

Wanted: Translators of the *Decameron's* Moral and Ethical Complexities

As readers of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, we need to cultivate our ability to recognize — and to articulate in all their complexity — the moral and ethical concerns that emerge in this work.¹ To this one might counter: Haven't we been doing precisely this? Thanks to those scholars who have long recognized Boccaccio as an author with sustained interests in moral and ethical discourse,² we have transcended the view of Boccaccio and his *Decameron* that Francesco De Sanctis promulgated in his *Storia della letteratura italiana (History of Italian Literature)*: a Boccaccio who was superficial, a Boccaccio about whom De Sanctis would write "Le rughe del pensiero non hanno mai traversata quella fronte e nessun'ombra è calata sulla sua coscienza" ("The wrinkles of thought never crossed that brow and no shadow fell on his conscience").³ We no longer see the *Decameron* as a book without "serietà di mezzi e di scopo" ('seriousness of means or objective') where "i racconti non hanno altro fine che di far passare il tempo piacevolmente, e sono veri mezzani di piacere e d'amore" ('the stories, real brokers of pleasure and love, have no other goal than permitting one to pass the time pleasurably').⁴ Increasingly, readers

¹ I am grateful to Guyda Armstrong, Kathleen Perry Long, and Anna Papparcone for their helpful feedback on early versions of this essay, and to Susanna Barsella, Elsa Filosa, Jason Houston, Christopher Kleinhenz, and Roberta Morosini for insightful comments they made following my presentation of this work at the 2008 Joint AAIS/AATI Conference in Giardini Naxos (Taormina), Italy.

² Victoria Kirkham (1995) is one of the staunchest proponents of a Boccaccio interested in moral and ethical matters. Another crucial scholarly voice (and one whose contribution to the debate has been unfortunately overlooked) is Kurt Flasch (1995). Flasch argues, among other things, that the *Decameron* offers "filosofia morale per le donne, piacevole e concretamente percepibile" ('moral philosophy for women, a moral philosophy that is pleasurable and that can be grasped in its particulars,' 26). The English translation is mine, as are all subsequent translations unless otherwise noted.

³ De Sanctis, 1:359.

⁴ De Sanctis, 1:359.

recognize that the *Decameron* complicates a landscape of blacks and whites, that it calls into question the world of established authorities, and that it shows the tensions between conflicting systems of values, that things commonly held to be virtues may not always be so laudable and that things we thought of as reprehensible are not necessarily to be excluded from our moral palette.⁵

Still — and sometimes despite explicit statements to the contrary — many readers cling to deeply entrenched ideological views of the *Decameron* that hinder an accurate understanding of its ethical project. Among these deeply entrenched ideological views are the following:

- that the *Decameron* is focused on entertainment;
- that the *Decameron* is focused on formal questions (about order and organization) rather than substantive questions;
- that the *Decameron* makes no distinctions along the lines of gender and sex;
- that speech acts in the *Decameron* are focused so as to achieve a single purpose.

We need to question ideas such as these. I say this not because I want to argue that there is no entertainment, no order, no organization, no gender-blind behavior, and no singly-purposed speech act in the *Decameron*, but because I believe that when we focus too much on the entertainment and on what is pleasing from a formal and organizational point of view, when we focus too much on homogenous unity, we may forget that this is also a book that encourages us to reflect on how to live well, a book that fosters debate about the roles men and women play in this process, and a book that asks us to consider how speech acts can achieve multiple objectives — and not always the ones we first expect.

In this essay, I illustrate how moral and ethical concerns in the *Decameron* can pass unnoticed in our English-language translations. I shall focus mainly on the *Decameron*s translated by G. A. McWilliam (Penguin), Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (Mentor Books), and Guido Waldman (Oxford) for the simple reason that these are the main translations currently in print.⁶ My intention is not to denigrate these translators; if there

⁵ As Timothy Kircher would put it, the *Decameron* emphasizes the “contingent, subjective apprehension of moral truth” (2001, 1035).

⁶ See: McWilliam 1995; Musa and Bondanella 1982; Waldman 1993. Note that McWilliam’s translation of the *Decameron*, first published by Penguin Books in 1972, was republished in 1995 with minor revisions to the translation and with an updated

is blame, there is no particular reason to lay it solely at their feet. We find similar blind spots and shifts of emphasis when we examine scholarly responses, whether in Italian or English, and this suggests that any issues with the English-language translators are but part and parcel of widespread tendencies in reading the *Decameron*.

Let us examine how translators represent the ten young Florentines who, having fled a plague-stricken city, construct a project of living together and telling stories together. This will allow us to see also how translators understand Boccaccio's goals in writing the *Decameron* and how they perceive meaning to be created in the *Decameron*.

I offer, as a key piece of evidence, the foundational exchange that takes place between Dioneo and Pampinea in the Introduction to Day I. Dioneo, singled out for his wit and charm, is the first man to speak in direct discourse to the women of the group,⁷ and when he does so, he attempts to put his own stamp on the group's activity. In turn, Pampinea highlights her own role as founder of the group; she then proposes the system of rotating leadership that will allow the group to function over the time they spend together. Here is the Italian text followed by my own translation:

E postisi nella prima giunta a sedere, disse Dioneo, il quale oltre a ogni altro era piacevole giovane e pieno di motti: — Donne, il vostro senno, più che il nostro avvedimento ci ha qui guidati; io non so quello che de' vostri pensieri voi v'intendete di fare: li miei lasciai io dentro dalla porta della città allora che io con voi poco fa me ne uscì fuori: e per ciò o voi a sollazzare e a ridere e a cantare con meco insieme vi disponete (tanto, dico, quanto alla vostra dignità s'appartiene), o voi mi licenziate che io per li miei pensier mi ritorni e steami nella città tribolata. —

A cui Pampinea, non d'altra maniera che se similmente tutti i suoi avesse da sé cacciati, lieta rispose: — Dioneo, ottimamente parli: festevolmente viver si vuole, né altra cagione dalle tristizie ci ha fatte fuggire. Ma per ciò che le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare, io, che cominciatrix fui de' ragionamenti da' quali questa così bella compagnia è stata fatta, pensando al continuar della nostra letizia, estimo che di necessità sia convenire esser tra noi alcuno principale, il quale noi e onoriamo e ubidiamo come maggiore, nel quale ogni pensiero stea di doverci a lietamente vivere disporre. E acciò che ciascun pruovi il peso della sollecitudine insieme col piacere della maggioranza e, per conseguente da una parte e d'altra tratti, non possa chi nol pruova invidia avere alcuna, dico che a ciascuno per un giorno s'attribuisca e il peso e

introduction. Hereafter, in referring to these translations, I will use the translators' names.

⁷ Daniel Tonozzi brought this instance of direct discourse to my attention.

l'onore; e chi il primo di noi esser debba nella elezion di noi tutti sia: di quelli che seguiranno, come l'ora del vespro s'avvicinerà, quegli o quella che a colui o a colei piacerà che quel giorno avrà avuta la signoria; e questo cotale, secondo il suo arbitrio, del tempo che la sua signoria dee bastare, del luogo e del modo nel quale a vivere abbiamo ordini e disponga. — (I.intro.92–95)⁸

Just as soon as they had arrived and sat down, Dioneo, a young man who surpassed everyone else with his charm and ready wit, said: “Ladies, your wisdom and good judgment more than our foresight and planning have guided all of us to this place. I don’t know what you intend to do with your thoughts; as for mine, I left them behind the city gates when I, along with you, exited from there a short time ago. So either you prepare yourselves to have fun and laugh and sing with me — as much, I’d say, as your dignity allows — or you give me leave to go back to my thoughts and remain in the troubled city.

To this Pampinea, precisely as if she had put aside all of hers too, responded on a bright and happy note: “Dioneo, you are supremely articulate. People have to live in joy, and that is the very reason that we women have fled a situation that is painful and overwhelming. But given that things that are extreme cannot last very long, I, who initiated the discussions that allowed this fine group to be formed, thinking about our happiness over the longer term, consider that it is really necessary for there to be a leader, whom we would both honor and obey as a superior, and whose every thought would be directed at preparing us to live happily and well. And in order for each one of us to experience the burden of caring along with the pleasure of pre-eminence, and thus to deal with both aspects, and to avoid having anyone feel envious at not having this experience, I say that each of us should get the burden and the honor for a day. As to who should be the first of us to be elected, let that be our joint decision. As for those who will follow, he or she who will have ruled that day can, as the hour of vespers approaches, select that man or that woman who is to his or her liking. And let this someone have, for the duration of time that said authority is in effect, the decision-making power to establish and arrange the place and the manner in which we are to live.

This passage shows us the rhetorical strategies that Dioneo and Pampinea use to pull the entire group in the direction each of them wants. Obviously, Dioneo is pulling toward fun and games. What is not so obvious in translations other than mine is that Pampinea is pulling toward living well — in the sense in which philosophers and theologians would use the phrase, to describe a reflective and ordered practice that includes fun but does not have fun as its lone objective.

⁸ Branca 1992. All subsequent references appear in the text.

Boccaccio presents Dioneo so that we ask ourselves a crucial question: Is it right that the young man considered to be of matchless wit and charm should get to decide the direction of the *brigata*, and is it right that he should encourage the *brigata* to engage in amusement activities? In fact, I would take my claim further. Boccaccio is recalling a crucial passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6, where Aristotle discusses happiness, which he sees as the end goal of human activity. Because Boccaccio knew this passage as it appeared in Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* — a text that Boccaccio copied in his own hand⁹ — I quote from an English translation that more carefully tracks the medieval Latin version of Aristotle:

1. After the discussion of the various kinds of virtue, friendship, and pleasure, it remains for us to treat happiness in a general way, inasmuch as we consider this to be the end of human activity. But our discussion will be more concise if we reassert what has been stated already.
2. We have said that happiness is definitely not a habit. If it were it might be enjoyed by a person passing his whole life in sleep, living the life of a vegetable, or by someone suffering the greatest misfortune. If then this inconsistency is unacceptable, we must place happiness in the class of activity, as was indicated previously.
3. But some activities are necessary and desirable for the sake of something else while others are desirable in themselves.
4. Now it is clear that we must place happiness among the things desirable in themselves and not among those desirable for the sake of something else. For happiness lacks nothing and is self-sufficient. But those activities are desirable in themselves that are sought for no other reason than the activity itself.
5. Such actions are thought to be inconformity with virtue, for to do virtuous and honorable deeds is a thing desirable in itself. But agreeable amusements also seem to be desirable in themselves; they are not chosen for the sake of other things, since they are rather harmful than helpful, causing men to neglect their bodies and property.
6. Many apparently happy persons have recourse to such pastimes. This is why the ready-witted in conversation are favorites with tyrants; they show themselves agreeable in furnishing the desired amusement for which the tyrants want them. So these pleasures are thought to constitute happiness because people in high places spend their time in them.

⁹ The autograph manuscript of this text (which includes the Latin translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*) is housed in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, as codex Ambrosiano A 204 Inf. For an informative overview of the debates regarding the dating of this manuscript (to the period 1339/40, or to the early 1340s), see Susanna Barsella, S135–36, 40n.

7. But perhaps such persons prove nothing; for virtue and intelligence, the principles of good actions, do not depend on the possession of power. Nor should bodily pleasures be thought more desirable, if these persons without a taste for pure and liberal pleasure resort to physical pleasures. Children too think that objects highly prized by them are best. It is reasonable then that just as different things are valuable to a child and to a man, so also are they to good and bad men. Therefore, as we have often mentioned, those actions are worthy and pleasant that appear so to a good man. Now that activity is most desirable to everyone that is in accordance with his proper habit. But the activity most desirable to a good man is in accord with virtue. Consequently, his happiness does not consist in amusement.
8. Surely it would be strange that amusement should be our end – that we should transact business and undergo hardships all through life in order to amuse ourselves. For we choose nearly all things for the sake of something else, except happiness which is an end itself. Now it seems foolish and utterly childish to exert oneself and to labor for the sake of amusement. On the contrary, to play in order to work better is the correct rule according to Anacharsis. This is because amusement is a kind of relaxation that men need, since they are incapable of working continuously. Certainly relaxation is not an end, for it is taken as a means to further activity.
9. Moreover, a life lived in conformity with virtue is thought to be a happy one; it is accompanied by joy but not by the joy of amusement. Now we say that those things that are done in earnest are better than ludicrous things and things connected with amusement, and we say that the activity of the better part or the better man is more serious. But an activity that belongs to a superior faculty is itself superior and more productive of happiness. Surely anyone can enjoy the pleasure of the body, the bestial man no less than the best of men. However, we do not ascribe happiness to the bestial man, if we do not assign him a life properly human. Therefore happiness does not consist in pursuits of this sort but in virtuous activities, as has been stated already.¹⁰

What would Aristotle say if he were speaking directly to Dioneo? I venture he would say something like this: “Dioneo, to be supremely charming and witty, as the Author of the *Decameron* notes you are, is all very fine and good, but we have to remember that people like you are favored by tyrants. That’s because power-hungry people, who spend their leisure time having fun, like to have amusing people like you around. If we think about the matter of happiness, we will see that the fact that people like to have fun, and laugh, and sing doesn’t mean that these are worthy

¹⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6, at 1176a30–1177a11 (Aquinas 1964, 618–19).

activities that bring people happiness. Happiness isn't about having fun. What a strange thought! Having fun isn't the final goal of people's lives — unless of course they're idiots or really childish."

This is also the answer to Dioneo that an educated male reader in the fourteenth century is likely to have offered, particularly if he was minimally versed in moral philosophy and if he did not hesitate to speak his mind.

I dare say I would welcome a Pampinea who would respond to Dioneo as thunderously as I imagine Aristotle would. Aristotle swiftly labels as despotic, stupid, or infantile anyone who thinks that life is about amusement. Fourteenth-century codes of conduct require that an upper-class woman respond more obliquely, and we should also keep in mind that Pampinea may be respectful of Dioneo's emotional ties to one or more women of the group. So even as Boccaccio gives an Aristotelian moral thrust to Pampinea's response, he has her adopt a rhetoric that is more restrained and accommodative than Aristotle's. Consequently, in my translation of Pampinea's response, I have sought to render her ethical vision while at the same time rendering her superbly nuanced rhetorical stance. In the section that follows, I seek to document this by comparing the published English translations of this passage to my own.

How we translate Pampinea's response to Dioneo's *captatio benevolentiae* is already crucial. And here the translators make their first misstep. They take her statement, "Dioneo, ottimamente parli," as a speech act indicating agreement. Musa and Bondanella (1982) have "Dioneo, what you say is very true," Waldman has "How right you are, Dioneo," and McWilliam offers a more attenuated "There is much sense in what you say, Dioneo." I translate "Dioneo, ottimamente parli" as "Dioneo, you are supremely articulate" because I want to highlight that Pampinea has said nothing yet about the legitimacy of Dioneo's proposal.¹¹ If one says "Dioneo, you are right," it is less likely that one could anticipate a move to disagree. If one focuses on the quality of Dioneo's speech, however, one still has room to question the validity of his plan.

The translators then risk taking the wrong road entirely as they render into English Pampinea's concession to Dioneo, "festevolmente viver si vuole, né altra cagione dalle tristizie ci ha fatte fuggire." McWilliam has "A merry life should be our aim, since it was for no other reason that we were

¹¹ I like Musa and Bondanella's earlier choice, "Dioneo, you speak very well" (1977, 15), which Martinez also uses, and I would consider this acceptable. For Martinez's translation, see Martinez 2004, 114.

prompted to run away from the sorrows of the city,” Musa and Bondanella write “let us live happily, for after all it was unhappiness that made us flee the city,” and for Waldman “the thing is to have a good time, that’s been the whole point of leaving all that misery behind us.” With the exception of Musa and Bondanella, the translators emphasize amusement and good times, which I believe is a dreadful flattening of this line, but well in keeping with the notion of the *Decameron* as purely for entertainment.¹² I have chosen to translate “festevolmente viver si vuole” as “people have to live in joy,” so as to leave open the possibility that Pampinea could be referring both to “joy” as Dioneo understands it and to “joy” as I believe Pampinea would understand it.

Likewise, I believe that the translators are putting too much emphasis on joviality and merriment when they translate Pampinea’s declaration that their ruler’s every thought would be “di doverci a lietamente vivere disporre.” For Musa and Bondanella, this leader’s “only thought shall be to keep us happily entertained.” McWilliam has “whose sole concern will be that of devising the means whereby we may pass our time agreeably.” According to Waldman, “that person’s entire concern will have to be to assure us of happy days.” I prefer “whose every thought would be directed at preparing us to live happily and well,” because once again, I maintain that Pampinea’s “lietamente vivere” is positioned so as to permit Dioneo to project his forms of happiness onto this formulation while at the same time allowing Pampinea to further her own understanding of what it means to find joy in life.

The translators might have had second thoughts about emphasizing good times if they had picked up on Pampinea’s comment about gender difference. In response to Dioneo’s statement that the women’s wisdom has guided *all of them* — that is, men and women — out of the city (“il vostro senno... ci ha qui *guidati*,” emphasis mine), Pampinea makes it clear that the *women* have been made to flee (“ci ha *fatte* fuggire,” emphasis mine). For Pampinea, given that the women are behind this project, the women’s perspective needs to be acknowledged as the group decides its activities. I stand with Pampinea. Let us not render “ci ha fatte fuggire” as gender neutral.

¹² Jonathan Usher does not translate this line when he cites it in his essay, “Boccaccio’s *Ars Moriendi* in the *Decameron*,” but based on what he says about the “delicate serenity” and the “judicious admixture of reason and pleasure” (Usher 1986, 623), I believe he would likely agree with me.

Why would gender difference be a concern of Pampinea's at this very moment? I believe it is because men in festivity are one thing, but women in festivity are another. The translators may not be conscious of this, but in fact, their translations of the two other uses of "festevole" and "festevolmente" in the *Decameron* establish a clear gender difference. At the end of Day I, when Dioneo is recognized as "sollazzevole e festevole," the translators call him "entertaining and jovial," "jovial and entertaining," "the life and soul of the party."¹³ When Elissa is described just a bit earlier as being "tutta festevole" when she begins her novella, the translators call her "merry" or "joyous."¹⁴ Can a woman who is "festevole" in the *Decameron* be "jovial," "entertaining," and the "life and soul of the party"? I suspect that would not be in keeping with her dignity.¹⁵

As regards the main portion of Pampinea's response, I have to admit that it strikes me as being just a bit bizarre. Dioneo proposes that everyone laugh and sing or else he will leave, and Pampinea says, in essence, "Very well, people need joy, and I think we need a leader chosen from among us who will have no thought other than to establish and arrange the manner in which we are to live." Pampinea's strategy strikes me as much like the strategy of certain quick-thinking people faced with a question to which they don't have an answer: they offer that the question is very, very interesting indeed, but in fact there is something else that they believe is truly worthy of attention. But the translators, by anticipating Pampinea's attention to order and structure, are not allowing us to pick up on this logical disconnect. They take Pampinea's key counterargument, "ma le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare," and translate it as "However, nothing will last for very long unless it possesses a definite form" (McWilliam), "But when things lack order they cannot long endure" (Musa and Bondanella), and "but anything that's going to last must have prescribed limits" (Waldman).¹⁶ Order and structure are not Pampinea's

¹³ Filomena recognizes Dioneo as "sollazzevole e festevole" (I.concl.14) when she is about to grant him his privilege. McWilliam translates this as "jovial and entertaining" (68), Musa and Bondanella as "entertaining and jovial" (1982, 70), and Waldman "the life and soul of the party" (62).

¹⁴ Elissa is "tutta festevole" when she begins her story of the king of Cyprus and the lady of Gascony (I.9.2). McWilliam writes that she begins "all merrily" (61), Musa and Bondanella "most joyously" (1982, 63), Waldman "merrily" (57).

¹⁵ This takes us back to a question that I have raised earlier: Does the *Decameron* distinguish between male and female laughter? Arguing against Giulio Savelli, I have claimed that it does. See Migiel 2003, 139–42.

¹⁶ McWilliam, 20; Musa and Bondanella 1982, 21; Waldman, 20.

primary concern in this moment, however. Here she seeks to label Dioneo's proposal as over-the-top while at the same time not appearing to criticize him. Thus, in keeping with other passages in the *Decameron* where excess is described as "senza modo," I translate "senza modo" as "extreme."¹⁷

Furthermore, in their translations of Pampinea's final sentence, McWilliam, Musa/Bondanella, and Waldman accentuate the question of governance by rendering "questo cotale" as "the person chosen to govern" (McWilliam), "the ruler" (Musa/Bondanella), and "the sovereign" (Waldman).¹⁸ I maintain that "questo cotale" is best rendered as "this someone." This may seem a tiny point. But by choosing a term that remains indefinite, Pampinea can minimize the question of sovereignty, power, and rule at the same time that she seeks to define the ruling responsibilities of the person who has been elected or chosen.

Pampinea expertly navigates the fine line between encouraging Dioneo to believe she agrees with his desire for entertainment and advancing a vision that we could properly call philosophical. Crucial to this expert navigation is her oscillation between the use, on one hand, of a masculine generic that could potentially shift into designating a person of the male sex and, on the other, a meticulous accounting of male and female players. By

¹⁷ Note that Pampinea's "senza modo" follows upon the description of excessive behavior in the Author's description of the plague, Day I, Intro., 21: "Altri, in contraria opinion tratti, affermavano il bere assai e il godere e l'andar cantando a torno e sollazzando e il sodisfare d'ogni cosa all'appetito che si potesse e di ciò che avveniva ridersi e beffarsi esser medicina certissima a tanto male: e così come il dicevano il mettevano in opera a lor potere, il giorno e la notte ora a quella taverna ora a quella altra andando, bevendo *senza modo* e senza misura, e molto più" ('Others, drawn to the opposite belief, maintained that there was an absolutely certain remedy to this atrocious situation: drinking a lot and enjoying oneself and going around singing and having fun and satisfying all the desires one could and laughing about what was happening and joking. They put their words into action as much as they could, day and night going from one tavern to another, drinking disproportionately and *to excess*, and that wasn't all either' [emphasis mine]). Other instances include the description of ser Cepparello's swift decline at I.1.81 ("peggiorando senza modo" ['taking a terrible turn for the worse'], the women unable to control their laughter in II.2.2 following the story of Martellino ("senza modo risero le donne"), Pericone who is extremely pained ("dolente senza modo") that he and Alatiel do not understand each other's language in II.7.22, the description of Zima in III.5.4 as "extremely avaricious" ("avarissimo senza modo"), the extreme crudeness of Ferondo in III.8.5 ("uomo materiale e grosso senza modo"), Cimone who is extremely distressed in V.1.42 ("senza modo dolente"), and the extreme anguish of the widow in VIII.7.143 ("dolorosa senza modo").

¹⁸ McWilliam 20; Musa and Bondanella 1982, 20–21; Waldman, 20.

deploying phrases like “he or she” and “his or her,” Pampinea insists that the women will be involved, as much as the men, in ruling and will be involved in the selection process. But in describing the leader, Pampinea also exploits a series of terms that are gendered masculine: “alcuno principale” (‘a leader,’ masculine gender), “il primo” (‘the first,’ masculine gender) and “questo cotale” (‘this someone,’ masculine gender). Pampinea’s careful denotation of gender parity is positioned in the middle; her offers of possible male preeminence are placed at the open and close. Her wording could encourage Dioneo to believe that he or one of the other men would be the first leader. Since the nuances of the terms gendered masculine are extraordinarily difficult to render in any language without grammatical gender, all of us translating the *Decameron* into English are limited in our ability to reveal this aspect of Pampinea’s rhetoric.

Finally, there is the question of how we render the attention to a semantic group that has to do with thought, whether informed or troubled, overwrought or carefree. Dioneo’s address to the women immediately calls attention to that key semantic cluster: “Donne, il vostro *senno*, più che il nostro *avvedimento* ci ha qui guidati; io non so quello che de’ vostri *pensieri* voi v’intendete di fare: li miei lasciai io dentro dalla porta della città...” (‘Ladies, your *wisdom and good judgment* more than our *foresight and planning* have guided all of us to this place. I don’t know what you intend to do with your *thoughts*: as for mine, I left them behind the city gates...’ [emphasis mine]). By speaking of the ladies’ thoughts, Dioneo remains firmly within the semantic group that he had established by talking about their wisdom and foresight. This temporarily masks the fact that he is trying to dictate the group’s activities by going off on his own tangent. I would suggest that Dioneo’s statement is an example of *clinamen*, a term that Harold Bloom has used to describe a swerving away from a precursor (in this case, the women with their ethical bearing).¹⁹ An audience would need a moment to figure out what Dioneo means when he asks what the women intend to do with their “pensieri” because he has left his behind. One could resolve this uncertainty by translating “pensieri” as “troubles” (McWilliam) or “troubled thoughts” (Musa and Bondanella), or “cares”

¹⁹ Harold Bloom identified *clinamen* as a key revisionary ratio that allowed writers to deal with the anxiety of influence. See Bloom, 14.

(Waldman).²⁰ I am inclined to leave the content of these “thoughts” vaguer, however.²¹

I might be willing to cede ground to the other translators on this point but for the fact that this is not the last place we have to worry about these thoughts. These thoughts swell in relevance when they get elided by the Author, who describes Pampinea’s response to Dioneo: “A cui Pampinea, non d’altra maniera che se similmente tutti i suoi avesse da sé cacciati, lieta rispose” (“To this Pampinea, precisely as if she had put aside all of hers too, responded on a bright and happy note”). The translators have smoothed out the peculiarity of this phrasing by filling in the blank. Musa and Bondanella’s translation is representative: “To this Pampinea, who had driven away her sad thoughts in the same way, replied happily.”²² The peculiarity of the original Italian text is crucial, however, because the peculiarity is the *Decameron*’s way of alerting us to gender difference. Consider how odd the sentence would sound if it read, “A cui, Pampinea, non d’altra maniera che se similmente tutti i suoi pensieri avesse da sé cacciati, lieta rispose” (“To this Pampinea, precisely as if she had put aside all of her thoughts too, responded on a bright and happy note”). Pampinea cannot afford to put aside *tutti i suoi pensieri*. She cannot afford to do so because the reader can not be counted on to understand this to mean only that Pampinea has put aside all of her *troubled* thoughts. Her respectability as the founder of the group, and as a proper woman, is at risk. The Author’s elliptical phrasing thus censors the troublesome content and marks two divides clearly: the hierarchical divide (between the reflective life and the fun-loving life), and the gender divide (between women and men).

Most importantly, we must highlight the word “thought” in Dioneo’s address to the women if we care to understand why Pampinea maintains that the leader’s every thought (“ogni pensiero”) will be focused on preparing the group to live happily and well. Taking Dioneo’s language about thoughts, worries, thoughtlessness, and carefreeness, Pampinea redirects it, reclaiming *clinamen* as her own rhetorical strategy. She reaffirms that

²⁰ McWilliam, 20; Musa and Bondanella 1982, 21; Waldman, 20.

²¹ Interestingly, in their first translation, published in the Norton Critical Edition of selected *Decameron* stories, Musa and Bondanella translated “pensieri” simply as “thoughts” (1977, 14) the way I do, and only subsequently, with the publication of the full translation, decided to opt for “troubled thoughts” instead.

²² Musa and Bondanella 1982, 21.

there will be no taking time off from thought — at least not during one’s period of authoritative rule.²³

In summary, what happens in the currently published translations of this passage? The passage’s moral vocabulary has been muted or excised; readers will have a more difficult time seeing how dividing tensions are both underscored and downplayed; readers will find it difficult or impossible to register the ambiguities of the original Italian text (and especially if these have to do with gender).

And what then should we do? As I made clear at the start, our main goal is not to take translators to task. Rather, our goal should be to understand better why translators might have made the choices they made, to understand how the text of the *Decameron* may seem to encourage the choices the translators have made, and to correct imbalances, large and small. Clearly, the process will be dialectical: our translations of the *Decameron* will not change until our reading of the text changes; here scholars need to take the lead in weighing the effectiveness of the translated text. At the same time, in English-speaking countries, large populations of readers will be unlikely to change their views unless our translators take the lead. If the collaboration follows a path such as the one I have suggested here, I believe the result will be a *Decameron* that better represents the moral and ethical reflection that Boccaccio envisioned.

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²³ Musa and Bondanella use the expression “only thought” (1982, 21), while McWilliam opts for the “sole concern” (20) and Waldman for the “entire concern” (20).