e così dimorai alquanti di con desiderio di dire e con paura di cominciare. (*Vita nuova*, XVIII.1–9)<sup>19</sup>

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so, *provided that my honor is secure*, you may seek your every pleasure from me as if I were your own"). The Italian text is taken from Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno*, electronic edition from 2 November 1996, based on the dall'Oglio edition, <<http://www.fausernet.novara.it/fauser/biblio/svevo/svevo30.htm>>. Date of access: 1 November 2004. The English translation is mine.

<sup>19</sup> Text and translation of the *Vita nuova* are taken from Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, Italian text with facing English translation by Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 78–80.



Because through my countenance many had known the secret of my heart, certain ladies, who had gathered to enjoy each other's company, knew my heart well, because each had been present at many of my defeats; and passing near them, as if guided by fortune, I was addressed by one of these gentle ladies. The lady who had called me was of a graceful way of speaking so that when I came before them and noted well that my most gentle lady was not with them, with assurance I greeted them and asked their pleasure. The ladies were many, among whom were some who laughed among themselves; there were others who watched me, awaiting what I would say; and there were others who spoke among themselves. One of them, turning her eyes toward me and calling me by name, said these words: "to what end do you love this lady of yours, since you cannot bear her presence? Tell us, for the end of such a love must be extraordinary." And after she had said to me these words, not only she but all the others began visibly to await my response. I then spoke these words to them: "Ladies, the end of my love was indeed the greeting of this lady, of whom you are perhaps thinking, and in that greeting lay my beatitude, for it was the end of all my desires. But because it pleased her to deny it to me, my Lord Love, in his mercy, has placed all my beatitude in that which cannot fail me." Then these ladies began conversing among themselves; and as when at times we see rain falling mixed with beautiful snow, so I seemed to hear their words come forth mixed with sighs. After they had spoken somewhat among themselves, the lady who had first spoken to me added these words: "We pray you, tell us where this your beatitude lies." And I, in reply, said so much: "In those words that praise my lady." And then replied the one who was speaking to me: "If you were speaking the truth to us, those words that you have said to us in making known your condition you would have used with another purpose." Hence I, thinking about these words, in shame departed from those ladies, saying within myself meanwhile: "Since so much beatitude lies in those words that praise my lady, why have other words been mine?" Therefore I resolved to take as the subject of my speaking always and ever what would be in praise of this most gentle one; and thinking much upon it, I seemed to have taken on a subject too lofty for me, so that I dared not begin; and thus I tarried for some days with the desire to speak and the fear of beginning.

In this very remarkable passage from the *Vita nuova*, the excellence of the women is manifestly evident; theirs is the merit and theirs is the position of dominance. Already Dante's commitment to a poetry of praise is becoming clear. As for the women's power, at least part of it derives from the fact that they stand as a formidably mysterious group whose attitude toward Dante is not immediately clear. They have "gathered to enjoy each other's company." This might be innocuous enough. But then after one of the women addresses Dante, we are told that some of the women were laughing among themselves. The tension level is ratcheted up, as we find

out that some of the women have fixed their gaze upon Dante. Perhaps these are the women who have taken notice of him and the others are laughing about their own affairs? Or are they laughing at him? The group further fragments as we find out that some of the women are talking among themselves. All this laughing, expectant waiting, and talking ... Can this be a good sign? Are the women simply waiting for him to respond or are they already judging him and even possibly making fun of him?

Our attention then turns to the deliberate and paced questioning initiated by a singular woman of very graceful speech (“*donna di molto leggiadro parlare*”). She emerges from the group to ask a question; all the women look at Dante to await his answer; he answers all of them. The group reconstitutes, providing the occasion for the stunning simile that Dante uses to describe their language (“rain falling mixed with beautiful snow”); again the first woman emerges with a question; Dante answers. Now the pace picks up, for on the third round, the woman does not put forth questions or requests. Essentially, she tells Dante he is lying, although she does so with a hypothetical circumlocution: “If you were speaking the truth to us, those words that you have said to us in making known your condition you would have used with another purpose.” With her pointed observation about the divergence between Dante’s claimed intent and the actual results, she cuts our male protagonist down to size.

Chapter XVIII of the *Vita nuova*, which will be followed by the first of the *canzoni*, permits Dante to establish his absolute, unwavering commitment to a language in service of the *truth*. Consistent with this commitment to truthful reporting, Dante must document in direct discourse both the woman’s verbal contributions as well as his own, thus providing his audience with evidence they can use to judge these utterances for themselves. Consistent with his commitment to praise and with a newly evolving experience of sexuality, Dante emphasizes his own defeats and his own smallness, allowing not only Beatrice but all gentle and well-spoken women to emerge victorious over him.

Obviously, the rhetorical purpose of this moment in the *Vita nuova* is different from that of the novella of Maestro Alberto. Pampinea’s stated objective is to show the women the defects in their speech, even though she criticizes a woman’s speech without ever allowing us to evaluate that speech for ourselves. Pampinea wishes to reinforce our positive evaluation of Maestro Alberto’s rhetoric and his sexuality, even though Maestro Alberto’s perplexing mystifications and convoluted logic might not immediately draw our approbation. We are asked, in the face of thin evidence and perhaps against our better judgment, to grant our approbation to the project of this novella — just as later, in multiple instances throughout the De-

cameron, we will be asked in the face of thin evidence and perhaps against our better judgment, to grant our approbation.

In this novella, it is manifestly clear that there are lessons about how to speak and how to read. I would add that the novella is also the occasion for another, perhaps less obvious, lesson: a lesson about how discourses are constructed, and in particular, about how, as I have said in the conclusion to my book, *A Rhetoric of the "Decameron,"* it is not necessary to have a deliberate volitional program in order to allow for the foreclosure of possibilities available to women. Rather, it is enough, even if passively and unknowingly, to permit multiple voices to intersect, thus producing a particular rhetorical and/or political outcome."<sup>20</sup>

We see an astonishingly clear example of this if we look to Maestro Alberto, whose vegetable metaphors are past their sell-by date. I would like to know how it is that in the metaphor of the leek, with its various parts white and green, Maestro Alberto got to be:

- 1) the green part of the leek (which tastes bad but who cares?);
- 2) the white part of the leek (which tastes less bad so people think that's good);
- 3) the whole leek (with a white part that is intellectually potent and a green part that is sexually potent, as long as we do not see this sexual potency as literal);
- 4) the whole leek (with a white part that is intellectually potent and a green part that is sexually potent, no questions asked).

Very curiously, the story of Maestro Alberto and Madonna Malgherida has been constructed — by Pampinea, by the author of the *Decameron*, and by the majority of critics — so that, significant textual obstacles notwithstanding, Maestro Alberto is always guaranteed a favorable outcome in the *Decameron's* sex wars. That outcome could be summed up as "Heads I win, tails you lose."

Given this not terribly optimistic overview, which shows that various authorial parties seem to have stacked the cards so as to privilege what "he says" over what "she says," I would conclude as follows: If we are committed to understanding how rhetoric is a crucial element in the waging of sex wars — and indeed any and all political and ideological wars — we will have to return to instances like the ones I have identified here. I believe they are many and the work that remains to be done is not trivial. We will have to examine in painstaking detail how reading publics respond to the

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<sup>20</sup> Migiel, 164.

language of a text, presenting it as clear where in many cases it is not. We will have to draw out the ideological implications of plot summaries, translations, critical analyses, and rewritings. We will have to think about the unstated, implicit discourses that are constructed as the result of a confluence of voices, not all of which need be in agreement to ensure the persistence of these discourses in our cultural thinking. Only when we do this sort of work will we have some chance of achieving a more accurate understanding of texts and of the role we play in shaping their meanings.

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