

“A uno sposo novello si può anche contare qualche
novelletta boccaccevole”: Boccaccio and the
Lascivious Discourse of Generation and Procreation
among Eighteenth-Century Men of Science

Introduction

From the beginning of the long eighteenth century until its end in the early 1800s, *letterati* from every region of the polycentric Italian enlightenment found themselves in a defensive position on the subject of Italian prose and its Baroque legacy. Boccaccio's *Decameron* was one of the few texts that writers in search of models were proud to follow, though there were few Italian prose authors who could avail themselves of Boccaccio's narrative strategies in the genre of the novel, which had yet to develop fully in Italy.¹ Yet Boccaccio certainly inspired one particular group of scholars: anatomists and natural scientists who wrote about the illnesses and deaths of their patients, and increasingly about their own lives. In search of a means to describe, understand and disseminate their laboratory discoveries and their treatment of patients to a broader audience, these scientists found a model in Boccaccio. By analyzing the work of the anatomists who invoked Boccaccio in their writing about the intersection between human nature and physiology, it is my goal to provide a heretofore unknown area of reception and emulation of Boccaccio's prose style, language and narrative strategies.

Italian Prose and Its Discontents in the Eighteenth Century

Much ink has been spilled over the intense debate that pit French and Italian theoreticians and writers against each other in the battle for linguistic hegemony at the cusp of the eighteenth century. The argument was taken up in both the periodical press and by many academies throughout Italy,

¹ The rise of the novel in Italy is currently undergoing intense scrutiny and prompting a provocative and much overdue rethinking of origins and evolution, thanks in large part to the reassessment of the role of translated novels in eighteenth-century Italian literary history. See, for example, Clerici 1997 and Madignani 2000.

such as the Accademia dei Pugni, where cultural debates spilled over from the salon into the press, and in the case of this particular academy, into their newspaper, *Il Caffé*. Memorable, in particular, are the many railings against the normative role assumed by the Accademia della Crusca, the first European language academy founded in 1583, and its dictionary, the *Vocabolario della Crusca*, which only listed as valid those words used by authors who had written in Florentine. The sentiment to preserve a language that had been admired and emulated throughout Europe for its verbal artistry made sense in the sixteenth century; it also resonated deeply with other European nations that would follow the lead of the Crusca in their quest both to forge and to preserve identity through the protection of their linguistic and literary patrimonies. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, that same sentiment had become an albatross for the Italian states. It not only weighed Italy down through the quaintly old-fashioned ring it lent to Italian literary production, particularly prose, but it had also made Italian letters something of a laughing stock throughout the rest of Europe, as we know from the Bouhours controversy, which will be discussed later in this article.

As Françoise Waquet has shown, the French had become well equipped to adapt language to evolving scientific and social realities, their goals and circumstances often being closely intertwined in narration.² Among the scientific discoveries that were most greatly reflected in literature, we find “generation,” the result of human coupling. The sexual practices and courtship scenes that animated English and French eighteenth-century novels, and the relationship of those same depictions to the evolving knowledge about sexual functioning and response, have been the topic of several monographs over the past quarter of a century; little, however, has been written about the relationship between medical discourse and Italian prose, which is the topic of this article.³

Among the most vociferous and incisive critiques of the Crusca to appear in *Il Caffé* was Alessandro Verri’s “Rinunzia avanti notaio degli autori del presente foglio periodico al Vocabolario della Crusca,” published in 1764 in the newspaper he had founded together with his brother Pietro to lampoon, in *Spectator*- and *Tatler*-like fashion, the many idiosyncrasies of Italian culture. In his article, Verri expresses, with ironic disdain, his intention to boycott the aesthetic and grammatical tyranny of Europe’s oldest language academy, the Accademia della Crusca, with its rigid approach to language usage and the ability to adapt language to an evolving culture through the freedom to create neologisms. He harks back to the time when the three

² Waquet 1990, 233–34.

³ See in particular Harvey 2004 and Scheibinger 1993.

crowns of Italian literature were writing and their natural propensity to create new vocabulary as needed. To be sure, Verri cites Boccaccio among Dante, Petrarch and Casa with respect to their freedom to coin neologisms:

Perché se Petrarca, se Dante, se Boccaccio, se Casa e gli altri testi di lingua hanno avuta la facultà d'inventar parole nuove e buone, così pretendiamo che tale libertà convenga ancora a noi; conciossiaché abbiamo due braccia, due gambe, un corpo ed una testa fra due spalle com'eglino l'ebbero.⁴

Because if Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, Casa and the other great Florentine authors were capable of inventing new, usable words, we insist that the same liberties be extended to us, for we have two arms, two legs, a body and a head between our shoulders as they had.

However, the strongest case for Boccaccio and the illustrious age of Italian prose during the embattled eighteenth century came from what might initially seem a surprising source: the pens of eighteenth-century anatomists. Revisiting Italy's anatomical prowess, particularly in the nascent fields of reproduction and generation in the Renaissance, we are reminded of the work of Realdo Colombo (1516–59), Andreas Vesalius (1515–64), a Belgian who studied in Pavia and Padua, and Gabriele Falloppio (1523–69). Writing on reproduction was further strengthened by Galileo Galilei's (1564–1642) scientific method in the early seventeenth century, as well as the mechanistic research of Marcello Malpighi (1628–94) in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Anatomists and Boccaccio

One of Malpighi's students, Antonio Vallisneri (1661–1730), and Vallisneri's student in turn, Giovanni Bianchi (otherwise Janus Plancus, 1693–1775), are shining examples of this legacy and its evolution across new frontiers of scientific research, beyond the mechanistic and into the contextual. Scholars of the history of science, such as Peter Hanns Reill, have written about the waning interest in mechanism during the mid-eighteenth century, and the rise in vitalistic thinking among a group of scientists who sought to understand what lay beyond the "man-machine," to quote anatomy student La Mettrie's controversial volume by the same title, *L'Homme machine*.⁵ This included emotions, work, relationships, social interaction, food and drink, i.e., what we would define today as overall lifestyle factors. Vitalists sought to understand the driving force of life and nature as opposed to describing

⁴ Verri 1993, 47. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁵ Reill 2005 and La Mettrie 1748.

a mechanistic balance in which the universe was conceived in the image of a big clock with all of its component parts.⁶ This image, however, was not particularly conducive to narrative. Instead, works addressing vitalistic concerns of nature and the human in nature and society pushed later generations of anatomists to think about science as it intersected with humanity in society. Faced with the need for new forms of medical writing that might offer opportunities for incorporating such factors into the recounting of medicine and science, anatomists found models in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

The anatomists to be discussed in this article, Bianchi and Vallisneri, had begun to test the limits of mechanistic science in their work, becoming increasingly interested in questions of human geography and science. Thus, they were committed to reinvigorating the rather dry, terminology-laden documents, known as *consulti* 'consultations,' in which doctors offered medical advice and analysis. A consultation was a letter written by a well-known physician in response to a request from patients, their relatives, or their attending physicians. They date back to thirteenth-century Bologna, with origins in legal documents. As Domenico Bertoloni Meli has noted, these consultations were thoroughly textual in nature, since they were elicited from written descriptions of a particular malady or physical symptoms.⁷ Despite these limitations, as Meli has pointed out, they shed light on how physicians thought and practiced and, we might add, how they wrote.

Antonio Vallisneri was particularly aware of the importance of style and language as he prepared his 1713 publication of what would prove to be a poorly received selection of one hundred of Malpighi's consultations, a *Centuria*.⁸ He certainly thought about what might have tainted their reception among the readers of such collections and how he might do things differently as he assembled his own consultations for publication in 1733, a volume that would only appear after his death. While Malpighi's Latin consultations are highly formulaic, those of Vallisneri are rich with the anecdotes and brio found in the consultations written by Francesco Redi (1626–97), another anatomist whose work Vallisneri admired greatly. Redi, however, wrote his consultations in Tuscan, and never in Latin, which would certainly

⁶ Reill 2005, 24.

⁷ Meli 2011, 331–53.

⁸ The first published collection of Malpighi's *Consulti* appeared in 1713, edited by Antonio Vallisneri under the name of Gaetano Gaspari. Some of them had already been published in the Venetian journal *La galleria di Minerva*, where Vallisneri usually published his own works and experimental results (Marinozzi 2003, 945).

have been a prime factor in Vallisneri's interest in them. Redi, like Vallisneri, was inspired by Boccaccio's prose and as such Vallisneri would decide to follow his example.⁹ Redi also wrote poetry, was a member of both the Arcadia and Crusca academies and supported the preparation of the Tuscan dictionary. He reflected on Boccaccio as he wrote, considering the author to be a reliable narrator who incorporated a scientific-like observation into his *novelle*; for Redi, this was a key element in the universal appeal of their comedic effects. In the *Esperienze intorno a diverse cose naturali*, Redi confirms that Boccaccio had accurately reported on the common practice of cranes when the cook Chichibio describes the crane as perched on one leg to his purportedly duped master Currado Gianfigliuzzi in *Dec.* 6.4.¹⁰ While it is easy to speculate that Redi may have made this reference to please his Medici patrons, a reading of his consultations reveals a far greater engagement with the story and Boccaccio's narrative truth than that for which simple deference might account. Indeed, he is defending Boccaccio as an author whose work follows the rules of verisimilitude, an important point in the developing French debate against Italian literature, which criticized the extreme liberties taken by Italian writers with the truth: "Che le Gru dimorino talvolta in un sol piede è cosa verissima, e la fece vedere Chicchibio cuoco a Currado Gianfigliuzzi colà nel pian di Peretola" "The fact that cranes sometimes stand on one leg is absolutely true, as demonstrated by Chichibio, Currado Gianfigliuzzi's cook, there on the flats of Peretola."¹¹

Malpighi died in 1694, Redi a few years later in 1697, and during these years the French debates against Italian culture and letters heated up considerably. Following Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's *L'art poétique* (1674), René Rapin's *Réflexions sur la poétique* (1674), and Dominique Bouhours'

⁹ "Uno de' primi motivi, che ha mosso il nostro autore [Antonio Vallisneri], si è stato l'aver, sino da giovane, seco stesso stabilito di seguitar con pié fermo le illustri pedate di Francesco Redi, gran medico e gran naturale filosofo, che ha sempre voluto in lingua toscana scrivere, sì per essere da tutti i nostri universalmente inteso, sì per dar lustro e decoro alla nostra lingua, sì per ampliarla e renderla necessaria anche alle nazioni straniere. Il famoso Lamindo Pritanio, che vuol dire il savio e dotto Signor Muratori di Modena, fra' consigli che nel suo trattato del buon gusto dà agli arconti d'Italia, fra' quali era descritto il nostro autore, uno de' più premurosi e de' più spettanti alla gloria della nostra nazione si è, che in lingua volgare le arti e le scienze si scrivano, arricchendola di nuovi vocaboli e di proprie parole adornandola, per ispiegare al popolo non intendente il latino (che non è in piccol numero) i misteri più astrusi del cielo, della natura e dell'arte, imitando i Greci, gli Arabi, gli Egizi, i Latini, gli Ebrei e cadauna altra antica nazione, che del suo idioma uso facendo, ammaestrò col medesimo la sua gente" (Vallisneri 1722, 1:255–56).

¹⁰ Redi 1687, 83–4.

¹¹ Redi 1858, 263.

Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène (1671) and *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* (1687), the Italians finally began to respond with works such as Orsi's *Considerazioni sopra un famoso Libro Franzese intitolato La Manière de bien penser dans les Ouvrages d'esprit, cioè La Maniera di ben pensare ne' Componimenti, divise in sette Dialoghi, Ne' quali s'agitano alcune Quistioni Rettoriche, e Poetiche, e si difendono molti Passi di Poeti e di Prosatori Italiani condannati dall'Autor Franzese* (1703). Orsi's work is remarkable for encompassing the entire range of Italian literary production, despite its primary focus on poetry, and its ability to defend and uphold the Italian tradition.¹² Bianchi and Vallisneri began their writing careers in this context: both saw themselves as taking up the mantle of Boccaccio, firmly rejecting French models and proud of the example left to them by the author of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio became an important point of reference for both authors as leaders in prose, but also human exempla, especially as an ever-widening circle of people, no longer exclusively confined to the elite, wanted access to medical knowledge, and above all, a means of rhetorical access for understanding this. Boccaccio would in fact provide both.

Anatomists of the caliber of Bianchi and Vallisneri were perfectly positioned to defend Italian prose and to practice it in new ways. Their reputations throughout Europe assured them of renown and self-esteem. Let us begin with a closer examination of Vallisneri's writings, in particular his correspondence with Bianchi. In a letter dated 17 June 1722, Vallisneri refers to the vision he shares with Bianchi about how much better it would be if all Italians would use Boccaccio as a model for prose:

Se tutti s'accordassero con V.S. Ill.ma intorno allo scrivere nella maniera in cui scrisse il gran Boccaccio, non può ella giudicare meglio, ma quando i toscani, che in Italia hanno inalzato il tribunale sopra il ben dire, diversamente pensano e fanno, è difficile, anzi impossibile, a rendere universalmente accettata e gradita la detta maniera.¹³

If everyone agreed with you, Most Illustrious Sir, about writing in the manner in which the great Boccaccio wrote, your opinion would be unassailable; but when the Tuscans, who in Italy have established their own tribunal about the proper way of speaking, think and act otherwise, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to make this fashion of writing universally accepted and agreed upon.

¹² Accorsi and Graziosi 1989.

¹³ *Fondo Gambetti* (Vallisneri to Bianchi, Padua, 17 June 1722).

Speaking about the Trecento, when Italian prose was in flux but at least had the excellent model of Boccaccio, Vallisneri laments a prose style that was still unsteady, but could become stable if writers would seek to emulate Boccaccio.¹⁴ He insists that writing in the style of Boccaccio was the best model one could follow: “non posso dir altro, se non che chi scrive nello stile del Boccaccio non può certamente essere tassato, lasciando però certe parole ormai antiquate, che non s’accomodano all’orecchio de’ presenti” ‘I have nothing more to say except that those who write in the style of Boccaccio certainly won’t be burdened as long as they avoid certain words that are now antiquated and no longer familiar to our ears.’¹⁵ Vallisneri uses the letter to tell Bianchi about the anonymous article he had written, about to be published in the *Supplementi al Giornale de’ Letterati d’Italia*.¹⁶ The primary purpose of this journal was to elevate the status of Italian scientific and cultural activity in Europe, a presence that Vallisneri believed would be beneficial to Europe as a whole.¹⁷ Vallisneri’s anonymous article carried the title “Che ogni Italiano debba scrivere in Lingua purgata Italiana, o Toscana, per debito, per giustizia, e per decoro della nostra Italia: lettera del Sig. N. N. *** al Sig. Alessandro Pegolotti Segretario di Belle Lettere del Serenissimo di Guastalla” ‘May every Italian speak in the purified Italian language, or Tuscan, out of a sense of duty, justice and decorum for our Italy: Letter sent from Mr. N. N. *** to Mr. Alessandro Pegolotti, Secretary of Belles Lettres of the Most Serene Duchy of Guastalla.’ It is written in the familiar style of an advice letter, in which an “anonymous” author answers the complaint lodged against Vallisneri for no longer writing in Latin, opting instead for the vernacular. The author of the first letter had speculated as to the reason for this, concluding that Vallisneri had probably become lazy. This pretext is used to extol the virtues of writing in Tuscan, to give Italian equal status with other languages, i.e., Arabic, English, French, German, Latin and Spanish. The “anonymous” author also points out that foreigners will learn Italian if they wish to read the content he is producing, just as he learns any language he needs to learn in order to advance his own research.

This was not the first time that Vallisneri had defended Italian as a modern, scientific language. In the preface to his *Saggio d’istoria medica e naturale* (1733), he addressed “l’amico lettore” ‘his friend the reader’ to explain how the most erudite of nations had tried to diffuse knowledge relative to natural and medical history in their own language. Yet he finds that Italians,

¹⁴ Marazzini 2004, 85.

¹⁵ *Fondo Gambetti* (Vallisneri to Bianchi, Padua, 17 June 1722).

¹⁶ Vallisneri 1722, 1:252.

¹⁷ Generali 2003, 85.

who appear to scorn their native language, are embarrassed to use it for writing about solid and scientific matters, preferring instead the languages of dead men: the Romans, Greeks, Arabs and Jews. In this way, they never learn how to work with the living language, becoming like so many of their peers “pellegrini in casa propria” ‘pilgrims in their own home,’ as well as “alla sua Patria ribelli” ‘rebels toward their own homeland.’ He chides them for their belief that their native language is impoverished, lacking the necessary terminology and vocabulary for discussing all things. Thus, they throw themselves into Latin and other ancient languages, satisfied with what they find there. They are wrong, however, because all they would have to do is consult the wise Tuscans and other Italians who have treated every subject matter with elegance and propriety in the vernacular. They would understand this, he opines, if they would only become acquainted with these authors and not consider themselves above reading their works in the *volgare*.¹⁸

Indeed, the dilemma of the scientist in the eighteenth century is not terribly far from Galileo Galilei’s position some one hundred years prior. Galileo possessed an unwavering faith in the *volgare*, both for its expressive capacity and its symbolic value as a means of setting himself apart from the “baroni,” thus making erudition accessible. He communicated in an elegant tone, which was neither low nor pretentious. He did not create many neologisms, but instead appropriated terms that were already in use, applying them in a technical sense and imbuing them with a modern meaning. He avoided the use of Latin and Greek terms unless they were already current, preferring instead simple, Italian words.¹⁹

This theme will come up in other letters as well, but it is particularly interesting in Vallisneri’s exchanges with Bianchi, who not only promoted writing everything in Italian and in the style and language of Boccaccio, but also wrote *novelle* in the style of Boccaccio, purportedly for the reading pleasure of his friends. Bianchi would live some forty-five years beyond Vallisneri, who died suddenly in 1730. Yet beyond the interest of writing in the style and language of Boccaccio, both anatomists also wrote “boccaccevolutamente,” referring explicitly to their use of language, content and censorship, and the desire to bring medicine and medical practice into reflections on lifestyle, particularly with regard to sexuality.

The theory and practice of “generation” and “procreation” among men of medical science in the eighteenth century sparked a wealth of epistolary activity throughout Europe along networks of scholarly exchange that have

¹⁸ Camerano 1905, 86.

¹⁹ Marazzini 2004, 142–45.

only now begun to be explored. From Leiden, to Padua, to Bologna, London and Göttingen, to name only a few, anatomists referenced case after case of observations documenting the variety and frequency of particular genital configurations in animals and humans alike (both before and after autopsy), sexual performance (both observed and imagined), and anecdotal comments related to their own ideas or feelings about sexuality inspired by the case at hand. In a surprising number of these letters, Boccaccio is cited as a means of signaling a shift from the scientific to the social or personal. References to Boccaccio are used in this case to document the reception of Boccaccio and his scholarly output among a particular professional audience for whom the Boccaccio corpus offered a rich source for conceptualizing the public domain of the burgeoning science of sexuality. Indeed, the challenge of disseminating scientific information about sexuality and procreation to a wider audience also emerges in Vallisneri's letters. The extent of the Boccaccio corpus and their mastery of it brought specific *novelle* immediately to mind as a means of explaining the social side of scientific phenomena.

The quote cited in the title of this article is but one of the many examples discovered in the epistolary exchanges of Vallisneri, Bianchi and Antonio Cocchi, a Florentine physician (known as Horace Walpole's personal physician during the Englishman's stay in Florence) and antiquarian. The quote, appearing in a letter dated 3 December 1716, is sent from Vallisneri in Padua to his friend Ubertino Landi, a nobleman known for organizing the meetings of the Arcadia in Piacenza. He congratulates Landi on his recent wedding, marveling that his friend had taken the time to read his book, *Istoria del camaleonte africano*:

Ammiro bene la bella e nobile curiosità, ch'ha avuto l'Ecc.za V.ra, immersa in altre delizie, di leggere il mio libro. Quando è giunta alla descrizione delle parti genitali del camaleonte maschio, il quale si trova corredato di due membri generatori, non si è augurata, nelle presenti sue emergenze, d'essere in quelle simile a quel fortunato animale? Qual parzialità è stata quella della natura? Noi ne abbisogneressimo d'una dozzina almeno, acciòché, stanco uno, succedesse l'altro, e ce ne ha fatto un solo miserabile, che per tali bisogni troppo presto si stanca. A un sposo novello si può anche contare qualche novelletta boccaccevole.²⁰

I truly admire the beautiful and noble curiosity that Your Excellency had in reading my book while immersed in other delights. When you reached the description of the genitalia of the male chameleon, equipped as he is

²⁰ Biblioteca Comunale "Passerini," ms. Pallastrelli n. 100, cc. 140^r–41^v (Vallisneri to Landi, Padua, 3 December 1716). A full transcription is available online at: <<http://www.vallisneri.it/micheli.shtml>>.

with two instruments of generation, did you not wish, in your current predicament, that you instead shared a similar predicament to the one of that fortunate animal? Why this preferential treatment from nature? To us, who could use a dozen at least, so that when one is tired another could take over and so on, nature has given only a single, miserable one, which for such needs is exhausted much too soon. To those who newly wed, we can certainly tell a few Boccaccio-like *novelle*.

While this comment might easily be glossed over as an avuncular, male exchange, it is important to know that Vallisneri's findings were the source of debate and controversy in a scientific community that eschewed anatomical research in favor of medieval medical book learning. By telling science in a "boccaccevole," novelistic fashion, Vallisneri builds consensus for his work and a broader public platform, for he could count on Landi to reference the letter in Arcadia.

He also writes the entries to his *Saggio alfabetico d'istoria medica e naturale*, written between 1726 and 1727, but only published by his son after his death in 1730, in a "boccaccevole" manner. For example, under the article "Clitoride," after a description of the body part, Vallisneri tells the story of a woman whose parents thought she was a man, for which they also dressed her as a man. She had a beard and appeared to be a man to all who knew her. A few months after sleeping with a young man, however, her belly began to grow. Her parents brought her to the priest, to whom she confessed that she had been with a man. The parents then took her to Vallisneri to try to understand if their child was in fact a man or a woman, for anatomically, she seemed to be male. Vallisneri examined her/him:

Risposi che [...] a me mandasse [il Parroco] l'infantata paziente, per osservare, se quella parte che credevano il corno, con cui cozzano gli uomini colle donne, fosse forata, e se per quella orinasse, o il seme spandesse; che se tale era, poteva chiamarsi Ermafrodito, se imperforata, era la Clitoride allungata, ed esser vera Donna. Si trovò senza foro, laonde donna la dichiarai, e fù dal suo Drudo, ridente il popolo, sposata, e con nera barba sul volto vestita da Donna, e vive ancora, mutato avendo genio, e mestiere.²¹

I answered that [...] the parish priest should send the pregnant patient to me so that I could determine whether that part that they believed to be the horn with which men butt against women had an orifice in it, and if he/she urinated or ejaculated through it, for if that were the case, he/she could be called a hermaphrodite; if there were no orifice, and it were instead an elongated clitoris, she can be considered a true woman. It was found to be without an orifice, so I declared her a woman and she was married by her paramour, and in front of the bemused public, with a black beard on her

²¹ Vallisneri 1983, 75.

face, dressed like a woman, and she is still alive today, having changed both her gender and her trade.

Vallisneri's prose unmistakably recalls the passage in the *Decameron* where a penis is first discovered by Alatiel, "non avendo mai davanti saputo con che corno gli uomini cozzano" 'who had never before known with what kind horn men do their butting' (2.7.30) and reflects the influence of Boccaccio's style, particular in the wording of the resolution to the dilemma and in the description of the public who had witnessed the strange event and become tolerant of her, now bearing witness to the acceptance of her sexuality and appearance among the young woman's community: "I declared her a woman and she was married by her paramour, and in front of the bemused public, with a black beard on her face, dressed like a woman, and she is still alive today, having changed both her gender and her trade."

In a similar fashion, Bianchi published a medical *novella* in 1744, *Breve storia di Caterina Vizzani*, to provide a context and life story for the sexually ambiguous person upon whom he had performed an autopsy. Giovanni Bordon, the name used by Caterina Vizzani when performing as a man, used a self-fashioned penis, referred to in the *novella* as his "piuolo." Bianchi refers to Boccaccio numerous times in his correspondence with other doctors about this case, and he ultimately decides to write it as a Boccaccian *novella*, using the word "piuolo" from the *Decameron* to refer to the artificial penis she fashioned for herself out of leather and rags. Bianchi treats the dildo ("piuolo") as an integral part of her anatomy:

Giovanni per essere più grato alle Donne in tutto un maschile portamento, e un libero parlare usava. Anzi per parere uomo davvero un bel Piuolo de Cuoijo ripieno di Cenci s'era fatto, che sotto la camischia teneva, e talora, ma sempre coperto a suoi Compagni per baldanza di soppiatto mostrava.²²

To be more attractive to women, Giovanni consistently adopted a masculine demeanour and employed a loose way of speaking. Indeed, in order to appear to be a real man, he had fashioned for himself a nice leather dildo [*piuolo*], stuffed with rags, which he kept under his shirt; and though all the while he kept it covered, he sometimes daringly showed it off to his friends in a secretive manner.

Bianchi ultimately ran into trouble with this word, for the Venetian publisher Giambattista Pasquali asked him to drop it in accordance with a request from the ecclesiastical censors who demanded its removal in order to pass inspection for publication. In a letter dated 8 August 1744, Bianchi

²² Bianchi 1744, 7.

wrote to Pasquali to insist that not one word should be changed in the publication of his manuscript on Caterina Vizzani. As we can see from the letter, the most offensive word was “piuolo” or dildo:

soprattutto le raccomando che la faccia correggere bene da un correttore di li gente che osservi minutamente acciò che venga come l'originale senza prendersi libertà di mutare nulla di quelle parole che a lui paressero strane, o di dovere avere altra ortografia, perciocché la cosa è scritta alla bocccacevole, cioè in Toscano antico per cui non va mutato niente dall'originale.²³

I'm asking you above all else to have my manuscript corrected properly by one of their typesetters, one who will take special care that it is set exactly as it was written, without taking the liberty of changing in the slightest those words, that might seem to him strange or misspelled, because the piece is written in the Boccacesque style, in other words, in ancient Tuscan, for which not one single thing should be changed from the original.

Bianchi and Boccaccio

Maria D. Collina's work focuses to a large degree on Bianchi's literary interest in the Boccaccian *novella*, citing Bianchi's discussion of his own *novelle* written in the vein of Boccaccio in his correspondence.²⁴ She unearthed what is perhaps his earliest literary work, the *novella* “Gli amori di Zeokinizul Re di Kofirans” (1746), purportedly translated from the original Arabic into French, and then from French into Italian by Bianchi.²⁵ None of his other *novelle* have ever been found except, I would add, the story of Caterina Vizzani, of which Collina makes no mention. Considering her otherwise scrupulous examination of Bianchi's papers and publications, we can only surmise that the subject matter of Vizzani's story was considered too scandalous to broach in a scholarly work published in the 1950s. However, it is evident from the letters cited by Collina that Bianchi had a high opinion of his own literary writing and that it was a very important aspect of his life. This attitude is certainly corroborated in his correspondences concerning the *novella* on Caterina Vizzani, the medical *novella* he had written later in life when he was an established anatomist. He boasted to the papal physician Antonio Leprotti: “That history that I wrote in a Boccacesque style will be printed easily in Venice.”²⁶ When trying to convince the publisher Giambattista Pasquali, he described the *novella* as “written in a Boccacesque

²³ *Fondo Gambetti* (Bianchi to Pasquali, Venice, 8 August 1744).

²⁴ Collina 1957.

²⁵ Collina 1957, 137–54.

²⁶ Findlen 2009, 230.

style, in other words, in ancient Tuscan.”²⁷ Ultimately, his refusal to remove the word “piuolo,” as we have mentioned, forced him to publish the work with the risk-taking publisher Bonducci in Florence with the false imprint of Simone Occhi in Venice. He insisted that the word and its meaning, taken directly from Boccaccio, was offensive to no one.

The currency of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* among men of erudition in eighteenth-century Italy coincides with a revival of interest in the narration of life stories as the novelistic genre begins to reestablish itself in the Veneto region where Padua, renowned university town and home to the medical professors who wrote these letters, is located. Early modern English and French novels entered Italy through Venice and were widely consumed in their original, reprinted, and translated versions, as book historians Mario Infelise and Françoise Waquet have shown in their work.²⁸ The consumption of these foreign literary works prompted the Italians to reconsider their own prose narrative legacy, long overshadowed by the Italian poetic tradition that had made Italy a literary point of reference in Europe for some three centuries. Thus idealized Petrarchan beauty yields in the eighteenth century to the depiction of real women in real-life situations, along the lines of the one hundred stories that make up Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Eighteenth-century anatomists thus paid as careful attention to the evolution of the “volgar lingua” as they did to scientific discovery. Considering the move from Latin to the vernacular as the language that would carry their ideas and discoveries to scientific and popular audiences alike, it is not surprising to find that Bianchi was referred to by a fellow Riminese, Pier Jacopo Martello, as “our living Boccaccio of Rimini,” high praise indeed for Bianchi, but also for Vallisneri who sought to explain, in a similar fashion, the social side of scientific phenomena in his professional writing.²⁹ The desire to add a patient’s life story to clinical information reminds us of Freud’s recounting of Dora, or even Oliver Sacks’ narrations of his patients’ lives in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* and *Hallucinations*, his 2012 collection of medical *novelle*. Both Freud and Sacks have followed the footsteps of doctors like Bianchi and Vallisneri, who themselves owe a debt of gratitude to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.³⁰

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²⁷ Findlen 2009, 230.

²⁸ Infelise 1989 and Waquet 1990.

²⁹ Collina 1957, 146.

³⁰ Freud 1963; Sacks 1985 and 2012.

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