"Niuna sì disonesta n'è, che, con onesti vocaboli dicendola, si disdica a alcuno": Turpiloquium in Boccaccio's *Decameron*

"Lascivious" and "licentious" were some of the adjectives employed frequently to describe Boccaccio's *Decameron* during its early reception. Petrarch complains in his *Seniles* (17.3) that the author writes too freely, whilst Florentine humanist Matteo Palmieri is more scathing, describing Boccaccio's early works as "ripieni di tanta lascivia et dissoluti exempli" (6). Yet despite the proliferation of references to sexual material in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio concludes his work by claiming that he has not overstepped the boundaries of linguistic decorum:

> Saranno per avventura alcune di voi che diranno che io abbia nello scriver queste novelle troppa licenzia usata […] la qual cosa io nego, per ciò che niuna sì disonesta n'è, che con *onesti vocaboli* dicendola (Concl.3, italics mine).

The author-narrator claims that *onesti vocaboli* function in the *Decameron* as linguistic mediators, rendering discussion of problematic subject matter possible through their seemliness. Moreover, Boccaccio claims to have used these terms most effectively in his *Decameron* ("il che qui mi pare assai convenevolmente bene aver fatto" (Concl.3), so that he and his frame-story narrators may speak about sex indirectly and maintain the required degree of linguistic chastity.[1]

There can be little doubt that the positioning of the concluding statement is a strategic move on Boccaccio's part. Paradoxically, the author's closing remarks serve as a critical form of departure in terms of deciphering the text's complex sexual hermeneutics, forcing the reader to reconsider his/her reading of the text and to re-evaluate its seemliness, especially those

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[1] See Baxter 2014 for the role of metaphors as linguistic mediators, functioning as linguistic *galeotti* in Boccaccio's text.

passages that appear most bawdy. And yet the acclaimed "honesty" of Boccaccio's *onesti vocaboli* has not been widely investigated by critics, despite the emphasis that Boccaccio himself places on the issue of sexual reference here and elsewhere in the *Decameron*.[2] Using Boccaccio's declaration of linguistic decorum as its point of departure, this essay takes up Boccaccio's provocative invitation to review the sexual vocabulary of the *Decameron*, one that is assessed in relation to medieval discourses on linguistic decorum.

The Historical Context

In the period in which Boccaccio was writing, lewd speech was identified as the linguistic sin of *turpiloquium*.[3] This pertained to the tradition of the Sins of the Tongue, an immensely powerful and prolific Christian discourse which, during the thirteenth century, had systematically categorized and analysed all the evils of human speech. Scholars such as Bardsley, and Casagrande and Vecchio, have demonstrated that concern with verbal sin was, "not only laicised but popularised and woven securely into the fabric of everyday life."[4] It therefore formed an important part of Boccaccio's linguistic inheritance. Prominent moral writers such as Alexander of Hales, Albertano of Brescia, Raoul Ardent, Vincent of Beauvais and William of Peraldus all dealt with *turpiloquium*, citing Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which prohibited sexual reference, as their Biblical authority:

> Fornicatio autem, et omnis immunditia, aut avaritia, nec nominetur in vobis, sicut decet sanctos: aut turpitudo, aut stultiloquium, aut scurrilitas, quae ad rem non pertinet sed magis gratiarum actio. (5:3–4)

> Fornication, and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not be named among you as becometh saints: nor turpitude, nor filthy speech, nor scurrile behaviour, which has no purpose, but rather, the giving of thanks.[5]

Christian writers defined any enunciation that touched on the erotic as a form of "idle talk" (*otiosa locutio*), and *turpiloquium* was included in a list of vices that man should leave behind if he wanted to master the flesh (Ambrose, *De officiis* 5.14.176–80). Medieval thinkers believed that the signifier

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[2] For an exception to this see Milner 2008, 95–113, and Milner 2015, 83–100.

[3] Cf. Baxter 2014, 26 and 2013, 812.

[4] Bardsley 2007, 226–27; Casagrande and Vecchio 1987.

[5] My discussion of *turpiloquium* is much indebted to the groundbreaking work of Casagrande and Vecchio 1987, 393–406, and also to that of Karras 1998, 233–45. For a more detailed overview of Boccaccio's engagement with the sin of *turpiloquium*, see Baxter 2013.

was not merely an arbitrary sign, but closely connected to the word's meaning, and therefore direct sexual reference was forbidden on the basis of the word's moral and ontological equivalence to the thing that it represented. Since sexual speech was a sign of the carnal state of being, it was believed also to comprise a shift away from the spiritual ideal (Luke 6:45). A further danger of sexual language was that it was believed to have the potential to unleash dangerous and undisciplined sexual desire that, through uncontrolled imagination, could incite to fantasy and ultimately to sin.

The ability of sexual language to encourage a person to act was discussed at length by Christian thinkers, who frequently drew on Seneca as their authority.[6] The complex relationship between word and deed was so important in the Middle Ages that Alexander of Hales dedicated an entire chapter to the question of whether turpitude in speech was more sinful than turpitude in act.[7] When the Italian preacher Domenico Cavalca translated Peraldus' *De Lingua* into the vernacular just twenty years prior to the composition of the *Decameron*, he dedicated special attention to lewd speech by inserting a supplementary chapter into the section on *turpiloquium*, suggesting that sexual language represented an immediate concern around the time when Boccaccio was writing.[8]

Boccaccio's concern with the employment of *onesti vocaboli* echoes these theological discourses on sexual reference.[9] Both Ambrose and Ardent asserted that euphemism is language's natural mechanism for avoiding obscenity, with Ardent proposing that when it is necessary to allude to turpitude, more honest words are to be employed and are to conceal it, in order to hide its true nature: "Que [turpitudines] si quando necesse est significari honestioribus verbis sunt significanda et occultanda, sicut occultat ea et ipsa natura" 'Whenever it is necessary to allude to things that are unsightly, more honest words should be used to express them and to conceal them, just as nature herself conceals them' (c. 164*r*b).[10] Similarly, theologian Otlo of St. Emmeram (1013–76) posited that "honest*a* verb*a*" should be employed to speak of the lower bodily parts.[11] *Turpiloquium* was frequently defined in opposition to *honestas*, and Cavalca draws on this same lexical

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[6] See Casagrande and Vecchio 1987, 394, and Pseudo-Seneca 1980, 193.

[7] Alexander of Hales 1924, 1:426 (Inq. 3 Tract. 3, Sect. 2, Quaest. 4.4).

[8] Cavalca 1837, 241–50.

[9] See Hultin 2008 for a discussion of Christian speech ethics. Cf. Baxter 2014, 27.

[10] Ardent, Book 13. Ambrose suggested that God had hidden the offensive parts in the lower regions, out of sight (*De officiis*, 1:76–80). Cf. Baika 2014, 60–61.

[11] Otloh of St. Emmeram 1884, col. 238c.

vocabulary when he refers to *turpiloquium* as the sin of "disonesto parlare" in the vernacular.[12] The quality of *honestas* (moral rectitude) in speech was, in Ardent's view, one of the ethical criteria required of man in order to speak properly. Consequently, in evoking the dichotomy *disonesto/onesto*, Boccaccio appears to be drawing deliberately on an established lexical vocabulary in which the term "onesto" carries a strong ethical valence. In repeating the very language of the Christian discourse, Boccaccio can prove that he is aware of the prohibitions on sexual reference and the moral implications of speaking dishonestly. By concealing his sexual references in metaphor (*Concl.*5), Boccaccio suggests that he can avoid the sin of *turpiloquium* and claim moral rectitude in his vocabulary.

Boccaccio's Elusive Erotic Lexicon

Yet just how "honest" are Boccaccio's *onesti vocaboli*? The only way to ascertain whether or not Boccaccio's sexual vocabulary achieves linguistic propriety is to conduct a broad-based study of the *Decameron*'s sexual lexis, seeking to identify the sexual inferences in the text. This essay thereby constitutes a study of the sexual lexis of the *Decameron* in order to assess Boccaccio's linguistic strategy in alluding to matters sexual.[13] Whilst Boccaccio's most inventive sexual metaphors in the tales of Alatiel, Masetto, Caterina, Peronella and Alibech have been well-documented, minimal attention has been paid to the sexual vocabulary of the work as a whole and therefore to Boccaccio's most common and more mundane forms of sexual reference.[14] This suggests that there has been little scholarly consideration of Boccaccio's employment of standard euphemisms, pronouns, paralipses, and generic or elusive verbs, which actually make up the greater part of the *Decameron*'s sexual vocabulary. Much of my analysis will therefore be largely descriptive, documenting Boccaccio's employment of such terms in order to establish the extent to which Boccaccio maintains decorum.

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[12] Cavalca 1837, 24.

[13] Although this essay comprises a survey of the sexual lexicon of the *Decameron*, I do not claim my study to be exhaustive. A more detailed analysis of Boccaccio's linguistic reference systems was conducted for my doctoral thesis, "Language and Sex in Boccaccio's *Decameron*: Galeotto fu la metafora," University of Cambridge, 2010.

[14] The only work I have found which deals at length with the *Decameron*'s sexual vocabulary is Casalegno's unpublished *tesi di laurea*, at the University of Turin. For discussions of sexual metaphors in the aforementioned tales, see: Almansi 1975; Forni 1996; Koelb 1984; Migiel 1998; Marcus 1979; Mazzotta 1986; and Vasvari 1994.

Speaking Conventionally About Sex

My research reveals that on many occasions in the *Decameron*, sex is presented through textbook instances of *reticentia*. Boccaccio clearly took note of the conventional ways in which theologians couched their own sexual vocabulary, since a great number of sexual terms derive directly from the theological tradition. Since the policing of sexual language was intrinsic to the teachings of the medieval Church, and integral to the quality of *honestas* to which speech was meant to aspire, theologians established an appropriate vocabulary that, though direct, was deemed licit, for the technical nature of the words granted them a neutral value. Baldwin has established that *coitus, coniunctio, concubitus, copulatio, carnalis* and *cognoscere* comprised the "Latin word stock" that "became the clinical and learned vocabulary current in the schools for the sexual act."[15] Thus, when Boccaccio employs this type of language, he is following convention by speaking about sex in terms that were deemed entirely acceptable to the canon.

Boccaccio frequently makes recourse to the adjective *carnale* when alluding to sexual activity in the *Decameron*, since the term had long been recognised as a Biblical euphemism, meaning "of the flesh." The term represents both the human body itself and also its physical needs and desires, especially in contrast to the spiritual world. Since the word does not refer to any specific part of the body, merely the flesh *per se*, the term is also generic and does not provide the reader with any details about the sexual organs or the sexual act which might render the reference explicit.[16] When Boccaccio employed this term to convey a sexual meaning, he was confident that the term was well within the limits of linguistic decorum. Hence "carnalmente giaciuto" (7.9.73); "i diletti carnali" (1.intro.62); "la concupiscenza carnale" (1.4.5); "gli stimoli della carne" (1.4.15, 2.8.15, 9.2.18, 10.9.45); and "il carnale appetito" (8.7.68) make very regular appearances in the *Decameron*'s sexual vocabulary as a conventional way of talking about sex.[17]

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[15] Baldwin 1994, 188.

[16] Augustine pointed to the way in which the term functioned as a form of synecdoche when he explained that St Paul's employment of *caro* was an effective euphemism because it was a "mod[us] locutionis a parte totum" (*De civitate Dei* 14.2).

[17] Rustico's "resurrezion della carne" (3.10.13) is, however, conspicuous for its blasphemous associations, but also because the circumlocution functions differently with regard to the aforementioned examples, replacing instead a specific part of the flesh. Conceptually, therefore, it is more problematic than when *carne* is employed generically to refer to the sexual act.

Several the theological terms employed by Boccaccio were technically precise and therefore implicitly carried a negative connotation. In everyday usage this meant that when sexual matters had to be discussed directly, such as in confession, the penitent would recognise the precise nature of his sin.[18] The term *lussuria*, for example, covered a whole range of sexual acts, thereby functioning as a form of metonymy. This precision also meant that when Boccaccio uses *lussuria* to twice condemn the behaviour of the clergy, the employment of the proper theological term renders the exact nature of their sin all the more apparent: "egli trovò dal maggiore infino al minore generalmente tutti disonestissimamente peccare in lussuria" (1.2.19); and "Essi sgridan contra gli uomini la lussuria, acciò che, rimovendosene gli sgridati, agli sgridattori rimangono le femine; essi dannan l'usura" (3.7.38). A further example of vocabulary derived from the theological tradition is Boccaccio's employment of the verb *consumare*, which implies quick sex when it is employed in the *Decameron*, as if consummating marriage were primarily a matter of course: "incappò una volta per consumare il matrimonio a toccarla" (2.10.7); "dicendo che al suo contado tornar si voleva e quivi consumare" (3.9.27). In both these instances, fulfilment of the marriage contract is the sole focus rather than any form of sexual pleasure, in keeping with the importance accorded to consummation in the legal definition of marriage in the Middle Ages. It is only in 10.8 that *consumare* is portrayed as a pleasurable activity, and even here the word order and the employment of the past participle seem to suggest that any sort of enjoyment in the act of sex was only to be had once the marriage itself had been legally consummated: "E quinci consumato il matrimonio, lungo ed amoroso piacer prese di lei" (10.8.49).

Alongside *consumare*, Boccaccio also employs the dryly scientific term *congiugnimenti* and the verb *congiugnere* — further stock vocabulary from the theological tradition. With all but one exception, Boccaccio's use of the term *congiungimenti* conforms to traditional usage, referring to intercourse within the context of marriage.[19] Elsewhere in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio employs the well-known Biblical euphemism *conoscere* to avoid referencing the sexual act directly. Hence, in the tale in which a groom lies with the Queen without her knowledge, pretending to be the King, intercourse is expressed via "più volte carnalmente la reina cognobbe" (3.2.16). Alibech's virginity is alluded to in the same terms: "lei non aver mai uomo conosciuto" (3.10.11).

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[18] Payer 1984, 127.
[19] See: 2.10.9; 4.6.10; 10.8.80.

Other sexual euphemisms in the *Decameron* that derive from the theological tradition include the verb and noun forms *compiere* and *compimento*: "per dare all'opera compimento" (3.3.38), "dare al loro amore compimento" (7.6.5); the verb *usare*: "due usano insieme" (8.8.1); and the euphemism of "becoming someone's relation": "insieme fecero parentado" (2.7.89). Boccaccio's frequent conceptualization of desire as "il concupiscibile appetito" becomes almost formulaic through its repetition in the *Decameron*, carefully repeating the language of the Church, complete with its negative associations.[20]

The Elusive Erotic Pronoun

Following the lead of medieval theologians, Boccaccio also makes frequent recourse to pronouns to depict both the sexual act and the sexual organs. When Filostrato plays on the meaning of *quel che* in the tale of Masetto ("Masetto senza farsi troppo invitare quel fece che ella volle" (3.1.31), the meaning of the relative pronoun here is clearly erotic. At the same time, the precise details of what it is that the nun "wants" are not rendered explicit. In context, we can quickly surmise that *quel che* refers to the act of intercourse. The tale rehearses a number of established sexual metaphors, such as "lavorare l'orto," and Masetto's time at the convent results in the birth of many children. However *quel che* is periphrastic, creating an evasive subclause that, instead of defining, obscures.

This is a technique that we encounter frequently in the *Decameron*. When a flirtatious Madonna Agnese replies to Frate Rinaldo's supplications, she informs him that were he not her godfather, she would do "ciò che voi voleste" (7.3.16): exactly what Frate Rinaldo wants her to do is deliberately unclear. It is only a few lines later that we discover that *ciò che* means sleeping with Madonna Agnese the way she sleeps with her husband: "giacere con voi come vostro marito" (7.3.21).[21] Elsewhere, intercourse is reduced to the indefinable *questo*; for example, "ma le femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono" (5.10.18), "E per ciò che a questo siam nate" (5.10.19). Another couple's lovemaking is abridged to "e in questo continuando" (4.5.6). The equally ambiguous *questa* is employed in

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20 "[I]l concupiscibile appetito avendo desto nella mente ricevuto l'avea" (2.2.35); "tolgano del tutto a' lavoratori della terra i concupiscibili appetiti" (3.1.4); "per non destare nel concupiscibile appetito [...] alcuno inchinevole disiderio" (4.intro.23); "son giovane, [...] piena di concupiscibile disiderio" (4.1.34).

21 See also "pur non feci ciò che io avrei potuto fare" (5.10.17) and "che io non ammorbidisca bene e rechilo a ciò che io vorrò" (5.10.22).

similar contexts: "essi nascono buoni a mille cose, non pure a questa" (5.10.18). Likewise, the imprecise *quello che* also refers to the sexual act: "pervenire a quello che egli di lei disiderava" (3.10.10); "la cominciò a sollicitare a quello che egli di lei disiderava" (7.3.13). In all of these expressions, it is impossible to know if the pronoun refers merely to kissing, or to foreplay or to full sexual relations.

It is this lack of specificity that has led Vasvari to remark, in her discussions on the tale of Caterina and the nightingale, that Boccaccio's use of another pronoun, *cosa*, is merely an "empty word ([no]thing)" suggestively open to equivocal meanings.[22] In the tale of Alatiel, this generic euphemism refers to the sexual act: "si vedeva la disiderata cosa e più negata" (2.7.25). It is also employed almost formulaically by seemingly coy female protagonists to enquire about the sexual activity of the clergy: "voi facciate tai cose?" (7.9.59); "o fanno i preti così fatte cose?" (8.2.22); "fanno così fatte cose i frati?" (7.3.14); "io non credeva che gli agnoli facesson queste cose" (4.2.42).[23] Thanks to their very grammatical nature, pronouns never actually confirm a sexual act, thereby rendering them an ideal medium to express Boccaccio's sexual discourse in an elusive manner.[24]

In all the examples cited above, Boccaccio's language is remarkably, perhaps even disappointingly, conventional. The adoption of this restrained vocabulary is an important factor in assessing the ethical dimension of Boccaccio's linguistic choices and is almost certainly a deliberate tactic on the author's part. Whilst Boccaccio's employment of these traditional terms can partly be attributed to the cultural climate and to the far-reaching influence of the Church, there is little evidence of this type of technical language, for example, in the French *fabliaux*.[25] By adopting an orthodox approach to sexual reference, Boccaccio ensures that his vocabulary conforms to established moral rectitude.

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[22] Vasvari 1994, 225 n. 5. Boggione suggests that this euphemism was often employed by the Church Fathers (Boggione and Casalegno 1996, viii), while Adams states that it was frequently employed in Latin sexual vocabulary, particularly to denote the male member, as an "elliptical method of alluding to the part" (Adams 1982, 62).

[23] We witness a similar usage in "far cosa che gli piacesse" (4.3.26) and "che questa cosa fosse segreta" (4.3.26).

[24] Pronouns are also employed in the *Decameron* to mask a sexual reference in: 3.5.32; 3.8.26; 4.2.43; 5.10.58; 6.7.17; 7.9.59.

[25] Few, if any, major studies dedicated to the sexual language of the *fabliaux* (Pearcy 1974; Muscatine 1986; Baldwin 1994; Bloch 1998; and Brown 2014) acknowledge the employment of such theological terminology.

Avoiding Obscenity

In fact, where Boccaccio reworks a *fabliau* narrative, he is careful to avoid its direct language. Dioneo's tale of a young woman who is transformed into a mare by a local priest (9.10) is a reworking of *De la Pucelle qui voulait voler*, where a damsel is transformed into a bird. Crucial to the incantation in both of these tales is the attachment of the tail, performed through the sexual act. While the *fabliau* presents the sexual act in detail and distinguishes the female orifice and the masculine member in an unadorned vernacular, Boccaccio refers to the sexual organs through metaphor:

> Elle se met a recoillons;
> Il li embat jusqu'as coillons
> Le *vit* ou *con* sanz contredit.
> Et la damoisele li dit
> Et li demande ice que est;
> Il dit que la queue li met.[26]

> Appresso donno Gianni fece spogliare ignudanata comar Gemmata e fecela stare con le mani e co' piedi in terra a guisa che stanno le cavalle, [...] poi toccandole il petto e trovandolo sodo e tondo, risvegliandosi tale che non era chiamato e sù levandosi, disse: "E questo sia bel petto di cavalla"; e così fece alla schiena e al ventre e alle groppe e alle cosce e alle gambe; e ultimamente, niuna cosa restandogli a fare se non la coda, levata la camiscia e preso *il pivuolo* col quale egli piantava gli uomini e prestamente *nel solco* per ciò fatto messolo, disse: "E questa sia bella coda di cavalla." (9.10.17–18, italics mine)

By drawing on a long literary tradition of agricultural metaphors with sexual connotations, Boccaccio's substitution of *pivuolo* for *vit* ("prick") and *solco* for *con* ("cunt") avoids vulgar references to the sexual organs. In fact, by presenting the female body as fertile ground ready to be sown, and the male member as the object doing the sowing, Boccaccio underscores the passive role of the female in the sexual act and the act of deception, an important component in both versions of the tale.

Yet what is significant about Boccaccio's reticence at this point is that he is acutely aware of his linguistic behaviour. When he describes Donno Gianni's arousal, the verb *chiamare*, "risvegliandosi tale che non era chiamato" (9.10.18), can be read not only as a suggestion that the erect organ is an "uninvited guest," but also that the member could not be named directly: "tale che non era chiamato." The indefinite pronoun again indicates reserve, yet Boccaccio is also employing paralipsis at this point

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[26] From *De la pucelle chi vouloit voler*, in Montaiglon and Reynaud 1872–90, 4:209.

through the technique of drawing attention to the organ and yet declining to describe it further. The fact that Boccaccio should emphasize his reticence in reworking a tale that contains explicit language in its original version is therefore highly significant: he wants to ensure that his observance of linguistic decorum is noted by his readers, or at least by those who were familiar with the *fabliau*.

As Cherchi has demonstrated, when Boccaccio narrates the tale of Peronella (7.2), he also distances himself from his presumed source, at the level both of style and of vocabulary. Whereas Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 9.5 openly draws on the register of the obscene, including the base metaphor *dedolabat* 'hacked at' and other vocabulary from the same register ("scabie*s* vetust*a* cariosae testae" 'the old scuff from the rotten jar'; "ast*us* meretric*ius*" 'meretricious cunning'), Boccaccio not only avoids the obscene terms, but also introduces fantastic geography to elevate the register. No direct allusion is made to (what Cherchi calls) the *positura animalesca* underscored by Apuleius; instead, Boccaccio plays cleverly on the allusion to the Parthian mares and on the double meaning of the *bocca* of the *doglio*: "che potrebbe avere un senso osceno, ma niente forza a vedervelo."[27] By ensuring that his language is never visibly vulgar, Boccaccio's reworking of the classic tale provides again testament to the fact that he guards against the obscene, just as he maintains in the *Conclusione dell'autore*.

Naming the Genitalia

Whereas in the French *fabliaux* there clearly exists a "profuse celebration of the body, and especially the sexual organs,"[28] there is no such celebration of the genitalia in Boccaccio's *oeuvre*. In fact, the *Decameron*'s sexual vocabulary is significant for the lack of direct terms used to identify the sexual organs. Allusions to erect male members are relatively rare and are always expressed indirectly via circumlocution or metaphor. Hence, Boccaccio mentions "santo cresci in man" (2.7.37) and Alatiel refers figuratively to "san Cresci in Valcava" (2.7.109). Rustico experiences a "resurrezion della carne" (3.10.13), leading Alibech to enquire "quella che cosa è che io ti veggio che così si pigne in fuori, e non l'ho io?" (3.10.13). Similarly, Federigo di Neri Pegolotti knocks at Monna Tessa's door with a "coda ritta" (7.1.27) and the scholar's member is concealed by a pronoun, "fece tale in piè levare che si giaceva" (8.7.67). Even virile Masetto, whose productive "tool" tends so many of the nuns' gardens, is not granted a direct depiction; instead it is

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[27] Cit. in Cherchi 2004, 114.
[28] Bloch 1998, 297.

merely prefigured metaphorically by the presence of a *zappa* and a *vanga* at the opening of the novella (3.1.4). Since the reader is only able to appreciate this phallic association retrospectively, Boccaccio's initial references to gardening implements are initially quite elusive. Even when there is a moment of revelation in the novella, Boccaccio is effectively silent about the protagonist's lower parts. As Masetto lies exhausted in the garden, Boccaccio states, "avendogli il vento i panni dinanzi levati indietro, tutto stava scoperto" (3.1.34). The wind may have brushed Masetto's clothes to one side, exposing his lower body, but Boccaccio's use of the indefinite pronoun *tutto* ensures that his language remains concealed.

Further references to the male member in the *Decameron* are expressed entirely in metaphors. Thus Caterina refers to the *usignuolo* (5.4.21, 25, 26, 29, 33, 36, 38, 39, 44, 49), both the Pisan Judge and the priest of Varlungo have a *pestello* (2.10.37; 8.2.45) and, of course, Rustico possesses the blasphemous *diavolo* (3.10.1, 14, 22, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 34, 35). Other words merely gesture towards a phallic interpretation, such as the King's lit *torchietto* as he enters his wife's chamber in Day Three (3.2.14), the *bastone* on which Cimone leans suggestively as he gazes at semi-naked Efigenia sleeping in the woods (5.1.6) and the candle stubs the priest of Varlungo brings to his female parishioners (8.2.7). Further phallic imagery includes *la spada* (6.1.9; Concl.6), the *salciccia* (Concl.5), and the *lancia* (Concl.6). When it comes to naming the female organ, Boccaccio is no less resourceful. The pudendum is transformed into a *foro* in the tale involving the Pisan Judge (2.10.42), a *doglio* in the tale of Peronella (7.2.13, 14, 20, 21, 25, 27, 29, 32, 34), a *mortaio* for both Bartolomea and Belcolore (2.10.37; 8.2.1, 40, 42, 44, 45), a *solco* in the case of Comar Gemmata (9.10.18), an *orto* in the tale of Masetto (3.1.18), a *campicello* in 2.10.32, and a *campo* in 3.6.36. Of course, Alibech's genital area is famously transformed into "[n]inferno" (3.10.18, 19, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 35). Boccaccio also hints at the female sex organ through provocative references to openings and dark or enclosed spaces; for example, Ghismonda's long-abandoned *grotta* (4.1.9–11), and the *uscio* belonging to the wife of Messer Ricciardo di Chinzica (2.2.25).

Whilst many critics have lingered on these metaphors to admire Boccaccio's linguistic inventiveness, these expressions actually account for a very small percentage of the *Decameron*'s sexual lexis. What is more, they almost all draw on a conventional sexual vocabulary from other literary genres.

Tuiel, andouille and *lance* are substitutions for the penis in the French tradition, alongside the female *pertuis* ("hole") and *uis* (doorway).[29] Vasvari has demonstrated that the nightingale metaphor was already in use within the Italian folklore tradition as a means of referring to the male member[30]; and the facile connection between the penis and the *coda* draws on a long history that dates back to Horace's *Satires* (1.2.45 and 2.7.49). In her discussions on the use of sexual imagery in the *Corbaccio*, Armstrong has pointed out that Boccaccio may be drawing on a list of stock descriptions from Boncompagno da Signa's *Rhetorica novissima*.[31] Metaphors from this list also feature in the *Decameron*: the *os inferni* becomes Alibech's "ninferno," the *spelunca luctuosa* appears as the "grotta" of Ghismonda, and the "dolium in scarpsellam" is the central sexual metaphor in the tale of Peronella, borrowed from Apuleius.[32]

By drawing on an established list of precursors already employed in the literary tradition, Boccaccio ensures that his metaphors are easily recognised by the reader, which means that they are more likely to succeed in communicating their veiled meaning. On the other hand, metaphors were not to be so clearly recognizable that their sexual meaning was immediately comprehensible to the reader. It was the author's responsibility to find an appropriate middle ground. In order to ensure that his metaphorical vocabulary was acceptable, Boccaccio therefore drew on terms that were sanctioned by usage in other literary texts.

Boccaccio's Verbal Allusions to Sex

As already suggested, although they are the most well-known, the aforementioned metaphorical nouns actually represent a very minor part of Boccaccio's sexual vocabulary, which is largely made up of highly elusive verbs.

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[29] See Muscatine 1986, 110–14.

[30] Vasvari 1994, 225.

[31] Since the *Rhetorica* was written as an instruction manual for law students, Boccaccio would certainly have been familiar with this work (Armstrong 2006, 89).

[32] "Pudibundum eius transumitur in portum confusionis, in os inferni, in rivulum aque fetentis, in antrum, in speluncam luctuosam, in fornacem ignis ardentis, in dolium, in scarpsellam et in vaginam. Transumitur etiam in puteum. [...] Transumitur etiam in lacunam putridam, in torcular fecis, et in labyrinthum pudoris" 'Her pubis can be transposed into the gate of disorder, the mouth of the underworld, a stream of stinking water, a grotto, a doleful cave, a fiery furnace, a wide-mouthed jar, a purse and a sheath. Furthermore she can be transposed into a well, [...] a putrid pond, a press for wine dregs, and a labyrinth of shame' (in *Rhetorica novissima* 9.2.16). Cf. Russo 1983, 107.

Consider, for example, the verbal forms *stare con*, *dimorare insieme*, *essere con*, all synonyms of the verb "to be" and indicative of "being in the company of" another person.[33] When used to represent a sexual relationship, these verbs provide minimal information about the sexual act itself, and yet my research has revealed that they are some of the most typical and frequently employed verbs to refer to sexual activity in the whole of the *Decameron*. Guiscardo and Ghismonda "stettero per lungo spazio insieme" (4.1.20); in Day Seven a wife provides instructions for her lover to come to her house, "la donna […] si fa venire suo amante e con lui si dimora" (7.5.1). Similarly, Messer Lambertuccio declares his intention to "spend time with" Madonna Isabella: "io mi son venuto a stare alquanto con essolei" (7.6.13), and Monna Sismonda arranges "to be together" (sexually) with her lover, "esser con essolui" (7.8.7), but "assai volte andatovi e alcuna gli venne fatto d'esser con lei" (7.8.10). Apart from the reference to the lover, there is no indication that "being together" relates to sexual activity at all.

This cautious way of referencing sex is even employed in the more provocative tales, such as that of Masetto where the gardener's encounter with one of the nuns is described as "l'una si stea dentro con lui" (3.1.30); the tale of Peronella: "il giovane, entratogli in casa e standosi con Peronella" (7.2.10); and the tale of Alatiel, where her sexual relationship with lovers four and nine is alluded to equally reticently: "con grandissimo piacere fu dimorato con lei" (2.7.58) and "più tempo insieme col mercatante si stette" (2.7.89). This form of reference also becomes so frequent in the *Decameron* that in one tale, not only is *essere* employed in a sexual sense five times, but it becomes the focus of a comic verbal exchange about mistaken identities: "credendosi col marito *essere* stata si truova che con Ricciardo *è dimorata*" (3.6.1, italics mine); "Or con cui ti credi tu *essere stato*? Tu *sei stato* con colei." (3.6.34, italics mine).[34]

Amongst Boccaccio's stock expressions for sexual activity, *ritrovarsi con* and *trovarsi con* are another set of verbs that merely point to "being in the company of." Again, these verbs are highly euphemistic with regard to the sexual act itself, which is signalled only by the pleasure that these protagonists take in one another's company: "molte altre notti con pari letizia insieme si ritrovarono" (3.3.55); "più e più volte si ritrovarono insieme"

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[33] See Milner 2008.

[34] See also similar usage in Day Three: "credendosi sempre il conte non con la moglie ma con colei che egli amava essere stato" (3.9.49). Incidentally verbs of "being" are predominantly employed by female narrators to denote sexual intercourse, thereby signalling moderation in their use of sexual speech.

(7.3.22); "con gran consolazione insieme si ritrovarono" (5.7.17); "poi sicuramente più volte di ritrovarsi con lui continuò" (7.4.8); "se modo vi si potesse vedere, di ritrovarsi con lui" (7.5.12). The verb "trovare" is also frequently employed as a euphemism to signal adultery or the discovery of an illicit relationship: "trovato con una giovane amata" (5.6.1). Similarly, Madonna Filippa is "con un suo amante trovata" (6.7.1).

Boccaccio also makes regular use of verbs of movement, such as "going to the house of someone": "che viene a lei ogni notte" (7.5.1); "ella spesse volte in una cassa sua si faceva venire" (9.2.9); and "menarsi il suo amante in casa" (7.4.8), to suggest a sexual relation. Closely linked to this form of sexual denotation is the verb form *andare*, where "going to" one's lover is intended to be indicative of lovemaking: "ella va con lui" (9.5.1) and "alla sua monaca [...] andare" (9.2.6). The verb "to visit" is employed in the same manner: "amata da un messer Lambertuccio è visitata" (7.6.1) and "con gran piacer di ciascuno la visitò" (9.2.6). Apart from the fact that this "visiting" is pleasing to both parties, and the person being visited is of the opposite sex, there is minimal indication that these visits have a sexual purpose.

More connotative of sexual behaviour in the *Decameron* are the verbs that locate their action within a bedroom scene. The terms *andare a letto*, *coricarsi*, and *dormire* are identified by Adams as "universal euphemisms,"[35] and are used extensively in the *Decameron* to denote sexual activity. Yet despite their greater degree of specificity, these verbs also deny the reader detail about the act itself. Boccaccio employs terms that suggest lying together: "e senza niuno indugio coricatisi pienamente e molte volte" (2.2.39); "gli metterete allato" (3.9.47). Similarly, he locates the action within the bedroom itself: "nella sua camera nel menò" (3.1.35); "fu trovata nella sua propria camera [...] nelle braccia di Lazzarino" (6.7.5); "truovalo il marito in camera con lei" (7.3.1). On some occasions, he hints further that this activity is sexual in nature by employing a standard euphemism to indicate that it takes place on the bed or under the covers: "l'uno dell'altro pigliando sotto le lenzuola maraviglioso piacere" (2.7.80); "e andaronsi a letto, dandosi l'un dell'altro piacere e buon tempo" (7.5.42); "con lei nel letto tornatosi" (8.7.38). However, Boccaccio refrains from explaining precisely what took place beneath the bedclothes.

Elsewhere Boccaccio frequently draws on the euphemism *dormire* to indicate sexual intercourse: "Sì dormirò con sei [...] se bisognerà" (8.4.26); "poco quella notte dormirono" (8.7.38). He also signals a sexual relationship through the conventional periphrasis of "spending the night together":

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[35] Adams 1982, 177.

"faccendovi la notte compagnia" (3.8.26); "aveva avuta la buona notte" (5.4.39); "e lungo tempo potessono insieme di così fatte notti avere" (5.4.44); "stato la notte con lei" (8.10.37). However, by far the most common means of denoting sexual activity within the group of "bedroom" phrases is the verb *giacere*, which constitutes the second most common means of referencing sex in the whole of the *Decameron*. Hence, "il marchese quivi venuto per doversi la notte giacere con essolei" (2.2.20), "con la figliuola di lui giace" (2.6.1), "con lei si giacque più mesi lieto" (2.7.77), "una notte che io giacqui con lei" (2.9.53), "le quali [monache] tutte concorrono a giacersi con lui" (3.1.1) and "un pallafreniere giace con la moglie d'Agilulf" (3.2.1) constitute just a handful of an abundance of examples.[36] Far from being explicit, once again Boccaccio is following convention. The term *giacere* was an acceptable means of discussing sex, employed both by the Romance genre and by writers of moral texts, and later in the vernacular Bible.[37]

Boccaccio does refer to the acts of kissing and embracing directly, as writers of Romance genre had done before him.[38] In a clever rhetorical move, he even employs verbs for kissing and cuddling as a euphemism for the act of sex itself: "né solamente d'una volta contentò la gentil donna la contessa degli abbracciamenti del marito ma molte" (3.9.49). The reference to kissing and cuddling functions as a metonymy, whereby traditional acts of foreplay become metaphors for intercourse. Thus, one of Alatiel's sexual encounters is recast as "Egli disiderosamente in braccio recatalasi" (3.2.16) and the same expression signals the coming together of a lady and her lover again in Day Three: "nelle braccia della sua bella donna si mise" (3.3.53). The union of Monna Lisetta and the Angel Gabriel is denoted in these same terms, "il vostro corpo stette tutta la notte in braccio mio con l'agnol Gabriello" (4.2.36).

Elsewhere in the *Decameron*, the sexual act also becomes the "granting of a wish" or "giving in to a demand" through "neutral" verbs such as *acconsentire*, *compiacere*, *concedere*, *piegarsi a* and *soddisfare*.[39] Lovers are "received," acquaintances are "improved" and sexual acts become stories

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[36] See also: 3.4.23; 3.9.1; 3.9.48; 4.2.48; 7.3.1; 7.3.21; 7.5.24; 7.5.56; 8.2.1; 8.4.1; 8.4.37; 8.8.1; 8.10.24.

[37] "Io voglio ch'elli giaccia con meco" (in Segre and Marti 1959, 499). Boggione and Casalegno also suggest the *Bibbia volgare*, Leviticus 18:20 (1996, 67).

[38] "[...] il quale abbracciatala e basciatala più volte" (1.4.18); and "abbracciandola e baciandola centomilia volte" (3.5.32).

[39] In his discussions on the *fabliaux*, Muscatine identifies similar verbs such as "to serve someone," "to be at work" and "to be satisfied" as "rather neutral" (Muscatine 1986, 112).

themselves: "ella mai a così fatte novelle non intenderebbe con altro uomo" (2.9.10) and "son buona e non attendo a così fatte novelle" (7.2.17).[40] Many of these verb forms are so generic and conceptually removed from the act itself that it is hard to imagine how Boccaccio could be accused of *turpiloquium* at all.

By employing verbs such as *piacere* as a metaphor for sexual activity, Boccaccio clearly promotes the enjoyment of intercourse. Here he draws on the highly euphemistic vocabulary of the courtly French Romance tradition, transforming terms such as *joie*, *deliz* and *solaz*, *faire les bons*, *faire la volenté de quelqu'un*, *talent* and *plaisir* into *dilettarsi*, *prendere piacere*, *scherzare*, *fare piacere*, *fare volere*, *darsi buon tempo*, *farsi buon tempo*, *godersi di*. These expressions are highly euphemistic and clearly polite; yet these general and "pleasurable" verbs emerge as by far the most common way to depict sexual activity in the *Decameron.* Thus protagonists "joke" with one another: "men cautamente con le' scherzava" (1.4.7); "si sarebbe voluta [...] scherzar con lui" (3.4.6); they "flirt" with one another: "per lungo spazio con lei si trastullò" (1.4.18); and they "have a good time": "con la moglie del frate si dà buon tempo" (3.4.1); "io non so perché io non mi prendo questo buon tempo" (3.5.30); "l'altre si danno buon tempo cogli amanti loro" (7.2.17); "spesse volte con lui maraviglioso diletto si dava buon tempo" (8.7.4). Elsewhere protagonists "enjoy" their love for one another: "molte volte goderono del loro amore. Idio faccia noi goder del nostro" (3.6.50); "lungamente goderon del loro amore" (3.7.101). They take "delight" in one another: "l'un dell'altro prendendo dilettosa gioia" (3.7.79); "cominciò messer Lambertuccio a prender diletto di lei" (7.6.13); "trovar modo a' miei diletti" (7.9.10); "menar talvolta alcuna femina a suo diletto e tenervela un dì o due" (9.5.7). They "enjoy themselves": "e appresso insieme abbracciatisi, con gran piacer di ciascuna delle parti quanto di quella notte restava si sollazzarono" (2.3.35).[41] The expression "fare festa" also features prominently in the *Decameron*'s sexual vocabulary: "feria far [...] con le donne nel letto" (2.10.9); "con grandissima festa si stavano" (3.4.30); "e insieme avren tutta la notte festa e piacere l'un dell'altro" (3.5.22). However, the single most common means of alluding to sex in the whole of the *Decameron* is through the noun *piacere*.

I have counted more than fifty occasions in the *Decameron* where *piacere* is employed in various forms (*fare i piaceri di*, *dare piacere*, *prendere piacere*) in a sexual context, and there are undoubtedly many more. "Il

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[40] See also: 7.7.33; 2.5.4; 4.3.1; 1.4.18; 3.1.36; 3.1.37; 3.3.54; 3.7.68; 2.7.22; 2.7.37; 2.7.80.
[41] See also 2.7.30; 2.7.75; 3.3.54; 4.7.12; 1.10.53; 7.9.69; 8.2.38; 8.4.28; 3.5.32.

monaco, ancora che da grandissimo suo piacere e diletto fosse con questa giovane occupato" (1.4.8), "se io la posso recare a fare i piaceri miei" (1.4.15) and "a prendere amoroso piacere l'un dell'altro incominciarono" (2.6.37), are typical examples of this form of euphemism in practice.[42] On one level, employing *piacere* to refer to sexual activity suggests a ludic and playful attitude towards lovemaking, in which the enjoyment found in the sexual act represents the greatest possible form of pleasure for the protagonists within the *novelle*. At the same time, since these expressions are employed so frequently in the *Decameron*, this renders the sex that they describe increasingly formulaic, thereby potentially diminishing any eroticism. What is also significant about this form of sexual reference is that while these verbs direct attention back onto the participants and their feelings of sexual pleasure, they turn attention away from the act itself: "si recò a dover fare i suoi piaceri" (7.3.22). Thanks to the verbal circumlocutions that refer to feelings of pleasure, Boccaccio therefore avoids naming the sexual act directly or alluding to it in any detail.

By couching the majority of his sexual discourse in very general and highly innocuous verbs that relate to vague activities and concepts such as "meeting," "visiting," "finding," "being with" and "pleasure," Boccaccio succeeds in disclosing very little detail about the sexual act itself. Since, as Pearcy states, it is clear that "greater determinateness of signification correlates directly with greater offensiveness,"[43] Boccaccio's frequent recourse to such euphemistic verbs is therefore especially important as it also allows him to evade further the degree of referentiality that connects direct terms with obscenity.

Conclusions

The constraints of this essay have allowed me to cite only a limited number of examples for each of Boccaccio's evasive typologies. However, I hope to have gone some way to proving that the author was careful to follow a number of established conventions when writing about sex, incorporating a range of ethically appropriate reference systems into his writing. There can be little doubt that Boccacccio speaks verbosely of sex, but always indirectly:

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[42] See also 1.4.18; 2.7.22; 2.7.58; 3.2.17; 3:3.1; 3.3.54; 3.4.10; 3.4.32; 3.5.21; 3.6.26; 3.5.32; 3.8.37; 3.9.46; 3.10.11; 4.3.20; 4.3.26; 4.6.12; 4.6.34; 4.7.9; 4.7.9; 7.4.9; 7.4.30; 7.7.33; 8.7.23; 8.10.55; 10.5.20. This list is by no means exhaustive.

[43] Pearcy 1974, 166,

"in maniera mediata."[44] Thus, sexual messages between lovers are disguised; lubricious activities are concealed by the other —more honest— side of the metaphorical utterance. Boccaccio thereby seeks to beat the theologians at their own game, using "honest" metaphorical words in such a way that they shield sexual explicitness, while allowing for enjoyment of the veiled object of desire. It is easy to make judgments about the apparent obscenity of a text, yet it is important to understand the precise historical conventions on which Boccaccio was drawing in his handling of sexual language. This analysis therefore challenges those interpretations that casually identify the *Decameron*'s sexual lexis as "licentious" or "obscene," confirming instead Boccaccio's own claim that his language is decorous, especially at the level of its vocabulary. It is obvious that Boccaccio spoke with *onesti vocaboli*, however understood.

CATHERINE BAXTER

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[44] Boggione and Casalegno 1996, ix.

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