The *Motto* and the Enigma: Rhetoric and Knowledge in the Sixth Day of the *Decameron*

> *Facilis igitur est distinctio ingenui et inliberalis ioci. Alter est, si tempore fit, ut si remisso animo, <gravissimo> homine dignus, alter ne libero quidem, si rerum turpitudo adhibetur aut verborum obscenitas.* (Cicero, *De officiis* 29.104)

The relationship between rhetoric and knowledge (a true knowledge) is one of the oldest and most interesting problems. The modern stereotype of rhetoric as "deceiving" speech or "empty" speech reflects an essential division of rhetoric from knowledge that has had influential adherents within the rhetorical tradition, most notably Plato.[1] The negative side of rhetoric appears in a clearer light if we observe how closely it is linked to philosophy and dialectics, ever since its origins. A philosophical anecdote attributed to Aristotle's lost dialogue *On poets* exemplifies the negative and destructive side of dialectics.[2] The anecdote was also known

[1] Plato, in his *Gorgias*, criticized the sophists because he believed that rhetoric was simply too dangerous, being based on skill and common opinion (*doxa*). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato set out instead to discover *episteme*, or 'truth,' through dialectical method. Since Plato's argument has shaped western philosophy, rhetoric has mainly been regarded as an evil that has no epistemic status (Kennedy 58ff.). Aristotle, however, considers rhetoric as the counterpart, the countermelody (*antístrophos*), of dialectic insofar as they both have as their objects the same *topoi*, or commonplaces, to find arguments, and defines rhetoric as the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion (*Rhetoric* 1.1.1354a) (cf. Kennedy 78). In ancient Rome, rhetoric follows the teaching of Isocrates and is a part of political science; cf. Cicero, *De inventione* 1; Murphy 8. The Middle Ages ultimately inherit the study and practice of the discipline while elaborating further developments. See: Murphy, part two: "Medieval Rhetorical Genres"; C. Vasoli; Prill.

[2] Aristotle, *Liber de poetis*, frag. 8 (= Ps.-Plutarch, *Vita Homeri* 3–4). The anecdote is translated into English by Ross (*The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 12, p. 76–77) and into Italian by Colli (*Sapienza* 346–49). For an idea of ancient dialectics and its destructive potentialities see Colli, *La nascita* 61.

by Giovanni Boccaccio, who reports it in his commentary on Dante's *Commedia*.[3] This is the famous enigma about the legendary death of Homer that was transmitted throughout the Middle Ages without any significant alteration. A Delphic pronouncement once warned the poet that he would die on the island of Ios and urged him to beware of a riddle posed by some young fishermen. As predicted, at an advanced age, Homer finds himself on Ios by the sea, where he asks some fishermen what they have caught. They pose him a riddle: "We have what we did not find; what we did find we left behind." The fishermen have been fishing without success, and meanwhile spend some time searching themselves for lice before meeting Homer. They leave behind the lice they found, but the undiscovered vermin are still in their clothes. Unable to solve the riddle posed by the fishermen, Homer slips in the mud and dies soon afterwards, vexed that his famous mental powers have failed him.[4] The anecdote passed into

[3] Boccaccio narrates the anecdote, indicating Callimachus as his source: "Della morte sua, secondo che scrive Calimaco, fu uno strano accidente cagione: per ciò che, essendo egli in Arcadia ed andando solo su per lo lito del mare, sentì pescatori, li quali sovra uno scoglio si stavano, forse tendendo o raconciando loro reti; li quali esso domandò se preso avessero, intendendo seco medesimo de' pesci. Costoro risposero che quegli, che presi aveano, avean perduti, e quegli, che presi non aveano, se ne portavano. Era stata fortuna in mare e però, non avendo i pescatori potuto pescare, come loro usanza è, s'erano stati al sole e i vestimenti loro aveano cerchi e purgati di que' vermini che in essi nascono: e quegli, che nel cercar trovati e presi aveano, gli aveano uccisi e quegli, che presi non aveano, essendosi ne' vestimenti rimasi, ne portavan seco. Omero, udita la risposta de' pescatori ed essendogli oscura, mentre al doverla intendere andava sospeso, per caso percosse in una pietra, per la qual cosa cadde e fieramente nel cader percosse e di quella percossa il terzo dì appresso si morì. Alcuni voglion dire che, non potendo intender la risposta fattagli da' pescatori, entrò in tanta maninconia che una febbre il prese, della quale in pochi dì si morì e poveramente in Arcadia fu sepellito; onde poi, portando gli Ateniesi le sue ossa in Atene, in quella onorevolmente il sepellirono" (4.litt.105–07). In a marginal note on f. 227^{r} of the so-called *Zibaldone Magliabechiano* (Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, BR 50), Boccaccio corrects the false attribution of the anecdote to Diogenes made by a Venetian Chronographer (cf. Macrì-Leone, esp. 36). In the manuscript containing Terence's comedies (Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 38.17, f. 84^{v}), Boccaccio briefly narrates two anecdotes on Homer, one about his birth and the other about his death caused by the fishermen's riddle. Cf. Hauvette; Hecker fig. XI; Hortis 340; Di Benedetto 21.

[4] See also Valerius Maximus 9.12 ext. 3 ("Non uulgaris etiam Homeri mortis causa fertur, qui in Io insula, quia quaestionem a piscatoribus positam soluere non potuisset, dolore absumptus creditor") and Ps.-Plutarch, *Vita Homeri* 14 (1062). The riddle, according to a gloss on Johannes of Hauvilla's *Architrenius* (6.488–95) runs as follows: "Quotquot non cepimus, habemus et quos cepimus, non habemus." John of Salisbury talks about this story of Homer's death in his *Policraticus*, 1.141 and 2.111, and gives as its source

medieval tradition, but according to the account of an otherwise unidentified Virius Nicomachus Flavianus (*De vestigiis et dogmatibus philosophorum*), reported in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, the name of Homer was replaced by that of Plato, possibly with the intention of giving the anecdote a stronger philosophical emphasis.[5] John of Salisbury, who is considered one of the authors of the so-called literary and philosophical renaissance of the twelfth century, insisted on the necessity of unifying dialectics with rhetoric within the well-established set of *artes liberales* and emphasized the importance of linking them to philosophy as a means for the search for knowledge.[6]

Because of its well-structured framework and the rhetorically elaborated language of the tales and the *cornice*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* has been studied as a typical expression of the *artes rhetoricae* of the fourteenth century and, more recently, as a literary work worthy of interpretation according to the modern methods of rhetorical analysis.[7] Yet a reading of the *Decameron* and, particularly, of the Sixth Day that emphasizes the epistemological implications of the tales has never been attempted. This could both give us the possibility of speculating on the meaning and literary treatment of rhetoric in a specific medieval fictional context and allow us to understand the manifold applications of rhetoric in a *constructive* perspective — as opposed to the negative side of rhetoric. The Sixth Day of the *Decameron* is commonly remembered as the day of the *motto*, that is, the witty and rhetorically elaborated answer with which the characters of the stories escape from potentially dangerous or embarrassing situations. In reading the various *motti* of the Sixth Day, we become fully aware of the active role of the subject who pronounces the *motto*. Notice the character of playful judgment of the *motto*, the combination of dissimilar elements, the contrast of representation and the sense of absurd involved. These same characteristics are precisely some of the features of the *Witz* studied by Freud from both the rhetorical and psychoanalytical points of view, and are used as a critical framework to

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Flavianus' *De vestigiis philosophorum*. According to Webb, John's original source was Pseudo-Herodotus' *Vita Homeri*, in *Homeri Opera*, ed. Thomas W. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 5.184. For Homer's troubles, see the letter of pseudo-Cornelius Nepos to Sallust appended to Dares Phrygius (in Stohlmann).

[5] *Policraticus* 1.141, 1 ff.

[6] Curtius 62–63.

[7] See: Branca 29–70; Chiappelli; Sanguineti; Surdich; De Michelis; Badini Confalonieri; Barilli; Coulter; Forni, "Retorica"; Forni, *Adventures*; Klesczewski; Muscetta, "Giovanni Boccaccio"; Schiaffini, esp. pp. 187–97 and 193–203; Stäuble; Stewart.

study analogous jokes in the *Novellino*.[8] Yet, rather than using psychoanalytical categories, which are certainly applicable to the *motto* of the Sixth Day as well as to its oppositional rhetorical elements, I would like to establish a parallel with a rhetorical feature of ancient Greek philosophy, the enigma, in order both to describe the formal and narrative characteristics of the *motto* and to elicit the philosophical and epistemological aspects of the Sixth Day.

Looking at the *motto*'s tales of the *Decameron* and at the philosophical enigma tradition, certain symmetries begin to present themselves to our attention. At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the famous riddle that provoked Homer's death: "We have what we did not find; what we did find we left behind." After a day of fishing without success and spending some time searching themselves for lice, the fishermen leave behind the lice they had found. Is this just a riddle, an enigma which is meant to put the reader to a test? Is nothing else involved? According to Eleanor Cook, the enigma can be considered a form of speech, or a trope.[9] The enigma also takes the literary form of a short tale. According to Giorgio Colli, moreover, the knowledge that comes from the Delphic oracles or the prophecies of Dionysus in the form of enigmas is made by the *combination of opposites*; namely, the combination of things that conflict with each other and are not understandable; he clearly shows the connection of the enigma with Mysteries in pre-Socratic philosophy. The combination of contradictory elements is indeed the essence of the paradox, which is also at the origin of the enigma and ancient knowledge.[10] Thus, the enigma of the Ancient World produces knowledge that must be deciphered. Going back to the *Decameron*, it is precisely by virtue of a paradox that Madonna Filippa, although guilty, testifies in her trial and is declared *not* guilty (6.7)[11]; it is a paradox that makes the coals of Friar Cipolla become a

[8] Evidently, the contrast of representation, the opposition of dissimilar elements, is in perfect accordance with the rhetoric *de oppositis* and the comic elements of the *Decameron* (cf. Paolella; Freud). In his introduction to the Italian translation of Freud's *Der Witz* (*Il motto di spirito*, 19–20), Francesco Orlando emphasizes the rhetorical aspects of Freud's interpretation of jokes and points out the implications of his thought for a new general rhetoric of the discourse influenced by the unconscious.

[9] Cook, "The Figure of Enigma"; Cook, *Enigmas* 27–63.

[10] Colli, *Nascita* 56–58.

[11] "La donna, senza sbigottire punto, con voce assai piacevole rispose: 'Messere, egli è vero che Rinaldo è mio marito e che egli questa notte passata mi trovò nelle braccia di Lazzarino, nelle quali io sono, per buono e per perfetto amore che io gli porto, molte volte stata, né questo negherei mai;' [...] 'Adunque' seguì prestamente la donna 'domando io voi, messer podestà, se egli ha sempre di me preso quello che gli è bisognato e piaciuto,

source of inspiration for the final *motto* (6.10); it is by virtue of a paradox that Currado's clapping should make the crane's leg appear in the tale of Chichibio (6.4).[12]

But paradox is just an aspect of the same rhetorical feature involved in the *motto*. Alan Freedman has found an opposition/polarity played out in the theme of eloquence between 6.1 and 6.10, and has brilliantly found the source of the first tale of the Sixth Day in an enigma of the medieval tradition.[13] The famous tale of Madonna Oretta (6.1) is not only a *mise en abyme* of the composition of the entire collection, or a reflection on the art of narrating, it is also the literary representation of an enigma. The motifs of this enigma have been found in works of the oriental tradition such as the *Book of Delight* by Yosef ibn Zabara,[14] or in Latin and Occitan texts such as the *Lai du Trot* and the *De amore* by Andreas Capellanus in which the same subject is combined with the myth of the infernal hunt.[15] In the tale of Enan in the *Book of Delight*, the giant traveling with Zabara pronounces a sort of challenge: "I will bring you or you will bring me." Zabara is then puzzled, because they are both on horseback. So Enan narrates a story in order to explain the mysterious sentence. The solution to his mysterious saying is finally revealed: "this means [...] that [...] a man nar-

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io che doveva fare o debbo di quel che gli avanza? debbolo io gittare a' cani? non è egli molto meglio servirne un gentile uomo che più che sé m'ama, che lasciarlo perdere o guastare'?" (6.7.13 and 17). For a discussion of the tale and its relation to the argumentative structure of the discourse, see Giannetto and Morosini. According to Pennington (905), Madonna Filippa's *motto* echoes *Matthew* 7:6 and plays on the meaning of the word "sanctum" in order to allude to the female body.

[12] Cf. Cipolla's words: "Vera cosa è che io porto la penna dell'agnol Gabriello, acciò che non si guasti, in una cassetta e i carboni co' quali fu arrostito san Lorenzo in un'altra; le quali son sì simiglianti l'una all'altra, che spesse volte mi vien presa l'una per l'altra, e al presente m'è avvenuto: per ciò che, credendomi io qui avere arrecata la cassetta dove era la penna, io ho arrecata quella dove sono i carboni. Il quale io non reputo che stato sia errore, anzi mi pare esser certo che volontà sia stata di Dio e che Egli stesso la cassetta de' carboni ponesse nelle mie mani ricordandom'io pur testé che la festa di san Lorenzo sia di qui a due dì. [...] voglio che voi sappiate che chiunque da questi carboni in segno di croce è tocco, tutto quello anno può viver sicuro che fuoco nol cocerà che non si senta." (6.10.49–52); and Chichibio's *motto*: "Messer sì, ma voi non gridaste 'ho, ho!' a quella d'iersera; ché se così gridato aveste ella avrebbe così l'altra coscia e l'altro piè fuor mandata, come hanno fatto queste" (6.4.18).

[13] See Freedman.

[14] See: Freedman; Picone, esp. pp. 103–04.

[15] Cf. Neilson.

rates a tale to another while traveling."[16] In the tale of Madonna Oretta (6.1), a knight, unable to narrate a story, is silenced by the lady he accompanies in his journey with an ironic and smart justification: "Messer, questo vostro cavallo ha troppo duro trotto, per che io vi priego che vi piaccia di pormi a piè" (6.1.11). The art of narrating and the literary form is so important that the knight's incompetence provokes a painful reaction in the lady while listening to him: "Di che a madonna Oretta, udendolo, spesse volte veniva un sudore e uno sfinimento di cuore, come se inferma fosse stata per terminare; la qual cosa poi che più sofferir non poté, conoscendo che il cavaliere era entrato nel pecoreccio [...]" (6.1.10). Boccaccio collected in a single sentence ("Madonna Oretta, quando voi vogliate, io vi porterò, gran parte della via che ad andare abbiamo, a cavallo, con una delle belle novelle del mondo" [6.1.7]) the two enigmatic elements of his source, namely the challenge of narrating a story ("io porterò te o tu porterai me") and the solution ("questo vuol dire [...] che [...] viaggiando un viandante racconta una novella o simile all'altro"), and then forged a mysterious sentence ("Messer, questo vostro cavallo ha troppo duro trotto; per che io vi priego che vi piaccia di pormi a piè" [6.1.11]),[17] using the same mechanism of condensation and substitution analyzed by Freud for the joke.[18]

If Freedman recognized the source of the first tale, I would like to use the characteristics of the enigma to explain the formal features and epistemological functions of the *motto* in the Sixth Day of the *Decameron*. According to Carlo Muscetta, the idea of the Sixth Day probably came to Boccaccio's mind from Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, which contained a book (the second) entirely devoted to jokes.[19] Luisa Cuomo thinks it came from a group of tales in the *Novellino*.[20] But its rhetorical features and the veiled significance hidden in the *motto* are likely to be taken from a more ancient

[16] The Latin version of the same enigma from the *Compilatio singulorum exemplorum*, which reproduces the same narrative materials and could better suit Madonna Oretta's *motto*, is also worth mentioning. The knight says to the bride: "Abreviate nobis viam." Then he says: "Portate me aliquantulum de via ista et ego tantundem portabo vos." Later, she asked him: "Nonne dixistis michi quod abreviarem vobis viam illam et quod portarem vos et vos me portaretis?" Then the bride explains the enigma: "Quando duo milites equitant et unus narrat aliquod pulchrum exemplum, dicitur socium portare eum et viam abreviare." The Latin tale's text in Hilka.

[17] Freedman 234.

[18] Freud 44–58.

[19] Muscetta, *Ritratti* 245.

[20] See Cuomo.

atmosphere whose origins are probably to be identified in a primordial epoch. The *motto* could be considered a particular form of the ancient enigma — and not a variant of the riddle[21] — that the Middle Ages preserved; thus, it could also be considered the unifying element of the Sixth Day insofar as it involves knowledge.

Before analyzing the Sixth Day, however, it is worth considering how Boccaccio could have known of the tradition of the enigma, both in literary and rhetorical texts. Besides the anecdote on Homer's death, Boccaccio certainly knew some of the texts of medieval literary theory which mention and describe the rhetorical features of the enigma. Specifically, Matthew of Vendôme's *Ars versificatoria*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Priscian's and Donatus' grammars, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova* appear among the books possessed by Boccaccio.[22] He may have also reflected on the nature of the enigma as it is described by Cicero in his *De divinatione* (2.131–33), by the *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*, which reports ten of Symphosius' enigmas (chaps. 42 and 43), by the *Gesta romanorum*, a thirteenth-century collection of moral tales inspired by Roman history and legends that contains another three of Symphosius' riddles, as well as by the authors of medieval *artes dictaminis*. In fact, Cicero, following Aristotle, connects the enigma with the metaphor, but warns about its misuse (*De oratore* 3.42.167). Moreover, in the *De divinatione* (2.131–33), he talks about the obscurity of dreams and their utility in divination, again mentioning the enigma as an example of incomprehensible language. Donatus mentions it among the seven types of allegory; according to him, an enigma occurs when an obscure thought is concealed

[21] Enigmatists maintain that there is a difference between enigma and riddle. They define the 'riddle' as a short, humoristic and double-sense text of not more than 4–6 lines. They define 'enigma,' instead, as a short poem (longer than the riddle, though) whose context has a more important, even tragic, take. See Bartezzaghi, 50 and 294. In another work, Bartezzaghi analyzes the intricacies of language, in the belief that language, like enigmas or enigmatic games, is a tool for saying, but also for not saying; to explain, but also to deceive. Most of our modern puzzles have a noble origin that stems from the time when the wisdom of myths reigned, and although today they are largely devoid of their arcane mysteries, they still contain an echo of those antique devices. See Bartezzaghi, *Incontri*.

[22] Branca discusses at length Boccaccio's rhetorical readings (117ff.). For the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, see Mazza, esp. 22, 32, 33, 35 and 66. For Priscian and Donatus, see Mazza 31 and 36. For Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, see Mazza 50. For Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, see Mazza 16 and 61.

within an expression because of certain resemblances.[23] Matthew of Vendôme mentions the figure of the enigma in his *Ars versificatoria* (3.18–44) as one of the thirteen rhetorical tropes.[24] According to Gervasius of Melkley's *Ars poetica*, the enigma is a kind of *transsumptio orationis*, a trope that involves the transformation of a phrase from its conventional meaning; in particular, the enigma is defined as "any obscure statement which tries the cleverness of the one guessing."[25]

Boccaccio's prose often features the characteristics of the language typical of the enigmatists. Boccaccio's ability to forge acrostics is shown in his *Amorosa visione* (see the indication of the proemial sonnet). Boccaccio could have been in contact with the riddle tradition in many ways, through the classical and medieval tradition.[26] However, besides the cryptic aspect of the Sixth Day's *motti*, each of which has its own transposed meaning, a clear and conclusive instance of the discourse comparable to the riddle is evident in Friar Cipolla's speech that exemplary concludes the Day. His imaginative vein enigmatizes superfluous or even elementary information: "arrivai in quelle sante terre dove l'anno di state vi vale il pan freddo quatro denari e il caldo v'è per niente" (6.10.43).[27] What do the "sante terre" stand for? Even the *canzoni* at the end of each Day of the *Decameron* can be seen as poetic instances of the language of riddles. A clear example could be found at the very beginning of the first ballad, in which the reader is undoubtedly challenged to understand the real identity of the *Io* and the nature of *quel ben*:

> Io son sì vaga della mia bellezza,
> che d'altro amor giammai
> non curerò, né credo aver vaghezza.
> Io veggio in quella, ogn'ora ch'io mi specchio,
> quel ben che fa contento lo 'ntelletto,
> né accidente nuovo o pensier vecchio
> mi può privar di si caro diletto.

[23] See Purcell 27 and 156.

[24] See Purcell 65.

[25] Gervasius of Melkley, *Ars poetica*, quoted by Purcell (110–11).

[26] Vergil's Third *Eclogue* (vv. 104–07) contains a famous pair of riddles, at least one of which has never been satisfactorily solved (cf. La Penna I:152 ff. and 168 ff). Ovid has a few riddles in *Fasti* 3.339–42, and 4.663–72. There is a brief discussion of the riddle in Aulus Gellius' *Noctes atticae* 12.6.1–3 and still other enigmas can be found in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis* (56.7–9, and 58.7ff.). For an overview of the riddle tradition in classical and medieval Latin literature, see Polara.

[27] Rossi 228–29, emphasizes the enigmatic usage of Frate Cipolla's language. Cf. also Palumbo, esp. 15.

Besides the correspondence of the mirror theme, the analogies with the poetic style of Symphosius' enigmas are astounding, and not just for the typical first-person mode of speaking:

> LXIX. SPECULUM
> Nulla mihi certa est, nulla est peregrina figura.
> Fulgor inest intus radianti luci coruscus,
> qui nihil ostendit, nisi si quid viderit ante.
>
> No fixed form is mine, yet none is stranger to me. My brightness lies within sparkling with radiant light, which shows nothing except what it has seen before.[28]

We do not know if Boccaccio knew Symphosius' text, yet the similarities with its enigmatic language, its ability to convey both an apparent and a real meaning, as well as the wide diffusion of Symphosius' riddles in the European literary tradition could advocate, if not for a direct and specific knowledge, at least for a certain acquaintance.[29] Moreover, the literary framework that introduces the enigmas in Symphosius' collection not only

[28] Trans. by Ohl.

[29] The ability to convey both apparent and real meanings of Symphosius' riddles is emphasized by Bergamin, in her edition of Symphosius, *Aenigmata*, xxx–xxxi. Symphosius was the founder of a genre destined to have a long life and extensive circulation in Europe. He is a late antique writer about whom nothing is known, not even the century in which he wrote: dates as early as the second century AD and as late as the 6th have been proposed. Since the author's identity is uncertain, Symphosius' enigmas have been also attributed to Lactantius (Boccaccio knew Lactantius' *Divinarum Institutionum Libri VII*; see Mazza 32). Symphosius' riddles survive in the collection known as the Latin Anthology. Each of the hundred riddles is a triplet of dactylic hexameters. Symphosius claims he made them up from the riddles he heard at a drinking party during the Saturnalia. He is also the founder of a genre destined to have great success in the seventh and eighth century England. Aldhelm's *Aenigmata* (one hundred verse riddles in Latin) show the influence of Symphosius. His work reflects and foreshadows the popularity of the riddle in Old English. Aldhelm's style shows the 'Hisperic' tendency towards rare — even bizarre — words. Hwaetberht was the author of a collection of sixty riddles, known as the *Enigmata Eusebii*, written under the pen-name of Eusebius. These were written as a supplement to forty riddles written earlier by Tatwine, archbishop of Canterbury. According to Bede's commentary, Tatwine was a man notable for his prudence, devotion and learning, qualities that were displayed in the two surviving manuscripts of his riddles and four of his Grammar. His riddles deal with such diverse topics as philosophy and charity, the five senses and the alphabet, and a book and a pen. The riddles are formed in acrostics. The text of Aldhelm comes from Ehwald's ed. Aldhelm's enigmas have also recently been edited along with the other Old English enigmas in *Variae collectiones aenigmatum Merovingicae aetatis*, CCSL 133 and 133A. See also Polara.

refers to the Saturnalia tradition that Boccaccio certainly knew through other texts such as Macrobius' *Saturnalia* (the second book actually begins with a collection of *bons mots*) and Martial's *Epigrams* (which, incidentally, were also characterized by their biting and often scathing sense of wit[30]); both works, most strikingly, recall similar features in the *Decameron*'s *cornice*. Like the storytellers of the *Decameron*, the imagined characters of Symphosius pass their time telling enigmas each one in turn after the banquet, and a witty spirit of one-upmanship is involved in trying to solve them:

> [Haec quoque Symphosius de carmine lusit inepto. Sic tu, Sexte, doces; sic te deliro magistro.] Annua Saturni dum tempora festa redirent perpetuo semper nobis sollemnia ludo, post epulas laetas, post dulcia pocula mensae, deliras inter vetulas puerosque loquaces, cum strepperet late madidae facundia linguae, tum verbosa cohors studio sermonis inepti nescio quas passim magno de nomine nugas est mediata diu; sed frivola multa locuta est. Nec mediocre fuit; magni certaminis instar, ponere diverse vel solvere quaeque vicissim. Ast ego, ne solus foede tacuisse viderer, qui nihil adtuleram mecum quod dicere possem, hos versus feci subito de carmine vocis. Insanos inter sanum non esse necesse est. Da veniam, lector, quod non sapit ebria Musa.
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> [These bits, too, of trifling verse Symphosius has done in sport. So you, Sextus, teach; so with you as an exemplar I proceed in my folly.] While Saturn's festive season was making its yearly return, always for me a holiday on unbroken fun, after joyous banquets and the dinner's dulcet draughts, when amid doting old women and prattling children there clamored far and wide the eloquence of intoxicated tongues, then the wordy gathering in their fondness for verbal quip mulled over long at random some trifles with grand titles; but foolish were the many jests they made. No small matter was it, but like a great contest, to set or solve in various ways each one in turn. But I, who had brought along with me nothing that I could proffer, lest I seem to be the only one to have kept silence in disgrace, made these verses from their off-hand conundrums. One must not be wise amid the otherwise. Pardon, reader, the indiscretions of a tipsy Muse.

The banquet is the privileged context in which the challenge, the philosophical contest and the enigma join together. Furthermore, the Middle Ages developed allegorical aspects of the language that were already oper-

[30] Martial, *Epigrams*, books 13 and 14. See Citroni, "Marziale" and *Poesia e lettori* 440. On Boccaccio's discovery of Martial, see Billanovich 263–64. Boccaccio held and glossed a manuscript of Martial's *Epigrams*: see Mazza 49 and Petoletti.

ating in Symphosius' enigmas.[31] The concept of art as *integumentum veri, fabulosa narratio veritatis*, was certainly familiar to Boccaccio.[32] If Cicero developed the concept of allegory as the veiled language connected to the enigma,[33] and later on, as we have seen before, the enigma was classified as one of the species of allegory, the patristic tradition played a great part in developing an attitude toward the Bible not only as a sacred text, but also as an obscure one, whose understanding requires particular knowledge and wisdom.[34] Augustine, especially, maintains that one cannot understand the famous Epistle to the Corinthians (I *Cor*. 13.12: *videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*) without also knowing the rhetorical doctrine of the enigma.[35] Thus, if the enigma can become the privileged rhetorical figure through which to read the Bible, the idea of conveying hidden meanings through the power of language could similarly have influenced the definition of the *motto* in the *Decameron*.

The *motto* is not simply a type of metaphor, as both Freedman and Bosetti assume,[36] for the metaphor is a rhetorical figure based on a relation of similarity. The metaphor is a rhetorical trope that describes something as *being* or *equal to* something else in some way, whereas the *motto*, like the enigma, is a combination of different and irreconcilable elements and, most important, cannot exist outside a well-defined context that provides an explanation.[37] Reading Oretta's *motto* ("Messer, questo vostro cavallo ha troppo duro trotto; per che io vi priego che vi piaccia di pormi a piè" [6.1.11]), one wonders how trotting can be related to narration. We definitely need an explanation that goes beyond common knowledge. Here, it is useful to recall Aristotle's definition of the contradictory nature of the enigma and the impossibility of connecting it "directly" to the metaphor: "For the essence of a riddle [i.e. enigma] is to express true facts under im-

[31] Like the *Decameron*'s one hundred tales, Symphosius' *Aenigmata* include one hundred riddles which, according to medieval numerological interpretation, could symbolize eternity or perfection (Bergamin, *Aenigmat*a xxxvii). Moreover, Relihan suggests adding to the so-called *Symposion-Literatur* (Martin 1931) even the *Cena Cypriani*, a medieval banquet full of allusions to the Bible.

[32] See his poetic theory in *Genealogie* 13–14 and the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*.

[33] *De oratore* 3.42.166–67, *Letter to Atticus* 2.20.3, *Orator* 27–94, mentioned by Cook, *Enigmas* 34–35. Even Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.6.52, links the enigma to allegory.

[34] Just to mention a few instances, cf. Augustine, *De trinitate* 15.9ff., Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* 6.3ff., Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.q.1a.9, and *Quodlibetales* (7.a.15–16), Dante, *Convivio* 2.1. See also Branca 344n.

[35] Cf. Bergamin, *Aenigmata*, xxxi; Cook, *Enigmas* 352 and 362.

[36] Bosetti esp. 148. Freedman 226–27, 234.

[37] See also Cook, "The Figure of Enigma" *passim*.

possible combinations. Now this cannot be done by any arrangement of ordinary words, but by the use of metaphor it can. Such is the riddle: 'A man I saw who on another man had glued the bronze by aid of fire,' and others of the same kind" (*Poetics*, 1458a.26–30).[38] The elements involved in the enigma can exist in a relation of similarity, but since this similarity combines dissimilar elements and is not understood, it has to be explained; moreover, the supposed metaphor may well be confused with metonymy, as there can be a transposition between an object and an idea, as in the first tale of the Sixth Day where the object "horse" is primarily aligned with the concept of "to ride," and only secondarily with the concept of "to recount."

Rather than making a list of all the witticisms of the Sixth Day — which are, incidentally, notorious — let us look at the contextual features that they share with the enigma. First of all, the tales of the *motto* typically involve a challenge between two wise men and display the same agonistic features of the ancient philosophical contests.[39] In this respect, it is interesting to consider an anecdote about Calchas reported by Hesiod: the soothsayer Calchas arrived in Claro where he found the wise Mopsus. After having challenged Mopsus with an enigma, Calchas died for the shame of his defeat:

> "I am filled with wonder at the quantity of figs this wild fig-tree bears though it is so small. Can you tell their number?" And Mopsus answered: "Ten thousand is their number, and their measure is a bushel: one fig is left over, which you would not be able to put into the measure." So said he; and they found the reckoning of the measure true. Then did the end of death shroud Calchas.[40]

Likewise in the *Decameron*, Guido Cavalcanti's tale (6.9) can be considered the best example of agonism in a philosophical contest.[41] Sir Betto Brunelleschi and his fellows challenge Guido Cavalcanti: ("Andiamo a dargli briga;" and "quando tu avrai trovato che Idio non sia, che avrai fatto?"

[38] The solution is 'the blood-sucker.' Cf. Colli, *Sapienza*, fr. 7, A, 26 (357).

[39] See Levine. Richard Martin (108–28) has recently defined as "agonistic" the nature of wisdom which is characteristic of the Seven Sages of the archaic period.

[40] *The Melampodia* 1.267. Cf. also Colli, *Sapienza*, 7, A, 1 (341).

[41] As Burkhardt emphasized, the culture of Renaissance Florence was an agonistic one. Similarly, by analyzing practical jokes in their historical and cultural context in early modern Italy, Peter Burke (66) defines the *beffa* as an expression of a "culture of trickery," as an appropriate form of joking in a competitive society such as the Florentine.

(6.9.11).[42] The wise Guido is also defined as a great philosopher: "egli fu un de' miglior loici che avesse il mondo e ottimo filosofo naturale" (6.9.8). In the sixth tale, Michele Scalza provokes a discussion among his fellows and accepts their challenge, whose prize is a dinner, of showing how the Baronci are the most gentle and noblest family of Florence: "Ora avvenne un giorno che, essendo egli con alquanti a Montughi, si cominciò tra loro una quistion così fatta: quali fossero li più gentili uomini di Firenze e i più antichi" (6.6.5). Sir Forese da Rabatta, described as "di tanto sentimento nelle leggi, che da molti valenti uomini uno armario di ragione civile fu reputato" (6.5.4), disputes with Giotto — himself described in equally lofty terms as "una delle luci della fiorentina gloria" (6.5.6) — and "bites" him with a *motto* in which he observes that Giotto's haggard appearance was not suited to his greatness as an artist. Chichibio, who got in trouble for stealing a thigh from the crane he later cooked for his master, accepts the paradoxical challenge of demonstrating to Currado Gianfigliazzi that all cranes have one leg: "'Come diavol non hanno che una coscia e una gamba? Non vid'io mai più gru che questa?' Chichibio seguitò: 'Egli è, messer, com'io vi dico; e quando vi piaccia, io il vi farò veder ne' vivi'" (6.4.11–12). The baker Cisti undertakes a courtesy contest with Messer Geri Spina displaying his magnificent wine and then, with a quick response, succeeding to gain the respect of the Florentine noble ("Messer Geri ebbe il dono di Cisti carissimo e quelle grazie gli rendé che a ciò credette si convenissero, e sempre poi per da molto l'ebbe e per amico" [6.2.30]). Monna Nonna de' Pulci with a quick response gains the victory over the bishop of Florence who had rudely provoked her ("Nonna, che ti par di costui? Crederrestil vincere?" [...] "Messere, e' forse non vincerebbe me; ma vorrei buona moneta" [6.3.9–10]).

By Boccaccio's time, most of the ancient significance of the enigma seems to have still been preserved, especially its mythical atmosphere and the direct connection with philosophy. The link between the *motto* and the enigma is solidified in the hints Boccaccio makes about his protagonists' wisdom — that of Guido Cavalcanti in particular among the nobles, but also that of Cisti and Forese among the humble. The connection with the sphere of philosophy is confirmed by the relation of the *Decameron* with a certain novelistic and exemplary tradition like that of the Latin *Compilatio singulorum exemplorum*, a vast repertoire of materials for sermons that

[42] The epistemological implications and the power of eloquence of this novella are well exposed by Durling. He particularly calls attention to the meaning of "dare briga" whose original sense was closer to quarrel or fight (273–304).

could have been one of the sources of Boccaccio's 6.1, or the Judeo-Spanish tale of Zabara.[43] The *motto* tales in the *Decameron* are not simply a contest about knowledge as in the ancient enigma tradition; rather, they here take on the literary form of a witty challenge to be performed in order to obtain practical knowledge for ordinary life. On the level of literary form, however, the link between the agonistic attitudes of the pre-Socratic enigma and the witty contest of Florentine popular life still remained strong, while the connection between agonism and dialectics ultimately ends up in the realm of morality. It is worth recalling the words of Giorgio Colli on the development of wisdom: "Dialectic is born on the ground of agonism. When the religious background has faded and the cognitive impulse no longer needs to be stimulated by a challenge of the god [Apollo], when a contest for knowledge among men no longer requires that they be diviners, here appears an agonism that is only human."[44] The main feature, or function, of Boccaccio's characters in the Sixth Day — be they male or female — is that of manifesting oneself through eloquence, and therefore through intelligence. The challenge of wise men ending with the *motto* requires a certain intellectual equality of the two contenders, and it therefore differs from the characteristics of the *beffa*, in which the mocked person (the *beffato*) is humiliated for his/her stupidity.[45]

It is worth noting a similar agonistic attitude in tales other than those of the Sixth Day. In *Decameron* 1.3, Saladin summons Melchisedech, welcomes him, and addresses him with these words: "Valente uomo, io ho da più persone inteso che tu se' savissimo e nelle cose di Dio senti molto avanti; e per ciò io saprei volentieri da te quale delle tre leggi tu reputi la verace, o la giudaica o la saracina o la cristiana" (1.3.8). Saladin's words hide a sort of riddle, or even a challenge that bears traces of the archaic function of the riddle as a ritualized contest, whereby knowledge of the origin of things and of the order of the world could be attained.[46] Equally

[43] Freedman 231–32.

[44] "La dialettica nasce sul terreno dell'agonismo. Quando lo sfondo religioso si è allontanato e l'impulso conoscitivo non ha più bisogno di essere stimolato da una sfida del dio, quando una gara per la conoscenza fra uomini non richiede più che essi siano divinatori, ecco apparire un agonismo soltanto umano" (Colli, *La nascita*, 75).

[45] Cf. Fontes-Baratto 35 and Van der Voort 212.

[46] Cf. Huizinga 108–09, 113: "The riddle is a sacred thing full of secret power, hence a dangerous thing. In its mythological or ritual context it is nearly always what German philologists know as the Halsrätsel or "capital riddle," which you either solve or forfeit your head. The player's life is at stake. A corollary of this is that it is accounted the highest wisdom to put a riddle nobody can answer. [...] Gradual transitions lead from the

traditional is the suddenness with which the solution comes to Melchisedech's mind: "aguzzato lo 'ngegno, gli venne prestamente avanti quello che dir dovesse" (1.3.9).[47] The solution to Saladin's riddle is notorious, and consists of telling the story of the three rings.

Danger and violence are also involved in this fight for knowledge. If the ancient wise man of the pre-Socratic tradition risks dying if he is unable to solve the enigma, likewise, the Sixth Day of the *Decameron* represents dangerous situations that befall the protagonists of the tales. Chichibio, for instance, runs a substantial risk in having taken a leg from his lord's crane (Currado tells him: "e io il voglio veder domattina e sarò contento; ma io ti giuro in sul corpo di Cristo che, se altramenti sarà, che io ti farò conciare in maniera che tu con tuo danno ti ricorderai, sempre che tu ci viverai, del nome mio" [6.4.13]). With his own words, Chichibio puts himself into a dangerously escalating situation, one from which he will eventually escape only by uttering a witty remark.[48] Madonna Filippa risks dying on the gallows unless she manages to escape with a quick and clever remark that arouses the mayor's and the people's generosity. Friar Cipolla could be lynched by the mob of Certaldo if the people discovered the falsity of his relic. The Florentine brigade that puts Guido to a test approaches him with a playful assault: "e spronati i cavalli a guisa d'uno assalto sollazzevole gli furono, quasi prima che egli se ne avvedesse, sopra" (6.9.11). In addition to resulting from a dangerous situation, violence is contained in the nature of the *motto* itself and in the way it operates against the person who is targeted. The action of the *motto* is always compared to a bite: "i voglio ricordare essere la natura de' motti cotale, che essi come la pecora *morde* deono così *mordere* l'uditore, e non come 'l cane; per ciò che, se come il cane mordesse il motto, non sarebbe motto ma villania" (6.3.3, emphasis mine). This violent reaction can even be perceived indirectly when it provokes a sort of psychosomatic reaction in a character, as with Oretta's reaction to the bad tale narrated by the knight: "Di che a madonna Oretta, udendolo, spesse volte veniva un sudore e uno sfinimento di cuore, come se inferma fosse stata per terminare" (6.1.10).

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sacred riddle-contest concerning the origin of things to the catch-question contest, with honor, possessions, or dear life at stake, and finally to the philosophical and theological disputation"; see also Masciandaro 26–27.

[47] Cf. Huizinga 110: "The answer to an enigmatic question is not found by reflection or logical reasoning. It comes quite literally as a sudden solution — a loosening of the tie by which the questioner holds you bound."

[48] Getto (149) compares the action of Chichibio's tale with a gamble in which the character eventually wins, albeit in the last game.

From his attentive reading of the introduction to the Sixth Day, Cok Van der Voort infers a thematic bipartition that divides the Day's narrative model into two variants: the "provocation" and the "threat" (cf. "voglio che domane, con l'aiuto di Dio, infra questi termini si ragioni, cioè di chi, con alcuno leggiadro motto tentato, si riscosse, o con pronta risposta o avvedimento fuggì perdita, pericolo o scorno" [5.concl.3]).[49] And in fact, the use of the *motto* appears in two variants, either a provocation or a threat. But a perfect parodic prologue to the Sixth Day (as well as to the first enigma of the Day) is the quarrel between Tindaro and Licisca which summarizes all the themes involved in the *motto*, such as knowledge and the violence of sex. At the rising of the sun, just when the *lieta brigata* is discussing the beauty of the narrated tales and is preparing to reconvene, we suddenly hear "un gran romore": here are Tindaro and Licisca quarrelling over somewhat spicy matters. When asked about the reasons for the dispute, Licisca answers: "Madonna, costui mi vuol far *conoscere* la moglie di Sicofante; e né più né meno, come se io con lei usata non fossi, mi vuol dare a *vedere* che la notte prima che *Sicofante* giacque con lei, messer *Mazza* entrasse in *Monte Nero* per forza e con *ispargimento di sangue*; e io dico che non è vero, anzi v'entrò paceficamente e con gran piacere di quei d'entro" (6.intr.8, emphasis mine). A supposed sexual defloration obviously hides behind the metaphorical and obscene language, but the way in which places and characters are expressed in this context takes the formal appearance of the impossible and paradoxical discourse that requires a special context-bound acumen to be understood. The enigma sets itself as a challenge, albeit low and vulgar, between the two contenders, and results in the merry brigade's comprehension of the *motto* ("Mentre la Licisca parlava, facevan le donne sì gran risa, che tutti i denti si sarebbero loro potuti trarre" [6.intro.11]) and with Dioneo's conferral of the victory to Licisca ("Madonna, la sentenzia è data senza udirne altro; e dico che la Licisca ha ragione, e credo che così sia com'ella dice; e Tindaro è una bestia" [6.intro.13]), who in turn puts the shame of defeat on Tindaro ("Ben lo diceva io; vatti con Dio; credi tu *saper* più di me tu, che non hai ancora rasciutti gli occhi?" [6.intro.14, emphasis mine]). This brief introductory narration, therefore, is not an alien or out-of-place element of the Day, as some critics maintain, but is a perfect parodic *mise en abîme* of what the *motto* will be in its literary form in the narration of the tales. Not surprisingly, the significance the *motto* attaches to knowledge is already high-

[49] Van der Voort 213.

lighted by the words pronounced by Licisca that ambiguously refer to "knowledge" and "sight" (*conoscere*, *vedere*).

Giorgio Colli reviews the terms that identify the enigma: the Greek sources sometimes use the term *próblema*, which means "obstacle," or something that is projected forward.[50] As a matter of fact, the enigma is an obstacle, a test Dionysus sets up and the philosopher has to overcome. Indeed, a test, or obstacle, is the subject of the Sixth Day, since all the characters have to overcome a difficult situation using their wit. The characteristic of the enigma as a hostile intrusion of the divine in the human sphere — in other terms, the god's challenge — is possibly reflected in the role played by the Goddess Fortune in creating obstacles in the *Decameron*. It is Fortune that plays a fundamental role in this Day, since it is the force that sets a series of obstacles. It gives, for instance, an ugly appearance to exceptional figures such as Giotto, or attributes a low social rank to gracious souls such as Cisti ("Belle donne, io non so da me medesima vedere che più in questo si pecchi, o la natura apparecchiando a una nobile anima un vil corpo, o la fortuna apparecchiando a un corpo dotato d'anima nobile vil mestiero, sì come in Cisti nostro cittadino e in molti ancora abbiamo potuto vedere avvenire; il qual Cisti, d'altissimo animo fornito, la fortuna fece fornaio" [6.2.3]). Moreover, in the ancient and medieval Aristotelian traditions, the term *próblema* indicates the formulation of a query, precisely the dialectic query that starts a discussion.[51] Likewise, in the tales of the *motto*, the first question a character asks to another may be the opening question of a dialectic contest, a provocation or a challenge. Luisa Cuomo has emphasized the elements of a typical dialectic controversy in the tale about the nobility of the Baronci family (6.6); here, the two opposite assertions the contenders bring forward have the same probability of being true, but a syllogism is finally needed to demonstrate the thesis: namely, that the Baronci, insofar as they are the most ancient among all the families, are also the noblest.[52] But the entire discussion is also charged with a parodic connotation consisting of the "gap between the seriousness of the correct terminology of the scholastic deductive processes and the comic of both the parody of the basic arguments and the expressive language loaded with emotional connotations," which leads to

[50] Colli, *La nascita* 78.

[51] The same term *próblema* is also used in the Vulgate and Septuagint versions of the Bible (Cook, "The Figure of Enigma" 366).

[52] Cuomo 252 ff.

the direct consequence that the friends of Scalza will laugh at the *motto*, thus recognizing its validity and parodic meaning.[53]

The formulation of the enigma is as contradictory as the formulation of the dialectic question, which presents two alternative terms. The knowledge produced by the understanding of the *motto* is as ambiguous, indirect and oblique as the knowledge provided by Dionysus through his enigmas or the nature of Apollo mediated by his singer Orpheus among men.[54] The message transmitted by the *motto* is not immediately understandable — who among us did not stop and reread the *motto* pronounced by Forese and addressed to Giotto? "Giotto, a che ora venendo di qua allo 'ncontro di noi un forestiere che mai veduto non t'avesse, credi tu che egli credesse che tu fossi il miglior dipintor del mondo, come tu se'?" (6.5.14). The *motto* is a device that *hides* knowledge by virtue of its rhetorical form and needs to be explained by someone else in the narrative. The wisdom that the wise Cavalcanti communicates with his *motto* needs to be explained by Betto to his companions.

Traditionally, in order to be solved, the enigma needs a narrative to accompany it, or at least an explanation whose didactic function has typically been present since antiquity. (From this point of view, although we may laugh a lot, it seems that the Sixth is the most serious Day of the *Decameron*.) The knowledge of the mocker is not the same as that of the mocked person. The latter has to undergo a gnoseological transformation in order to understand the wit and to reach the same level of knowledge. (Sometimes, though, the mocked fails to increase his knowledge if he does not understand the *motto*; then, an explanation is provided by adding a parodic value to the narrative.) Furthermore, it is possible to interpret the function of the *motto* as a peculiar literary form of recognition that leads the characters of the tales to a *shift* from ignorance to knowledge. Therefore, Boccaccio seems to portray an ideal situation in which the character, as a man, gains new knowledge through a transformation (which sometimes ends with a laugh). In particular, let us focus on the figure of the defeated, and see how both the comprehension of the *motto* and the declaration of the defeat work in each tale of the Sixth Day (all emphasis added):

> The anonymous knight. "Il cavaliere, il qual per avventura era molto migliore *intenditore* che novellatore, *inteso* il motto, e quello in festa e in

[53] Cuomo 255 (translation mine).
[54] Colli, *Sapienza* 37.

> gabbo preso, mise mano in altre novelle, e quella che cominciata avea e mai seguita, senza finita lasciò stare" (6.1.12);
>
> Geri Spina. "Il che rapportando il famigliare a messer Geri, subito *gli occhi* gli s'apersero dello '*ntelletto*" (6.2.26);
>
> Antonio d'Orso and Dego della Ratta. "La qual parola udita il maliscalco e 'l vescovo, sentendosi parimente *trafitti*, l'uno siccome facitore della disonesta cosa nella nepote del fratel del vescovo, e l'altro sì come ricevitore nella nepote del proprio fratello, senza guardar l'un l'altro, *vergognosi e taciti* se n'andarono, senza più quel giorno dirle alcuna cosa" (6.3.11);
>
> Forese da Rabatta. "Il che messer Forese udendo, il suo error riconobbe, e *videsi* di tal moneta pagato, quali erano state le derrate vendute" (6.5.16);
>
> The citizens of Prato. "Eran quivi a così fatta essaminazione, e di tanta e sì famosa donna, quasi tutti i pratesi concorsi, li quali, udendo così piacevol risposta, subitamente, dopo molte risa, quasi ad una voce tutti gridarono la donna aver ragione e dir bene" (6.7.18);
>
> Betto Brunelleschi and his companions. "Allora ciascuno intese quello che Guido aveva voluto dire e *vergognossi* nè mai più gli diedero briga, e tennero per innanzi messer Betto sottile e intendente cavaliere" (6.9.15);
>
> Giovanni del Bragoniera and Biagio Pizzini. "Li quali stati alla sua predica e avendo udito il nuovo riparo preso da lui e quanto da lungi fatto si fosse e con che parole, avevan tanto riso che eran creduti smascellare. E poi che partito si fu il vulgo, a lui andatisene, con la maggior festa del mondo ciò che fatto avevan gli discoprirono, e appresso gli renderono la sua penna; la quale l'anno seguente gli valse non meno che quel giorno gli fosser valuti i carboni" (6.10.55).

The transformation can also be simply ideal, as when an obtuse person is not able to understand the *motto*:

> Cesca. "Ma ella, più che una canna vana e a cui di senno pareva pareggiar Salamone, non altramenti che un montone avrebbe fatto, intese il vero motto di Fresco; anzi disse che ella si voleva specchiar come l'altre. E così nella sua grossezza si rimase e ancor vi si sta" (6.8.10).

Otherwise, the transformation can be parodic, as when the defeated understands the burlesque sense of the *motto* and laughs at it as in the tale of Chichibio or Scalza:

> Currado Gianfigliazzi. "Chichibio, tu hai ragione, ben lo dovea fare" (6.4.19).
>
> Michele Scalza's companions. "Della qual cosa, e Piero che era il giudice, e Neri che aveva messa la cena, e ciascun altro ricordandosi, e avendo il piacevole argomento dello Scalza udito, tutti cominciarono a ridere e af-

> fermare che lo Scalza aveva la ragione, e che egli aveva vinta la cena, e che per certo i Baronci erano i più gentili uomini e i più antichi che fossero, non che in Firenze, ma nel mondo o in maremma" (6.6.16).

Even at the level of discourse, a metamorphosis takes place. The tale of Friar Cipolla can be considered as a key example. Cipolla is aware of a reality which is not the same as that of the *certaldesi*: his speech is so clever, his rhetoric so refined, that he can make everybody believe that he has taken a trip to the Holy Land, while his fantastic account is merely about a tour in the streets of Florence. The speech that he pronounces is made with signifiers with a double signified, words that are able to change reality[55] and create a metamorphic discourse that is not only able to increase the level of understanding but also to transform reality itself within the tale. Friar Cipolla eventually manages to escape from the risk of a possible lynching and retains his credibility in the eyes of the *certaldesi* by means of the fantastic reality he succeeded in creating with his oratory.[56]

As argued above, the enigma is also a short tale, as the Greek etymology indicates (from "ainos" = tale/story),[57] and was considered as such in the pre-Socratic era.[58] The meaning of the *motto* is not always recognizable and valid in itself; rather, it depends on the function it performs within a defined narrative situation.[59] For instance, Nonna de' Pulci's *motto* is not witty in itself but becomes witty in a particular narrative context; specifically, the urban context of fourteenth-century Florence. In addition, in order to clarify better the contextual nature of the *motto*, we find that the link between enigma and *motto* becomes apparent, both in antiquity and in the Florence of the *Decameron*, within a historical context that is not pure theatrical backdrop.[60] Characters such as Giotto and Guido Cavalcanti are historical Florentine figures but are represented as legendary by virtue of their instinctive cleverness. The anecdotes of the Sixth Day take

[55] Cf. Bosetti 157.

[56] The issue of a type of narration which leads to the transformation/metamorphosis of a character appears from the very beginning of Boccaccio's literary production: for example, see the transformation of Ameto and his cathartic bath in the *Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, which represents the evolution of humanity from a primordial condition characterized by the power of senses, to a moral and intellectual consciousness mediated by virtues and love. The topos of the brigata and the transformation of the character is also present in the *Filocolo*.

[57] Cook, "The Figure of Enigma" 355.

[58] Colli, *Sapienza* 36.

[59] Van der Voort 211.

[60] Cf. De' Negri.

the form of historical *memorabilia*. The city of Florence is represented in the background as the proper context of a primordial society whose characters are depicted with the same stylized actions of the philosophers of Ancient Greece. Boccaccio's characters are historical but they are still represented as ideal figures. (Boccaccio collects his stories from the repertory of collective memory, just as Plato, Aristotle and the authors of the age of philosophy collected the riddles and the Eleusinian oracles in their works.) The "contextual" nature of the *motto* is evident not only from the simple observation that some historical Florentine characters appear in short anecdotes, but also for the motivations presented and repeated several times by the author regarding narrative poetics. Getto rightly points out these aspects of Boccaccio's poetics: the tales are given birth from a "happy memory impulse," which the author then makes explicit, through the words of Fiammetta, in the exhibition of his poetics, which is that of a discourse attentive to historical truth, or at least to verisimilitude.[61] But above all, what does matter is Boccaccio's direct intervention in the First Day, in which he says he is almost forced to write about the plague.[62] Thus, here, Florence appears as the mythical setting of witty people, historical characters represented in an evanescent historicity that loads the verisimilitude of the story with a universal and idealized atmosphere that inevitably emphasizes wisdom. Overall, the exaltation of intelligence in the *motto* is the expression of the bourgeois mercantile society in which the value of wit prevails and those who do not have it are doomed to exclusion.[63]

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[61] "[S]e io dalla verità del fatto mi fossi scostare voluta o volessi, avrei ben saputo e saprei sotto altri nomi comporla e raccontarla [*scil.* la novella]; ma per ciò che il partirsi dalla verità delle cose state nel novellare è gran diminuire di diletto negli 'ntendenti, in propia forma, dalla ragion di sopra detta aiutata, la vi dirò" (9.5.5).

[62] "E nel vero, se io potuto avessi onestamente per altra parte menarvi a quello che io desidero che per così aspro sentiero come fia questo, io l'avrei volentier fatto: ma ciò che, qual fosse la cagione per che le cose che appresso si leggeranno avvenissero, non si poteva senza questa ramemorazion dimostrare, quasi da necessità constretto a scriverle mi conduco" (1.intr.7).

[63] Thus Getto concludes his introductory remarks: "È sempre quel principio genetico dell'obbedienza ad un invito del fatto storico, ad un richiamo dell'accadimento reale, assai caro (e rivelatore) per il gusto del nostro artista, che qui agisce. Il Boccaccio si troverà costantemente a legare le sue novelle ad eventi e cose di una verità consacrata dalla storia ufficiale o dalla sua storia personale, a scoprire addentellati con nomi, luoghi, vicende concrete, storicamente determinabili" (Getto 10). The opening of Getto's first chapter is meaningful for the perspective he employs, insofar as it makes us understand his attention for Boccaccio's discourse and usage of connotation: "Al critico del Boccaccio che con occhio attento sappia scrutare in trasparenza la pagina, non mancherà certo

The *motto,* as the enigma, is a formal device for the search for wisdom and knowledge. Once again, we must recall Getto's observations on the *Decameron*'s Introduction, for his remarks are in perfect harmony, at the level of discourse, with the search for knowledge. Getto found in the words of the Introduction a "layering" of "three expressive moments" that produce the narrative and the form of the work: from the pleasure of memory as the engine of narrative, to the pleasure of communication in the context of the refined conversation of the merry and idle brigade, and finally to the "lyrical emotion" of the "life wisdom joyfully reached by the young brigade."[64] This last moment links the reasons of the entire collection to the author's desire to provide through his tales an ideal model of life, a standard of perfect living. This model is constructed by getting through the "sin of Fortune,"[65] after a "passionate contemplation of the limitations and obstacles that life (nature and fortune) places before men, and the men who face those same limits and obstacles." Moreover, this model of life is achieved in accordance with a perfectly secular ideal of the world and within the scope of a very precise social reality.[66]

Alan Freedman does not emphasize at all these important ideal aspects; he believes that "Boccaccio instead feels the need to eliminate the enigmatic element prior to using his narrative materials in a book that, despite the wide variety of sources, character and tone of any single tale, reveals a consistently strong structural unit insofar as a coherent and con-

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di rendersi sensibile la presenza, fin dal Proemio del Decameron, di un tipico nucleo espressivo in cui la parola acquista un tale valore allusivo da costituire come una rivelazione emblematica, quasi una filigrana pallida e pur evidente, del ritmo fantastico che governa l'intera partitura dell'opera". It is worth noticing that Getto was writing in the 1950s, a period in which critics and semioticians put a lot of emphasis on the connotative aspects of literary production. See, for instance, Barthes' *Le degré zéro,* which is almost contemporary to Getto's *Vita di forme e forme di vita*. Before Getto, Vittore Branca writes on the importance of historical and contextual references for Boccaccio in order to create "un linguaggio storicamente allusivo" whose repetitive "motivi costituzionali" make them "costanti, o meglio condizioni del suo narrare" (Branca 226).

[64] Getto 12.

[65] Cf. Proemio.13: "Adunque, acciò che in parte per me s'ammendi il peccato della fortuna, la quale dove meno era di forza, sì come noi nelle dilicate donne veggiamo, quivi più avara fu di sostegno, in soccorso e rifugio di quelle che amano, per ciò che all'altre è assai l'ago e 'l fuso e l'arcolaio, intendo di raccontare cento novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie che dire le vogliamo, raccontate in diece giorni da una onesta brigata di sette donne e di tre giovani nel pistelenzioso, tempo della passata mortalità fatta, e alcune canzonette dalle predette donne cantate al lor diletto."

[66] Getto 11–12.

sistent fiction." Moreover, Freedman states that Boccaccio wants "to reject any obviously didactic-problematic suggestion" and that in the *Decameron* in general, as well as for instance in 10.5, "the center of the work's interest is moved from the intellectual paradox to the narrative and its characters."[67] In essence, Freedman maintains that Boccaccio has transformed the enigma in 6.1 into a new metaphorical coinage. Guido Cavalcanti is eminently wise and is described so in the Florentine context ("un de' migliori loici che avesse il mondo e ottimo filosofo naturale" [6.9.8]). What Getto calls "the art of living" is nothing but a search for wisdom expressed in the literary form of the challenge, of the enigma, of the *motto* set within Florentine civilization. Although knowledge may result in a violent and competitive act, it also involves a productive moment: knowledge is the virtue of intelligent minds (but just a few have it) and can also be transmitted and taught, as long as we are willing to learn. Cisti gives to Messer Geri a lesson on courtesy and on how to live one's own life, and Messer Geri is gracious and humble enough to accept the lesson: "Il che rapportando il famigliare a messer Geri, subito gli *occhi* gli s'apersero dello *'ntelletto* e disse al famigliare: – Lasciami *vedere* che fiasco tu vi porti; – e vedutol disse: – Cisti dice vero; – e dettagli villania gli fece torre un fiasco convenevole" (6.2.26, emphasis added). Not surprisingly, the comprehension of the *motto* is here associated with sight, as sight was linked to the ancient knowledge of Dionysus and Apollo; moreover, the *vision* of the future was the primitive feature of the knowledge of the truth.[68]

The central theme of the Sixth Day is not merely represented by a verbal challenge, and intelligently varied in its own parodic aspects, but is also manifested in a peculiar form of narrative; namely, the form of discourse that Boccaccio calls *motto*. The characteristics and formal features of the *motto* show how this metaphorical device can be considered not only a structuring feature of Boccaccio's discourse, but also a "veil," a poetic strategy that is able both to conceal and to reveal philosophical knowledge. If we consider the first tale of the Sixth Day (Madonna Oretta's tale) as a one whose primary purpose is to guide the reader to an understanding of the whole day by means of an enigma, it is then possible to read the entire Sixth Day of the *Decameron* as a series of literary enigmas in the form of the *motto*. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret the function of the *motto* as a peculiar literary form of recognition that leads the characters to a *shift* from ignorance to knowledge. The *motto*, indeed, has

[67] Freedman 234.
[68] Colli, *Sapienza* 20.

the same formal features and contextual characteristics of the ancient enigma with which pre-Socratic philosophers exercised their own search for knowledge. At the time the *Decameron*, the oppositional elements characterizing the ancient *problémata* were still practiced in dialectic controversies and still preserved all their primordial vividness while providing Boccaccio with a completely renewed narrative form as opposed to that of the *Novellino*. Even the archetypical and tragic atmosphere that surrounded the accounts of ancient enigmas — particularly the mortal danger of defeat in the dialectical challenge between two wise men — stands in the characters' historical background. Yet, this same potentially threatening atmosphere in the Sixth Day is either exorcised by the comedic by granting the reader the pleasure of understanding a witty remark, or it is subverted and transformed by parody.

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