

The *Decameron* and *Il Libro del Cortegiano*: Story of a Conversation

The *Cortegiano* rejects one major aspect of the Renaissance reinterpretation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It cannot consider the text as a model for literary Italian in the way that Bembo urged his readers do so in the *Prose della volgar lingua*. For Castiglione this attempt to make the *Decameron* a timeless, linguistic archetype was misguided and inappropriate to the needs of contemporary court society. However, Bembo's almost complete separation of the language question from issues of content serves to make available the *Decameron* for purposes other than linguistic standardisation.¹ It was a model of narrative which dealt with themes that had practical implications for the mental universe of Castiglione's Renaissance courtiers in his dialogue. Boccaccio's narrative frame was of particular interest to the writer as it gave him a vernacular model to convey conversation amongst an elite group of men and women. This paper will explore how Castiglione read the *Decameron* and with what results as far as the *Cortegiano* is concerned. Although the relationship between the two texts has been the subject of some investigation, the main focus has been on the ways in which the *Cortegiano* criticizes Bembo's *Decameron* as a linguistic model. In this regard, one of Castiglione's innovations is to reread Boccaccio's collection directly and critically so that at the same time he is criticizing Bembo's fundamental choices about both language and literature. Therefore, we have to distinguish between Bembo's *Decameron*, characterised by an attempt to demolish the *lingua cortigiana*, to prescribe a single, written model in its place and Castiglione's *Decameron* that critiques Bembo's prescriptions but shows interest in other aspects: the incorporation of Boccaccian framing devices into the fabric of the text, emended as necessary, and the critical analysis of individual or groups of *novelle*, especially the *beffe* or *burle*.

¹ See Vianello 368–74.

Through Bembo's privileging of its linguistic primacy the *Decameron* had become an ambiguous classic for the Renaissance in the 16th century. It was ambiguous, if not 'dangerous,' because of its 'naturalistic' attitude to sexual behaviour and its overt criticism of the clergy in a period of increasing religious orthodoxy. However, for Castiglione the *Decameron* certainly had its literary merits and was to a degree imitable, but he challenged the idea that there could be a straightforward and precise dovetailing between the literary and linguistic exigencies of a medieval writer and those of a Renaissance theorist of the courts. Moreover, the concept of freezing linguistic and stylistic development at the *Decameron* would have made redundant Castiglione's efforts to create a style for his courtiers that was specifically adapted to the requirements of the Renaissance court.

Castiglione had certainly meditated on the *Decameron*, as is obvious from the number of direct references to it in the *Cortegiano*. He first refers to Boccaccio in the dedication to Miguel da Silva as concerns the *questione della lingua*. It is of particular interest because he characterises the medieval writer not only in linguistic but equally in more strictly stylistic terms:

non restarò di dire che, ancor che 'l Boccaccio fusse di gentil ingegno, secondo quei tempi, e che in alcuna parte scrivesse con discrezione ed industria, nientedimeno assai meglio scrisse quando si lassò guidar solamente dall'ingegno ed istinto suo naturale, senz'altro studio o cura di limare i scritti suoi, che quando con diligenza e fatica si sforzò d'esser più culto e castigato.²

This passage indicates several crucial points about Castiglione's reading of the *Decameron*. He analyses it with great subtlety and sensitivity to its stylistic diversity, as is owed to a text that had become canonical as a consequence of Bembo's language reforms.³ He has only rejected it as a model

² Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano*, (Dedica, II) 72.

³ Castiglione had Bembo's own evaluation of Boccaccio's style in mind, as is made plain by the following comment: 'Perciò li medesimi suoi fautori affermano che esso [Boccaccio] nelle cose sue proprie molto *s'ingannò di giudicio*' (Dedica, II). It is necessary to compare a similar passage in the *Prose della volgar lingua*: 'Che quantunque del Boccaccio si possa dire, che egli nel vero alcuna volta *molto prudente scrittore stato non sia*; con ciò sia cosa che egli *mancasse talora di giudicio nello scrivere*, non pure delle altre opere, ma nel *Decamerone* ancora, nondimeno quelle parti del detto libro, le quali egli poco giudiciosamente prese a scrivere, quelle medesime egli pure con buono e con leggiadro stile scrisse tutte; il che è quello che noi cerchiamo' (*Prose*, II, XIX, p. 173; my emphases). Castiglione takes issue with Bembo on his assertion that Boccaccio's style is always even and regular. Further, in the

after long and careful consideration of its language and style. In the dedication to the final version, Castiglione attempts to justify his derogation from the new linguistic norm by suggesting that the *Decameron* was not contemporary enough in its concerns to be of interest to the writer of the sixteenth century. He was challenging its status as canonical and classical in the Italian literary tradition. By ‘eliminating’ his rival at such a conspicuous point of the text, Castiglione is making a show of his originality, of implying that his models — Plato, Xenophon and Cicero — are to be found solely in the classical tradition. If this is the case, then logically Castiglione is the new starting point for vernacular writing where classicism is exclusion and prose narrative and dialogue are pushed in a different and original direction. The dedication of the *vulgata* intends to urge on the reader Castiglione’s definitive positions on issues that had been maturing for years through the various drafts of the *Cortegiano*. Clearly, linguistic matters are amongst the most fiercely debated of the early *Cinquecento*, but since Bembo made the *questione della lingua* into a literary question as well, Castiglione felt the need to defend himself from potential accusations of being too familiar with a text that provided an ambiguous start to the Italian literary tradition.

His appreciation of Boccaccio is tempered by the realisation that diverse periods have contrasting stylistic paradigms and, in a sense, the *Decameron* represents a transitional phase from a more ‘popular’ to a humanistically polished form of writing. Indeed, his critique of Boccaccio is based on the superiority of the moderns underlined by that ‘secondo quei tempi’; his sense of historical periodisation allows him to assess from the standpoint of the present the evolution of prose narrative. Castiglione implicitly asks the reader to compare the accomplishments of both writers.⁴ Thus, the act of freezing Boccaccio’s literary language is unjust to the complexities of the *Decameron* and to the objective historical conditions under which Boccaccio was working. Castiglione is suggesting that the *post eventum* definition of Boccaccio as a classic (‘culto’) is too simplistic, if not erroneous, because it fails to consider the textual inconsistencies of the *Decameron* as a work written in history. Indeed, the *Dedica* dethrones the *Decameron* and its searing ambiguities are revealed by the iconoclastic Castiglione. The *De-*

dedication, he implicitly shares Bembo’s condemnation of Boccaccio’s choice of subject matter in the *Decameron*.

⁴ The classic expression of Castiglione’s ‘modernity’ is Mazzacurati, *Misure del classicismo rinascimentale* (7–131). See also Mazzacurati, *Il rinascimento dei moderni* (149–207) and Quondam 404–28.

cameron, therefore, cannot signify a single line of development: it was experimental, trying out different stylistic solutions. It is not perfect: some parts succeed better than others. This judgement recognizes Boccaccio's talent as natural, untrained that becomes constrained the moment he imposes linguistic rules on himself. Apart from the jibe at rule-based literature in general, Castiglione's observation suggests that the *Decameron* itself rebels against an interpretation that privileges its least successful side as judged by the Renaissance writer. The *Cortegiano* presents itself as the culminating point of that experimentation. Castiglione designates the *Decameron* as 'inferior' or unsuccessful in developing a classical, humanistic model whereas the *Cortegiano* has implicitly succeeded. In this way, he further undermines Bembo's position.

Castiglione does not limit himself to criticising the linguistic choices of Boccaccio; he refers to the content of the *Decameron*, almost an afterthought that underlines his ambiguous attitude to this classic:

E quando ancora questo rispetto non m'avesse mosso, io non poteva nel subietto imitarlo, non avendo esso mai scritto cosa alcuna di materia simile a questi libri del *Cortegiano*. (Dedica, II; p. 73)

This statement distances the *Cortegiano* from the *Decameron* in such a way that they are viewed as inhabiting two distinct, even exclusive, literary universes. It would not be hard to imagine that behind Castiglione's declaration is an attitude akin to that of Petrarch who found the Boccaccian masterpiece somewhat lacking from a moral and humanist perspective.⁵ Yet Castiglione's categorical denial of intertextual links between the two works seems to fly in the face of the evidence. It appears that he is extremely anxious to dissociate himself from the *Decameron* at any level of the text. What could be the source of his anxiety? Even if we understand *subietto* to mean principally the substance of the text as opposed to its language and style, still the categorical nature of the declaration renders it problematic insofar as there is some overlap in themes, exemplarity of narratives, and the place of humour in the respective fictional universes. Castiglione seeks to negate the influence of the 'father' of vernacular prose in order to establish the originality of the *Cortegiano*.

If we take *subietto* in a broader sense to mean not only the themes of the narratives or the messages but also the structures of the two texts, then a different situation obtains where one can detect numerous points of contact. To name only the most pertinent: the respective *brigade*, the de-

⁵ See Olson.

ployment of a *regina*, the use of a *cornice*,⁶ narratives attached to the characters of each text associated with forms of turn-taking, the ambience as a desire for separation and perspective, the rituals of this existence.⁷ In many ways, my description is inaccurate because, while these genetic similarities can be identified, it would be equally easy to pinpoint differences in usage that suggest 'adaptation' to diverse circumstances and historical period. Castiglione never imports wholesale into the *vulgata* a structural feature; the work always undergoes some form of change, perhaps as a correlative to his linguistic theory. In fact, there is increasingly a tendency to play down the importation of such features over the long maturation of the text. Therefore, I would argue that Castiglione is not paying homage to the *Decameron* in the accepted sense; rather, he is modernising and re-elaborating in a critical vein the work that forms the foundation stone of the new vernacular canon created by Bembo.

Structural similarities are almost too obvious and are the product of conscious imitation. It is possible that Castiglione realised that such parallels could lead readers to assume that their presence was a wholesale acceptance of the *Decameron's* status of authoritative model. However, he rewrites the *Decameron* according to criteria of decorum and classicism so that he transplants its structures and rules into a new environment. Similarity and deviance are built into a partnership that generates a discussion of the model; it is not accepted unquestioningly and probes the texture of the architext. The various itineraries of the *Decameron* are telescoped into the unitary ambience and mindset of the court of Urbino. The world outside of the court is only sporadically revealed and then with the purpose of ever more tightly defining courtliness.

Castiglione re-elaborates structural elements from the *Decameron* in order to confirm his particular take on the mechanisms of group behaviour. For example, in Boccaccio the king/queen changes every day and rule is shared by every member of the *brigata* whereas in the *Cortegiano* the

⁶ Uberto Motta argues that the dedication and the 'prologues' to each Book of the *Cortegiano* should be considered as 'una cornice plasmata sul modello decameroniano' (viii).

⁷ Others can be enumerated: not the least being the absence of the respective authors (though there is also classical precedent), for which see Vianello 372, n.30; the deployment of dancing and the recitation of poetry are much reduced in the *Cortegiano* with respect to the *Decameron* but nevertheless present. The *Cortegiano* does not present these as activities that punctuate the text at prescribed intervals as is done in the *Decameron*. Furthermore, references to food are generally eliminated from Castiglione's dialogue (see Kolsky 371–73 and Richards).

regina (and her lieutenant) remain unchanged throughout. Indeed, the ruler of the game no longer receives the Boccaccian designation of *regina* but remains true to her official title of *duchessa*.⁸ The *Decameron*'s 'ruler' only has limited tenure in the office, bearing a certain similarity to the way in which offices were held in communal Florence for exceedingly short periods of time. In the *Cortegiano*, Elisabetta Gonzaga has the status of actual ruler, albeit on a temporary basis, because of the absence of her husband, the duke of Urbino. The grounds for exchange are built into the text through the presence of Francesco Maria della Rovere, the next ruler, but are alluded to with the utmost discretion. The historical 'realism' of the characters and the place — Elisabetta's private quarters — demand that she retain her position as *de facto* ruler; fictions only to a certain degree.⁹ Unlike as in the *Decameron*, the duchess appoints a lieutenant, Emilia Pia, who has a more active role in the entertainment.

Castiglione has therefore instituted significant changes in the governance of the game with respect to the medieval text. Such moves enhance the regal presence of the duchess, create a distance between her and other mortals, allows Castiglione to concentrate on the courtiers and the singular *donna di palazzo*, Emilia Pia. Although Castiglione has kept intact the circle in which the courtiers and ladies of the court sit (in direct correspondence with the *Decameron*), all the interlocutors are male except for the rare exception of a woman speaking at length (Emilia Pia in book III). Turn-taking is not as precisely organized and interruption is permitted

⁸ Vat lat. 8204, one of the earliest of the manuscript drafts of the *Cortegiano* datable to 1514–15 (for which see Quondam 92 and Ghinassi), contains a quite different reading from the *vulgata*: 'quivi ogni sera si havea un novo Re o Regina, il quale, al dipartirsi renuntiava il domino a chi più gli piaceva; ma mentre durava, e l'ordine de' giochi, et ciò che bisognava fare disponea a modo suo' (fol. 21v). Cf. Motta 155–56. If in this early draft it was acceptable to announce direct imitation of and subordination to the *Decameron*, by the *vulgata* Castiglione was hiding its traces. Some of Castiglione's reasons could be: greater confidence in his vernacular invention, dissatisfaction with the Boccaccian archetype, a need to put it in its place, a desire for greater consistency (criticism of Bembo's interpretation of Boccaccio's language and literature), the literary use of *sprezzatura* to indicate the ease with which he can adapt the *Decameron* as well as mould it to his objectives.

⁹ The names of the narrators in the *Decameron* indicate a tendency to symbolic signification and are often intertextually referential whereas all the interlocutors of the *Cortegiano* are historical and are grounded in the specific history of Urbino and the Italian peninsula of the early 16th century. Castiglione's conscious decision to reverse Boccaccio's proportion of women in favour of men (I, VI; p. 89) is another example of his desire to correct and historicize the fictions of the *Decameron*. See Motta 156–57.

throughout the *Cortegiano* whereas Boccaccio's narrators tell their story without any of the *brigata's* members attempting to interfere with the narrative flow.

Both works present a group of élite men and women who gather to construct narratives apparently on a playful level as a form of intellectual recreation. They both seem to have the aim of critiquing certain aspects of contemporary society and working towards a new order. Superficially, both bands are unified, pastoral and utopian, which expresses a vision for the future. Yet Castiglione acting on suggestions picked up from the *Decameron* accentuates divisions within the group. Indeed, he elevates such fissures to perform as the structural principle of the *Cortegiano*. The rigid hierarchy of the *Decameron* becomes much more fluid in the *Cortegiano*. Formally, the duchess or her lieutenant has the right to appoint the next person to speak. Some interlocutors commence their discourse without reference to the two ladies nominally in charge of proceedings. The most notable instance is that of Cesare Gonzaga who takes over from Giuliano de' Medici by simply asking *his* permission: 'Ma se 'l signor Magnifico mi concede ch'io possa in loco suo respondergli alcune poche cose...' (III, XL; p. 394). That would never happen in the *Decameron*. The Queen and her substitute are blatantly ignored in a show of intellectual autonomy that underlines the courtier's desire to achieve a limited independence within the rules of the game. This illicit pleasure or challenge to authority is sometimes called to order, creating tensions of governability and hierarchy. Order is disturbed by interruption, something that never happens in the *Decameron*, in which the story is always completed without the voices of the *brigata* entering into the space of the narratives.¹⁰ It is a quasi religious space dependent on the rites of passage enacted in the *cornice*. It is extremely rare that the court speak as a single community; its conversations divide the group and reach the extreme edge of courtly decorum. The *Decameron* does not fail to elicit hints that on some matters of judgement there is complete accord. Singularity is much more strongly expressed in the *Cortegiano* where the voice of each individual courtier is more recognisable, more clearly connected to the character since they are arguing a case, a situation that is dissimilar from a *novella* where fictional voices overlay the voice of the speaker.

¹⁰ Narratives can be interrupted as in *The Canterbury Tales* where the host abruptly cuts off 'Chaucer' who has been relating 'The Tale of Sir Thopas' with a 'Nameore of this, for Goddes dignitee' (l. 919).

It is clear that Castiglione had the medieval model in mind when it came to re-imagining the activities of the court. However, it is equally clear that the *Cortegiano* has its own rhythms and priorities. The routines that are established in the *cornice* as a sign of civility on the edge of chaos and disorder are not followed with the same assiduity in the *Cortegiano*. The same necessities are not felt with equal urgency: Urbino had already suffered its plague in the shape of Cesare Borgia who exiled the Montefeltros, but order had to a degree been restored. Death hovers over the *Cortegiano* through the perspective afforded by the introduction to the fourth book where it is noted that many of the interlocutors are now dead. Off stage, the duke is in his sick bed. Unlike the case of the *Decameron*, the perspective of a new social order is undermined by the lamentation of the deaths of so many of the interlocutors of the *Cortegiano*. Its revitalisation of society is undermined to a degree by the recognition that so many of its pioneers are now dead, whereas the Florentine *brigata* returns to that city presumably revived and stimulated by their experience. Castiglione explicitly ensures an ambiguous reading of the last book: Ottaviano Fregoso's failure as a prince and Bembo's aspirations to the cardinalate, perhaps hampered by his Neoplatonic, albeit heavily Christianised, tendencies.

Indeed, it could be argued that the Renaissance dialogue makes every effort not to imitate the *Decameron* in its anti-ecclesiastical stance; it does not wish to enter into overt conflict with a dominant social and cultural institution.¹¹ However, there is one instance in which that caution or courtier-like circumspection is overruled. Giuliano de' Medici launches a seemingly unprovoked attack against the friars. Its aim is to uncover the sordid reality behind their secrecy, which he construes as a means of procuring power and influence. The sentiments and expressions cannot but recall one of the leitmotifs of the *Decameron*: that constant misuse of power by the *frati*, particularly with regard to the seduction of women. An unambiguous statement of this attitude is found at the opening of the story of frate Alberto and Monna Lisetta (IV, 2, 5): 'e ancora a dimostrare quanta e quale sia la ipocresia de' religiosi.' Such an affirmation corresponds to Giuliano's exposition on the 'ippocriti maledetti' (III, XX). In both texts there is a sharp focus on acts of deception that have replaced

¹¹ The general rule for the discussions is to avoid 'entering into the sacristy.' Cf. III, XIX; p. 362.

truly Christian behaviour.¹² Although the discussion is cut short by Emilia Pia who acts authoritatively to put an end to this kind of talk, its insertion in the dialogue indicates that Castiglione is engaging in that discourse which was so central to the *Decameron*, albeit as an aside. In fact, it gains in emphasis because of the sharpness of Emilia Pia's rebuke¹³; the diatribe is no mere topos taken from the Italian literary tradition but an affirmation of the dangers of a corrupted Church that trespasses on those areas claimed by the nascent courtier class. The brevity of the exposition and the severity of the reproach underline the controversy surrounding the issue. It is a good illustration of Castiglione's ambiguous reading of the *Decameron*: he shares some of its concerns but is troubled by the representation of the clergy. His solution is to include an attack on the *frati* but to reduce its consequences for the interpretation of the *Cortegiano* by stressing the disapproval of the 'convenor' of the *brigata*.

In terms of subject matter, there are more marked differences than close similarities. Most especially, Castiglione draws a clear distinction between the narratives he is prepared to sanction in his work and those he found in the *Decameron*. Indeed, the collection of *novelle* becomes an object of enquiry in two precise aspects: language and the acceptability or

¹² Boccaccio rhetorically employs the clothing of the friars to declare their duplicity: 'e poscia coloro che in ciò alle loro parole dan fede sforzandosi d'ingannare. De' quali se quanto si convenisse fosse licito a me di mostrare, tosto dichiarerei a molti semplici quello che nelle lor cappe larghissime tengan nascoso' (IV, 2, 6–7). One can note the suggestiveness of these words for our interpretation of *Cortegiano* III, xx. Not only does Giuliano employ a similar phrase 'gabbano i semplici' to indicate the trickery of the friars but the story itself also illustrates what Castiglione's interlocutor is implying about their unethical relationship to women as well as their general untrustworthiness, which renders them unsuitable for the role the courtier intends to fill. The *vituperatio* in the *Cortegiano* resembles the introductory part of a *Decameronian novella* before the narrative proper has begun. Other relevant examples include Elissa's accusation that friars are the 'vitupero del guasto mondo!' (VII, 3, 8) and her condemnation of their worldly ways and desire for the good life: 'e che né san Domenico né san Francesco, senza aver quatro cappe per uno, non di tintillani né d'altri panni gentili ma di lana grossa fatti e di natural colore, a cacciare il freddo e non a apparere si vestissero' (VII, 3, 12).

¹³ Castiglione purposefully sets out to distinguish the Renaissance lady from her fictional predecessor by calling her 'la signora Emilia' (III, xx). Moreover, she corrects one of the Boccaccian Emilia's 'defects,' a penchant for criticising the clergy. Boccaccio's Emilia is only too happy to find an occasion to criticise the clergy: 'Valorose donne, quanto i preti e' frati e ogni cherico sieno sollecitatori delle menti nostre in più novelle dette mi ricorda esser mostrato; ma per ciò che dire non se ne potrebbe tanto, che ancora più non ne fosse' (VIII, 4, 3).

otherwise of the sexual *mores* of some of the stories. Castiglione's anxiety about the *Decameron* is underlined in regard to its being both a linguistic model and a moral model. In other words, he expresses concerns about what he considered to be shortcomings in a text whose status had been elevated to the level of a classic. Thus, the conversation is about whether the *Decameron* lives up to its theoretical elevation by Pietro Bembo.

The question that Castiglione poses to the reader is whether the sometimes lubricious subject matter of the *Decameron* should have been ignored in the search for a general linguistic model for written Italian. He answers the question by specifically discussing a number of overtly problematic stories that push up against conventional morality. The argument is that for the courts and the implied readership of the *Cortegiano* these two aspects cannot and should not be separated. The fact that its messages are dissected by the company in the *Cortegiano* means that they are taken seriously and are not dismissed as frivolous *divertissement*. Most importantly, however, they are criticised and where necessary the courtiers assert their independence from the questionable morality of some of the stories. For particular forms of humour Boccaccio is singled out as the maestro. Bernardo Bibbiena exhibits an extensive knowledge of the *Decameron* and appreciates the humour of its *narrazioni* (II, XLIX; p. 266). In particular he nominates the Calandrino cycle (one of whose episodes immediately follows on from the first mentioned story¹⁴) and the *novella* of the priest and Monna Belcolore. At this stage, he does not specify any more examples, merely stating that there are many others that can be classed as 'piacevoli narrazioni' (II, XLIX; p. 266).

The reader may deduce from such a declaration that the *Decameron* is a model of comic narration and that there are no problems with its attitude towards sex and women. The Calandrino story (VIII, 3), though it appears as a harmless practical joke, contains scenes of explicit violence of a rather gratuitous kind against the hapless Calandrino himself. Moreover, the Florentine painter takes out his frustrations on his innocent wife whom he beats mercilessly. The same story also does not portray the female protagonist in a positive light.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Decameron* VIII, 2, 3.

¹⁵ All these considerations are ignored by Bibbiena. On another occasion he again praises this cycle of stories: 'molti piacevoli ne sono nelle novelle del Boccaccio, come quelle che faceano Bruno e Buffalmacco al suo Calandrino ed a maestro Simone, e molte altre di donne, che veramente sono ingeniose e belle' (II, LXXXIX; p. 319). Bibbiena ignores VIII, VIII where sexual mores and the boundaries of marriage are pushed to their limit.

The other *novella* that Bibbiena specifically mentions is VIII, 2 where the negotiations that take place in order to bring about the sexual exchange are grounded in Monna Belcolore's desire to retrieve her best clothes from the pawnbroker. Thus she betrays her husband for economic reasons, with a priest no less, and the taint of prostitution is never far from the surface of the text. Monna Belcolore states that she will not be like one of the priest's previous lovers 'credete voi fare a me come voi faceste alla Biliuzza, che se n'andò col ceteratoio?'¹⁶ Once the priest fails to keep his promise of the monetary gift, it seems that she will break off all ties with him; however, through his use of a verbal menace, she recommences the affair. The narrative would not meet the approval of Giuliano de' Medici whose view is that a married *donna di palazzo* should only exchange glances with the enamoured courtier and absolutely nothing else.¹⁷ Bibbiena is careful about how he characterises the story. For him, the best line is constituted by his pathetic efforts at singing whenever Belcolore is present in church ('Chi non ride...').¹⁸ It is not by chance that this high point of humour comes before the *novella* describes their sexual relations and that the arguably funniest lines involving the heavily innuendoed mortar and pestle are totally ignored, in spite of the fact that the rubric makes it a central

¹⁶ VIII, 2, 30 (pp. 677–78). For a discussion of the meaning of 'ceteratoio,' see pp. 1407–08.

¹⁷ '[V]oglio che ella niuna altra cosa allo amante conceda eccetto che l'animo' (III, LVI; p. 419). However, Federico Fregoso had pointed out that married women were often victims of the dowry system and its associated ills. He paints a depressing picture of married life that could be seen as a justification of the behaviour of some of the Boccaccian women. Federico makes a remark that appears based on his reading of the *Decameron*: 'e penso che l'abbiate imparata [Giuliano] da qualche predicator, di quelli che riprendon le donne innamorate de' secolari per averne essi miglior parte' (III, LVI; p. 418). In this sense, Federico provides an explanation of otherwise morally reprehensible behaviour. The text as a whole militates against our accepting his view of sexual oppression leading to rebellion against current *mores*.

¹⁸ The *Seconda redazione del 'Cortegiano'* had explained in greater and perhaps redundant detail the priest's attempts to sing more tunefully if Belcolore were in church: 'che il prete da Varlungo quando sentia la Belcolore in chiesa, diceva un Chirie e un Sanctus sforzandosi per parere un gran maestro di canto, che pareva uno asino che raghiasse, e tutto il resto de la novella?' (II, XLVIII; p. 136). The emphasis indicates the section that was not carried into the *vulgata*. Cf. Quondam, who notes that Castiglione 'elimina anche una troppo ridondante citazione dal *Decamerone* (VIII, 2), rendendola sfumata e allusiva, perfettamente riconoscibile, però, alla competenza del lettore' (152). It is significant that the assent granted to the *novella* as a whole is removed in the final version.

part of the story.¹⁹ Sexual innuendo, especially when it involves a court lady is taboo: she should never use sexually loaded language.²⁰ Boccaccio clearly oversteps the mark in this regard. Castiglione is keen to emphasize that restraint, decorum, and exclusion of excess should dictate all forms of humour at court.

Bibbiena does have to confront the moral issues of the *novelle* when challenged by Gasparo Pallavicino who ironically reprises his description of some of the *Decameron* stories: 'Poiché voi dite che quelle burle di donne nel Giovan Boccaccio son così ingeniose e belle' (II, XCII; p. 324). Pallavicino singles out three *novelle* for their questionable moral values taken within the context of prescribed courtly behaviour (III, 6; VII, 7; VII, 8). These are troubling tales for someone who is seeking confirmation of women as asexualised beings whose honour and chastity must be safeguarded by the institutions in which they are required to operate.²¹ Surprisingly, Bibbiena sanctions certain forms of female behaviour that at first sight, given the parameters of the joke as he himself defines it, should have been disallowed. In this case, the joke becomes one of the few weapons in a woman's armoury to attack men because of the special status and rules they have with regard to reality, capable of undermining and reversing power expectations, laying bare the mechanisms of an external ideology.

Of the three *novelle* mentioned by Pallavicino, only one narrates the sexual domination and reduction of women to objects (III, 6) and the other two show the reversal of power relations in a kind of carnivalesque performance set up by their respective female protagonists. For Bibbiena the latter two are legitimate representations because they are signs of a 'revolt' against an unjust social system and hence to a degree equalise the differences between the genders. However, he is specific about the limits:

¹⁹ Importantly, it is Belcolore who pointedly draws out the sexual allusion of the mortar and pestle: 'Dirai così al sere da mia parte: "La Belcolor dice che fa prego a Dio che voi non pesterete mai più salsa in suo mortaio: non l'avete voi sì bello onor fatto di questa"' (VIII, 2, 44). In the context of court society her reprimand is indecorous and breaks the gendered boundaries of speech carefully engineered by the male interlocutors of the *Cortegiano*.

²⁰ 'Non deve tampoco, per mostrar d'esser libera e piacevole, dir parole disoneste, né usar una certa domestichezza intemperata' (III, v; p. 344).

²¹ Bibbiena could not be clearer on this point: 'è questo perché noi stessi avemo fatta una legge, che in noi non sia vicio né mancamento né infamia alcuna la vita dissoluta e nelle donne sia tanto estremo obbrobrio e vergogna, che quella di chi una volta si parla male, o falsa o vera che sia la calunnia che se le dà, sia per sempre vituperata' (II, XC; p. 322).

‘dico ben che esse possono con più licenzia morder gli omini di poca onestà’ (II, xc; p. 322).

In the story of Beatrice and Anichino (VII, 7), it cannot be said the husband Egano deserves his punishment insofar as his only sin is that he is outwitted by his wife and suffers physical humiliation as a consequence. Indeed, the extramarital affair is not based on dissatisfaction with her husband but on the understanding she has of the concept of love and how it is to be earned according to principles of the *dolce stil nuovo*.²² In the story of the merchant Arriguccio who marries the aristocratic Monna Sismonda (VII, 8), positively mentioned by Pallavicino, the husband is constructed as deserving his fate on several levels: *il quale scioccamente, sì come ancora oggi fanno tutto 'l di i mercatanti, pensò di volere ingentilire per moglie'* (VII, 8, 4) and then *'egli ne diventò il più geloso uomo del mondo'* (VII, 8, 6). This is enough to ensure his humiliation and eventual powerlessness to change the situation whereby his wife can continue to enjoy her extramarital relationship.²³

However ingenious the women are in these *burle* they still pose insurmountable problems for Castiglione's vision of the court woman. This position could not be made more transparent than by Bibbiena's view on the scope of a love relationship. Bibbiena strongly urges that it is the soul, not the body that is the goal of love.²⁴ Thus, whatever subject position the Boccaccian woman takes in these stories, they do not conform to this stern attitude towards love that is later confirmed in Book III. Bembo's finale on the concept of sexless love, though interrupted by Morello da Ortona, would seem to be the 'natural' outcome of the anti-Boccaccian strategy of the text.

However, Gasparo Pallavicino does not completely agree and reverses Bibbiena's observations. The troublesome story of Ricciardo Minutolo (III,

²² Beatrice says to Anichino: *'ma tu m'hai fatta in così poco spazio, come le tue parole durate sono, troppo più tua divenire che io non son mia. Io giudico che tu ottimamente abbi il mio amore guadagnato'* (VII, 7, 23–24). It needs to be underlined that unlike the *donna di palazzo*, Beatrice intends to give of herself sexually. The love triangle persists in spite of the presumed and continuing cordiality between the married couple. Their laughter has another edge for the reader which it does not possess for Egano, the betrayed husband.

²³ *'[L]a qual non solamente con la sua sagacità fuggì il pericolo soprastante ma s'aperse la via a poter fare nel tempo avvenire ogni suo piacere, senza paura alcuna più aver del marito'* (VII, 8, 50).

²⁴ The trials of love are supported *'non per acquistarne principalmente il corpo, ma per vincer la ròcca di quell'animo'* (II, xciv; p. 325)

6) provides the crux of the problem. It acquires 'exemplary' status not solely due to the dubious morality of the male protagonist (in 'contrast' to the comportment of the women in the two other stories). There are two further components that put pressure on the construction of woman in the *Cortegiano*: the desire for the female body achieved only through deceiving the jealous Catella and, perhaps more troubling, her acceptance and realisation that sex with her lover is more satisfying than that with her husband. In this way, the *novella* virtually undermines the constructed response to female sexuality that is based on a commitment to chastity and restraint. There could be no clearer challenge to ways of thinking about female attitudes to sex. Bibbiena has to beat back the insinuation that the sexual act is pleasurable for both men *and* women and is a justifiable and natural outcome of the relations between the sexes. He is dogmatic about the unacceptable nature of Ricciardo's manipulations: 'Ma, secondo me, la burla di Ricciardo Minutoli passa il termine' (II, XCIII; p. 325).²⁵ His interpretation is however too simplistic and unilinear and hence distorts the narrative in order to ensure that Catella is interpreted as the victim since that subject position suits the ideology of the *Cortegiano*. If interpreted as a form of rape,²⁶ the male protagonist is condemned for precisely that be-

²⁵ In the *Seconda redazione* we find the much weaker and less developed: 'Ma secondo me la burla di Ricciardo Minutoli non è simile a quella di Beatrice' (II, LXXXIX; p. 175).

²⁶ 'Ricciardo con quello inganno sforzò colei e fecela far di se stessa quello che ella non voleva' (II, xciii; p. 325, my emphasis). The actions of Beatrice (VII, VII) are formally justified since she is in the subject position 'per far essa di se stessa quello che le piaceva.' The explanation in the *Seconda redazione* is much more convoluted and at points unclear; there is almost a legalistic tone in the effort to distinguish the two cases: 'vedete che la moglie di Filippello era molto più di se stessa che non era Beatrice di Egano: però si può dire che Beatrice rubasse ad Egano quello che essa gli avea dato, cioè il debito della moglie et il corpo suo, ma Ricciardo rubbò alla moglie di Filippello lei medema, e sforzolla a far di se stessa quello che ella non volea' (II, LXXXIX; p. 175). The repetition is eliminated in the *vulgata* as are these nice distinctions that served to underline Ricciardo's attack on Catella's very identity as a loving wife. Castiglione tones down his attack on the Ricciardo story from the *Seconda redazione* to the *vulgata*, eliminating references that seem to belabour the point: 'che al parer mio forno più tollerabili che quello de Ricciardo' (II, LXXXIX; p. 175. See also II, XC; p. 176 and II, XCI; p. 177).

Bibbiena theorises his position as a kind of general repetition of the moral he wishes to draw from Ricciardo's story; his point is that mutuality is central to the role of women in a love affair that involves her will, her desire to enter into it. His univocal reading of III, 7 means that he can envisage a reversal of the story's narrative in the discursive space of the *Cortegiano*: 'quella a cui io servissi me redamasse di core e

haviour which the courtiers intend to correct in Book III. Yet it is not the domination of the woman by the man that is solely at issue, rather the complicity of the woman in 'unbecoming' conduct, ignored by Bibbiena. Pallavicino makes the other side of the argument about Catella's final complicity with Ricciardo, going so far to suggest that possession of the body is also possession of the soul, much to Bibbiena's annoyance. This 'other' reading collides with the more straightforward one of male agency and puts an end to the discussion quite abruptly. Bibbiena concludes, and it is not entirely based on the preceding arguments, that 'Giovan Boccaccio, era, come sete ancor voi, a gran torto nemico delle donne' (II, xcv; p. 327). Gasparo Pallavicino has caused Bibbiena to utter this *sentenza* in order to dispel the ambiguities to which the *Decameron* story gives rise. It is as if its complexities have to be banished from the text in a grandiose statement that contradicts the more conciliatory tones towards Boccaccio made previously. Bibbiena attaches the greatest opprobrium to that name 'nemico delle donne'; whereas Pallavicino can try to defend himself, Boccaccio for obvious reasons cannot and that is the last, enduring reference to the writer in the text. What Bibbiena has glimpsed is the potential social disorder and disruption to the institution of marriage to which certain conclusions drawn from the stories could lead ('non se ne trovaria alcuna che non amasse il marito più che altra persona del mondo,' II, xcv, p. 127). The debate structure of the *Cortegiano* leads to a conclusion that does not exactly reflect the discussion — all the more strange as Bibbiena had argued for a subtle reading of the selected exemplary narratives. The messages from the *Decameron* are just too mixed and, instead of relishing their ambiguities, the text simplifies Boccaccio's attitude towards women in the collection of *novelle*, not exactly admitting defeat at trying to synthesise its conflicting attitudes but rather acknowledging that the presence of female sexuality and male violence that is not entirely negative cannot be accommodated within the ideological grid of the *Cortegiano*. The *Decameron* is therefore stigmatised as negative and the *Cortegiano* implicitly as positive with regard to women. Bibbiena takes the moral high ground by claiming that as a theorist of jokes and women, from his humanist perspective, Boccaccio was undermining and underestimating female value or placing it on

m'avesse donato l'animo, senza averne mai altra soddisfazione, che goderla ed averne ogni copia contra sua voglia' (II, xciv; p. 326).

a different scale from the more conventional one advocated in the *Cortegiano*.²⁷

Castiglione set out to displace the *Decameron* as the canonical prose text of Italian literature. Bembo's strategy is deconstructed most obviously on the level of the *questione della lingua*. Castiglione realized that the question of content could not be ignored or censored with regard to the *Decameron*, which opened up issues concerning the nature of love that were vital to his definitions of the courtier and of the *donna di palazzo*. They could not be ignored and become the object of debate as we have seen in Book II and later in Books III and IV. Bembo's eulogy of love can also be seen as a response to some of the questions raised by the *Decameron*. However, the initiation and development of sexual activity were seen to be far beyond the purview of the court lady. The dialogue suppresses as far as it is able the implications of Boccaccio's stories but does not manage to expel them altogether. Castiglione wishes to create the impression of a more thoroughgoing denunciation of Boccaccian 'excesses' than the fabric of the text allows by enunciating an unambiguous condemnation of the writer as an enemy of women. The *Cortegiano* names several enemies including Plato who is treated more cautiously ('non era molto amico delle donne,' III, x; p. 350) and of course, Pallavicino and Ottaviano Fregoso who in some sense inherit the Boccaccian tradition. All these enemies hold an ambiguous status: their views of women are criticized by the anointed defenders but never ultimately exorcized.

Castiglione limits himself to two main areas in his thematic discussion of the *Decameron*: the clergy, in particular friars, receive limited attention whereas the principal area of analysis is Boccaccio's women, though it also cannot be said to be extensive. The *Cortegiano* seeks to contain the *Decameron*, to undermine its now privileged position in the literary pantheon and to indicate that as a classic it does not offer salutary lessons of courtiership. Castiglione's reflections on women do not generically come out of the material on jokes, as has often been stated, but much more precisely from the courtiers' considerations on the *Decameron's* representation of women. From this point of view, Castiglione treated it seriously; he investigated how one of its most visible themes, women and the relations

²⁷ Cf. Guidi (205–09) who claims that in his choice of *Decameron* stories, Castiglione has ignored their most important issues, namely, ideological questions of class and related matters. For Guidi 'aussi la lecture de Boccace ne saurait-elle être qu'une lecture mutilée' (p. 208) and so the 'woman question' is not so nearly important. It is argued in this paper that the discussions about women are fundamental to the type of society Castiglione is creating in these pages. See also Ferroni (96) and Pugliese (140).

between the sexes, was relegated to the *burla* and how this affected attitudes to women. Castiglione ignores large tracts of the *Decameron* with the result that it appears as a collection of 'blue' jokes. This is part of his undermining strategy. It allows Castiglione to focus on the shortcomings of Boccaccio's vision and to propose his dialogues as a replacement for Boccaccio's *novelle* in the literary canon.

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