

New Lessons in Criticism and Blame from the *Decameron**

One of the great innovations of the *Decameron*, with respect to the tradition, is that it aims to complicate our moral views and our ethical responses. If one believes, as I suspect many of us do, that the *Decameron* is neither immoral nor amoral in its stance, and if one believes, as I suspect many of us do, that the *Decameron*'s purpose is not solely to entertain, this claim won't strike us as earth-shaking. Precisely *how* the *Decameron* complicates our moral views — how it goes about teaching us about moral reasoning, how it leads us to reflect on what we find praiseworthy or blameworthy, and above all how it demonstrates the value of literature to this enterprise — this is a matter unlikely to be resolved any time soon. It must continue to be discussed.

Over the years, we have discovered that there are multiple ways in which the *Decameron* teaches us to view things differently and anew: by its search for harmony and joy out of confusion and chaos, by its irreverent stance toward unfounded authorities, by its spirited dialogue with sources and analogues, by its multiple languages, voices, and stylistic registers, by its use of pointed juxtapositions and pointed ironies. All these features are important to the *Decameron*'s success, and in many cases, they constitute significant innovations in the Italian and the European literary tradition.

We have also recognized, over the years, that the *Decameron* teaches us to reflect on what it means to speak and listen (or write and read) and that it does so by offering us a panoply of authorial and audiential role models — some seemingly reliable, some far less so, some puzzlingly uncertain.¹ Reading the *Decameron*, it turns out, is much like finding oneself

* The argumentation in this essay has benefited from careful critical readings offered by Kathleen Perry Long, Anna Paparcone, Daniel Tonozzi, and Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski.

¹ Interested in the “various ways in which Boccaccio teaches us to read the text,” Millicent J. Marcus draws our attention to the internalized artist figures and internalized publics of the *Decameron*. See her *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the*

in an academic setting. It's tempting to think that all the teachers are going to be fabulous and that learning from them is going to be a quite straightforward enterprise. The real educational process happens in a much less straightforward way, however, as students seek to determine the soundness of those teacherly voices, seek to identify other contributors who could be just as insightful (if not more so), and seek to figure out which books are actually worth reading, what facts stand out, and what theories have any validity.

Consistent with my own pedagogy and consistent with what I think Boccaccio was trying to achieve in the *Decameron*, I believe that the burden is on those of us who are readers and students. When we hear an opinion touted as gospel truth or rejected as utterly loathsome, when we get a report of something done well or something done badly, how careful are we to take measured account of the manner in which the information has been delivered to us? Are we confident that we have enough information to pronounce praise or to blame?

In fact, the *Decameron* offers us a spectacular opportunity to witness how information can be expertly controlled. The narrators and the Author function as "filtering mechanisms." To the extent that any fictional construct can be said to choose, they make choices about what to report in direct discourse or indirect discourse. They represent thoughts that could belong to a given character, could belong to alternate publics, or could be some combination thereof. Such reporting happens with the greatest frequency when frametale narrators re-present a scene that has been imagined, heard about, read about, or actually witnessed. It also happens as the Author conveys the frametale narrators' reactions or tells us what the stories are about (as for example, in the Author's rubrics). There are plenty of other medieval literary texts that expertly control information – the French fabliaux provide some outstanding examples of this – but on account of its length and complexity, the *Decameron* provides an especially sustained reflection on the ethics of reporting.

I would like to draw our attention to a specific kind of reported event in the *Decameron*, namely, moments where a wife – most especially a wronged, virtuous wife – criticizes her husband for behavior that a reader could objectively find blameworthy. Since the *Decameron's* Author offers

"*Decameron*" (Saratoga, Cal.: Anma Libri, 1979), p. 9. She emphasizes the *Decameron's* resistance to univocal interpretation – particularly evident from the final story of the collection where, as she notes, "Boccaccio subjects his readers to the severest of tests" (9).

that women in love will be able to take useful advice and pleasure from his book, we are led to pause, almost inevitably, over instances where the woman reader could reasonably expect to find “advice about how to speak,” most especially when a woman addresses a man whom she knows intimately and to whom she is joined by legal and perhaps emotional bonds. As I intend to show here, multiple voices from the *Decameron* come together in order to tell a story about how “good women” (which is to say women who are both virtuous and of elevated social standing) should speak when they have been aggrieved. The situation I describe has broader implications. It raises questions such as: Can the less powerful ever really speak truth to power? Can they ever really name blameworthy behavior as such?² I suspect that those were fascinating questions for Boccaccio, whose socio-economic, intellectual, and psychological condition may have predisposed him to identify, at least in part, with people outside the accepted circles of power. Finally, I shall ask us to reconsider how we, as critical readers of the *Decameron*, assign praise and blame and I shall propose some strategies for “new lessons in criticism.”

* * *

Among the wronged wives of the *Decameron*, perhaps none is more striking than Madonna Zinevra (II, 9), whose denunciation of the injustices done to her emerges as the model against which all subsequent criticisms of husbands will be judged. Looking to Madonna Zinevra, we will gain a more accurate understanding of how a narrator can handle a situation in which a woman reprimands her husband, shaping our perceptions of how admirable or blameworthy she may be.

In the moment that interests us, Madonna Zinevra, disguised as Sicurano da Finale, stands in the presence of three other men: 1) the Sultan; 2) Ambrogiuolo, who has falsely claimed to have taken his pleasure with Zinevra, winning a bet against Zinevra’s husband Bernabò; and 3) Bernabò himself, who had ordered Zinevra killed and believes she is dead. Sicurano has already managed to have Ambrogiuolo tell his entertaining version of story to the Sultan, and then to arrange a situation in which the Sultan forces Ambrogiuolo to tell the truth of the matter in the presence of Ber-

² Let me be more straightforward, at least in the parenthesis offered by this footnote. It is quite astonishing to see the increasing pressure, especially in the United States today, against anything that would look like assigning responsibility for bad behavior. Speaking out against bad behavior is considered “bad form,” an indication of less than collegial activity. Little concern is shown, however, for the ways in which *not* speaking out is a form of complicity.

nabò. Exactly what that truth is, we are not fully certain at first, since we learn only that Ambrogiuolo told all (“narrò ogni cosa” [II, 9, 60]).³ When Sicurano asks Bernabò, “E tu che facesti per questa bugia alla tua donna?” (“And what did you do to your wife on account of this lie?” [II, 9, 61]), we learn what the summary statement had stopped short of saying: namely, that Ambrogiuolo lied.

In exposing the lies about her, Zinevra demonstrates superb rhetorical control. It no doubt serves her well that she had begun speaking as Sicurano (i.e., as a man), in a public setting, and to a figure of authority. In a single, skillfully crafted sentence, she labels each of the personages in the dramatic situation she has constructed: first she acknowledges the Sultan as her lord, then she identifies herself, then she identifies the perpetrator of the wrong done to her and the nature of the injury, and finally, she indicates the man who must be her husband Bernabò and the wrong he had committed against her:

Signor mio, io sono la misera sventurata Zinevra, sei anni andata tapinando in forma d'uom per lo mondo, da questo traditor d'Ambrogiuolo falsamente e reamente vituperata, e da questo crudele e iniquo uomo data a uccidere ad un suo fante e a mangiare a' lupi. (II, 9, 69)

My lord, I am the poor unfortunate Zinevra, who spent six years wandering the world as a man, who was by this traitor Ambrogiuolo wrongly and maliciously dishonored, and who was by this cruel and unjust man given over to one of his servants to be killed and then eaten by wolves.

Throughout her eloquent condemnation of lies,⁴ Madonna Zinevra refrains from identifying her husband by name or calling him a “murderer,” though she does call him “cruel and unjust” (“crudele e iniquo”). This may indicate an unwillingness to assign to Bernabò the kind of blame that has

³ All citations from the *Decameron* are drawn from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, 2 vols. (Torino: Einaudi, 1992). All English translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Zinevra's rhetorical skill is evident not only in the succinctness and the moral pointedness of this denunciation, but also in the material vocalizing of her pain. Her self-identification is broadened by two adjectives preceding her name (“io sono la **misera sventurata** Zinevra”) and by the series of wailing “ah” sounds that characterize both this revelation of her name and the adjectival modifying phrase that follows it (“sei **anni andata tapinando** in forma d'uom per lo mondo”). The open wail is rendered even more stunning by the alternately accented morpheme AN, which suggests that Zinevra is swept away by repeated waves that overpower her. We could visualize this as follows. The first accented “AN” is followed by a non-accented (and therefore muted) “an,” making us think that the pain might have receded, only to return, after a warning “DA ta ta,” in a third accented AN: **sei AN**ni an**DA**ta tapi**NAN**do.

been placed squarely on Ambrogiuolo, whose name appears prominently along with the designation of “traitor.” This moment asks us to reflect on how we assign gradations of culpability. Is attempted murder a lesser offense than fraud and treachery? How does ordering someone’s murder compare to providing false testimony that could lead to the ordering of someone’s murder?

Thus far, Madonna Zinevra’s speech is directed at the Sultan, so we have not yet seen anything like a direct reprimand of a guilty party. This changes when, with dramatic flair, Madonna Zinevra, seals her statement with visual proof of her identity. Having proved that she is indeed a woman, she can now prove that Ambrogiuolo is the traitor she has claimed him to be:

E stracciando i panni dinanzi e mostrando il petto, sé esser femina e al soldano e a ciascuno altro fece palese, rivolgendosi poi ad Ambrogiuolo, ingiuriosamente domandandolo quando mai, secondo che egli avanti si vantava, con lei giaciuto fosse; il quale, già riconoscendola e per vergogna quasi mutolo divenuto, niente dicea. (II, 9, 69)

And ripping her clothes and baring her breast, she made it manifestly clear both to the sultan and to everyone else that she was a woman; turning then to Ambrogiuolo, with great indignation she asked him when, as he claimed previously, he had ever lain with her. Recognizing her and falling just about mute with shame, Ambrogiuolo said nothing.

Let us pause over the information that the narrator, Filomena, offers in indirect discourse: “ingiuriosamente domandandolo quando mai, secondo che egli avanti si vantava, con lei giaciuto fosse” (“with great indignation she asked him when, as he claimed previously, he had ever lain with her”). How might Madonna Zinevra have formulated her question to Ambrogiuolo? One possibility slips out of the indirect discourse. It is a shimmeringly elegant question, consisting of two septenaries cloaking a hendecasyllable: “Ambrogiuolo, quando mai, secondo che tu avanti ti vantavi, sei tu giaciuto con me?” (As for the shamed Ambrogiuolo’s silence, we might reproduce it, as would Elsa Morante, with “!...”) This, of course, assumes that we translate “ingiuriosamente” as “with great indignation” (as I have) or “scathingly” (as Guido Waldman translates it).⁵ What if we render the word, as G. H. McWilliam does, as “haughtily”?⁶ I could imagine Zinevra being haughty here – after all, she certainly has the right to be haughty,

⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 156.

⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 2nd ed. (1995; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 177.

seeing how her virtuous behavior gives her the upper hand. But what if we translate “ingiuriosamente,” along with Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella, as “abusively”?⁷ What if we understand “ingiuriosamente” to mean, as Fanfani does, “mescolando alla domanda parole d’ingiuria” (“mixing in with her question words of insult and injury”)?⁸ I admit that I would not like to think of Madonna Zinevra as “abusively.” And I am not sure how much insult and injury can we imagine in her speech before she stops being Zinevra and becomes instead Bartolomea (II, 10), or Catella (III, 6), or Tessa, the wife of Calandrino (IX, 5).

The indirect discourse asks us not to think about Madonna Zinevra’s language. Or rather, it asks us to believe what we may already be too willing to believe, namely, that whatever we imagine her to say is what she might actually have said. Indirect discourse can serve as a protective mechanism. It can allow for the possibility of insult and injury without ever tarnishing Madonna Zinevra’s reputation with any undignified words.

In a later passage, Filomena again uses indirect discourse to describe a moment that some readers will have long awaited: the reconciliation of Madonna Zinevra and her husband. The Sultan orders that dresses and women’s companions — both markers of femininity that must be present for the situation to right itself — be brought for Madonna Zinevra. Furthermore, Bernabò gets pardoned. Exactly what that pardon looks like should be of great interest to us:

E, fattile venire onorevolissimi vestimenti femminili e donne che compagnia le tenessero, secondo la dimanda fatta da lei a Bernabò perdonò la meritata morte; il quale, riconoscituala, a' piedi di lei si gittò piagnendo e domandando perdonanza, la quale ella, quantunque egli mal degno ne fosse, benignamente gli diede, e in piede il fece levare, teneramente sì come suo marito abbracciandolo (II, 9, 71)

Having ordered fine dresses and women that could keep her company, in response to her request he pardoned Bernabò the death that he deserved. Bernabò, having recognized her, threw himself at her feet, weeping and asking forgiveness, which she kindly granted him, though he was not deserving of it; and she had him rise to his feet, where she tenderly embraced him as her husband.⁹

⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: New American Library, 2002), p. 177.

⁸ See the footnote to this passage, in Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Branca, vol. 1, p. 300.

⁹ One other edition adds a comma that could alter our reading: “E, fattili venire onorevolissimi vestimenti femminili e donne che compagnia le tenessero, secondo la dimanda fatta da lei, a Bernabò perdonò la meritata morte” (See the text of II, 9 in Gio-

What precisely does Madonna Zinevra say when she advances her request? Could it be “Vi prego di perdonare mio marito” (“I beseech you to pardon my husband”)? In that case, the comment about a death well deserved would be attributed to the narrator. Or might Madonna Zinevra herself recognize the gravity of Bernabò’s crime, with a request such as “Vi prego di perdonare a mio marito la meritata morte?” (“I beseech you to pardon my husband the death that he deserves”)?

Even more pressing would be the questions that arise when Zinevra forgives Bernabò “even though he didn’t deserve it” (“quantunque egli maldegno ne fosse”). Is it conceivable that Zinevra would say to him “I forgive you even though you do not deserve it?” To whom should we attribute this comment? To Madonna Zinevra? To Bernabò? To the Sultan? To the narrator Filomena? Here, editorial interventions are telling. Although the original autograph text reveals no punctuation that would allow us to decide about where to assign responsibility for this comment, editors in the sixteenth century intervened with punctuation in order to set the comment off as a parenthetical interpolation, thus encouraging us to read the comment as belonging to the narrator rather than to Zinevra. Representative is the following from a 1522 edition of the *Decameron* published in Venice by Aldo Romano and Andrea Asolano:

secondo la domanda fatta dallei a Bernabo perdono la meritata morte. Il quale riconosciutala a piedi di lei si gitto piagnendo; & domando perdonanza: la quale ella (quantunque egli mal degno ne fusse) benignamente gli diede.¹⁰

vanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, in *Antologia (frammentaria) della Letteratura Italiana*, available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.crs4.it/Letteratura/Decamerone/Seconda/2_09.htm>, date of access 23 August 2006). The comma makes it less certain that Madonna Zinevra’s request regards Bernabò’s fate. Her request may refer just as easily to the clothes and the attendant women, which the Sultan has just provided.

¹⁰ *Il Decamerone di Giovanni Boccaccio novamente corretto con tre novelle aggiunte* (Venice: Case d’Aldo Romano e Andrea Asolano, 1522), p. 71. The passage can also be found in *Il Decamerone di M. Giovanni Boccaccio Di nuovo emendato secondo gli Antichi esemplari, per giudizio Et diligenza di piu autori con la Diversità di molti testi posta per ordine in margine, & nel fine con gli Epiteti dell’Autore, con la esposizione de’ proverbi Et luoghi difficili, che nell’opera si contengono, con tavole e altre cose notabili & molto Utili alli studiosi della lingua volgare* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito de Ferrarri, 1550), p. 116. In the Deputati edition, the relevant portion of the passage reads “domandando perdonanza, la quale ella (quantunque egli mal degno ne fosse) benignamente gli diede” (*Il Decameron di Messer Giovanni Boccaccio Cittadino Fiorentino, Ricorretto in Roma, et Emendato secondo l’ordine del Sacro Conc. Di Trento, Et*

in response to her request he pardoned Bernabò the death that he deserved. Bernabò, having recognized her, threw himself at her feet, weeping and asking forgiveness, which (though he was not deserving of it) she tenderly granted him.

Only by reflecting on the use of indirect discourse can we realize that we never have to come to terms with what a Zinevra openly critical of her husband would sound like. Would we agree with her particular combination of disapproval and forgiveness? Would we find that she strikes the right balance? The indirect discourse draws a veil over this, simply reassuring us with its elegant formulations that a resolution has been achieved.

* * *

Now let us look at another approach to criticism and blame, one from which we are invited to distance ourselves. I am thinking of Catella (III, 6), who, believing that she has successfully substituted herself for her husband's presumed lover, has sex in the dark with the man she believes to be her husband and then proceeds to reveal her true identity and to rail against him. (Unfortunately for Catella, the man she is railing against is Ricciardo, who has tricked her into this sexual encounter.) Here is what Catella says:

Ahi quanto è misera la fortuna delle donne e come è male impiegato l'amor di molte ne' mariti! Io, misera me, già sono otto anni, t'ho più che la mia vita amato, e tu, come io sentito ho, tutto ardi e consumiti nello amore d'una donna strana, reo e malvagio uom che tu se'. Or con cui ti credi tu essere stato? Tu se' stato con colei la qual con false lusinghe tu hai, già è assai, ingannata mostrandole amore ed essendo altrove innamorato. Io son Catella, non son la moglie di Ricciardo, traditor disleale che tu se': ascolta se tu riconosci la voce mia, io son ben dessa; e parmi mille anni che noi siamo al lume, ché io ti possa svergognare come tu se' degno, sozzo cane vituperato che tu se'. Oimè, misera me! a cui ho io cotanti anni portato cotanto amore? A questo can disleale che, credendosi in braccio avere una donna strana, m'ha più di carezze e d'amorevolezze fatte in questo poco di tempo che qui stata son con lui, che in tutto l'altro rimanente che stata son sua. Tu se' bene oggi, can rinnegato, stato gagliardo, che a casa ti suogli mostrare così debole e vinto e senza possa! Ma, lodato sia Idio, che il tuo campo, non l'altrui, hai lavorato, come tu ti credevi. Non maraviglia che stanotte tu non mi ti appressasti: tu aspettavi di scaricar le some altrove e volevi giugnere molto fresco cavaliere alla battaglia: ma lodato sia Idio e il mio avvedimento, l'acqua è pur corsa all'ingiù come ella doveva. Ché non rispondi, reo uomo? ché non di' qual-

riscontrato in Firenze don Testi Antichi & alla sua vera lezione ridotto da' Deputati di loro Alt. Ser. [Florence: Giunti, 1573], p. 129).

che cosa? Se' tu divenuto mutolo udendomi? In fè di Dio io non so a che io mi tengo che io non ti ficco le mani negli occhi e traggogli! Credesti molto celatamente saper fare questo tradimento? Par Dio! tanto sa altri quanto altri; non t'è venuto fatto, io t'ho avuti miglior bracchi alla coda che tu non credevi. (III, 6, 33–38)

Oh, how wretched is women's lot! how thankless is the love that many of them have for their husbands! Me — wretched me! — for eight years now I have loved you more than my life itself, and you, as I've heard, are completely consumed with passion for another woman, evil and wicked man that you are! Now who do you think you've been with? You've been with the woman you have been deceiving with bogus flattery for quite some time, exhibiting love for her when all the time you were enamored elsewhere. I am Catella, I am not Ricciardo's wife, you dishonest traitor that you are. Listen — do you recognize my voice? It really is me. I can't wait until we're out of here so that I can shame you the way you deserve, dirty shameful dog that you are. Oh, wretched me! Who have I loved for all these years? This dishonest dog who, thinking he had another woman in his arms, offered me more caresses and affection in this little bit of time that I've been here with him than in all the rest of the time that I was his. Today, you two-timing dog, you were daring and bold, while at home you prove feeble and defeated and lifeless. But praise be to God that it was your own field, not someone's else's that you were plowing, contrary to what you thought! It's no surprise that you didn't come near me last night! You were waiting to unload yourself elsewhere, and you wanted to be a fully rested knight entering the battlefield. But praise be to God and to my keen foresight, the water ended up running down the way it was supposed to! How come you don't answer, you wicked man? How come you aren't saying anything? Have you become mute as you've been listening to me? By God, I don't know what's keeping me back from sticking my fingers into your eyes and tearing them out! You thought you would know how to keep this affair secret? By God, other people know how things work too. It didn't turn out as you expected — I had better hounds on your tail than you thought.

While the first words out of Catella's mouth could have been spoken by Madonna Zinevra, the resemblance between these “virtuous wives” soon starts to look shaky. That double repetition of “misera” (“quanto è misera la fortuna delle donne...! ... Io, misera me!...”) forecasts the excess that will soon be evident. The attack turns exceedingly vicious and vulgar. Catella's relies on pounding repetitions and frequent jabbing monosyllables (with a particular emphasis on the pronoun “tu” with which she addresses him). Harsh dental consonants T and D reinforce the sense of attack. She moves from calling him “evil and wicked man that you are” to “dishonest traitor that you are” to “dirty shameful dog that you are” to “dishonest dog,” “two-timing dog” and “wicked man” (“reo e malvagio uom che tu se',” “traditor disleale che tu se',” “sozzo cane vituperato che tu se',” “questo can di-

sleale,” “can rinnegato,” “reo uomo”). This moment is presumably about self-revelation and intended to shame a wayward husband by making him see that he has had sex with his own wife while believing he was having sex with another woman. But Catella goes beyond naming him a wrongdoer (as does Zinevra with her husband in II, 9, and as the wife of Guglielmo Rossiglione will do with her husband in IV, 9); she descends into name-calling. This attempt to define Filippello soon proves to be her greatest blunder. As Catella attacks Filippello for his sexual shortcomings over the eight years she has been with him — shortcomings redressed in the encounter she has just had — she reveals her own sexual frustration and gives Ricciardo hope that he can indeed win her over.

Nor does Catella’s self-revelation stop here. After a brief interlude in which Fiammetta represents Ricciardo’s pleasure at hearing this (“in se medesimo godeva di queste parole” [III, 6, 39]) and in which she calls attention to Ricciardo’s pleasuring of Catella (“e senza rispondere alcuna cosa l’abbracciava e basciava, e più che mai le faceva le carezze grandi” [III, 6, 39]), Catella is given yet another long speech, in which she continues the name-calling, in which she repeats that Filippello has performed sexually beyond what is usually the case for him, in which she threatens Filippello with public shaming, and in which she concludes by saying that perhaps it would not be so bad after all if she were to take up with Ricciardo, who has always loved her. This speech reinforces our perception that 1) Catella has a few notes that she sounds insistently, and 2) the more she rants, the more she will reveal information that will undermine her authority.

This is the first time in the story that we hear Catella speak at any length, so we might assume that this is the only register available to her. Yet in her final speech, delivered after she is stunned to discover the identity of the man she has been with, she strikes a different tone:

Ricciardo, io non so come Domenedio mi si concederà che io possa comportare la ’ngiuria e lo ’nganno che fatto m’hai. Non voglio gridar qui, dove la mia simplicità e soperchia gelosia mi condusse, ma di questo vivi sicuro, che io non sarò mai lieta se in un modo o in un altro io non mi veggio vendica di ciò che fatto m’hai; e per ciò lasciami, non mi tener più: tu hai avuto ciò che desiderato hai e ha’mi straziata quanto t’è piaciuto. Tempo hai di lasciarmi; lasciami, io te ne priego. (III, 6, 47–48)

Ricciardo, I do not know how the lord God will grant me the ability to withstand the injury and the deception you have perpetrated on me. I do not wish to scream here, where my foolishness and excessive jealousy have brought me, but be certain of this: that I shall never be content if, in one way or another, I do not see myself avenged of what you have done to me. And so leave me, let me go. You have gotten what you longed for and

you have tormented me as much as you liked. It is time for you to leave me; leave me, I beg of you.

Now we have evidence that Catella is capable of delivering a composed and deliberate speech. The string of septenaries and hendecasyllables at the conclusion of this speech render it elegant and memorable. Even more stunning is the mournful lamenting sound “ai” that sounds repeatedly, particularly at the end of sentences. Catella is saying “hai” (that is, “you have” done this or that) but the effect on the listener is also to register “ahi!”, an exclamation that in Italian would be pronounced the same way. What if Catella had begun her earlier speech with a phrase like, “Filippello, io non so come Domenedio mi si concederà che io possa comportare la ‘ngiuria che fatto m’hai” (“Filippello, I do not know how the lord God will grant me the ability to withstand the injury and the deception you have perpetrated on me”)? Would she have descended as easily into name-calling? I suspect not. Rather, I would think that an exordium like this would have more likely led into an elegant hendecasyllable like “ha’mi straziata quanto t’è piaciuto” (“you have tormented me as much as you liked”) and, in closing, to polished double septenaries, marked by a poignant chiasmus: “Tempo hai di lasciarmi: lasciami io te ne priego” (“It is time for you to leave me; leave me, I beg of you” [III, 6, 48]).

And what do we make of the fact that, when Catella actually has her chance to call Ricciardo a fraudulent rapist, she does not do so? It is as if Catella has used up all her rhetorical weaponry and is no longer able to apply to Ricciardo all the epithets she hurled at him when she thought he was Filippello. This affects the reader’s perception of him. If Catella doesn’t find it within herself to call him a dirty dog, can we?

But Catella may not be the only person protecting Ricciardo from criticism. The narrator of the story, Fiammetta, also, by means of her selective use of direct and indirect discourse, can also shape our reaction.

When Ricciardo reveals himself to Catella, Fiammetta gives us the entire text of his speech. Already from the opening lines, we see his rhetorical power: “Anima mia dolce, non vi turbate: quello che io semplicemente amando aver non potei, Amor con inganno m’ha insegnato avere, e sono il vostro Ricciardo” (“Sweet darling, don’t be upset. What I could not have simply by loving, Love taught me to have by deception, and I am your Ricciardo” [III, 6, 42]). From the opening phrased as a hendecasyllable (“Anima mia dolce, non vi turbate”) to the closing septenary (“sono il vostro Ricciardo”), this is a statement remarkable for its mellifluous sophistication. As Ricciardo proceeds to demonstrate that what has happened cannot be otherwise, and as he asserts that Catella has no recourse to justice, he reveals a full arsenal of literary, historical, and judicial weaponry.

Multiple footnotes alert us to the sources for his argumentation: Livy, Valerius Maximus, and a range of passages in Boccaccio's earlier works.¹¹ The direct discourse asks us to consider the basis for his authority.

When Ricciardo responds to Catella's threat of retaliation, however, Fiammetta opts for indirect discourse:

Ricciardo, che conosceva l'animo suo ancora troppo turbato, s'avea posto in cuore di non lasciarla mai se la sua pace non riavesse: per che, cominciando con dolcissime parole a raumiliarla, tanto disse e tanto pregò e tanto scongiurò, che ella, vinta, con lui si paceficò... (III, 6, 49)

Ricciardo, who saw that she was still very agitated, had made up his mind not ever to leave her until he reconciled with her. So, beginning by placating her with sweet words, he spoke at length and pleaded at length and appealed at length, with the result that she, defeated, made peace with him.

Ricciardo has already exerted control over Catella by putting his hand over her mouth, and he has already stated that she has no recourse other than to accept him as a lover. What could he possibly say to pacify her? Why is his speech not rendered with direct discourse? I think it is because, no matter what Ricciardo says — and it clearly was quite a bit — we would not look kindly upon his arguments. If in reading “tanto disse e tanto pregò e tanto scongiurò” “he spoke at length and pleaded at length and appealed at length” [III, 6, 49]) we imagine the progression that could be required if Catella were to mount resistance, it would have to look something like “tanto disse e tanto pregò e tanto scongiurò e tanto implorò e tanto esortò e e tanto invocò e e tanto impetrò e tanto sollecitò e tanto supplicò” (“he spoke at length and pleaded at length and appealed at length and implored at length and exhorted at length and invoked at length and importuned at length and solicited at length and beseeched at length”). In the final accounting it is better — better for Ricciardo, that is — to leave his exact words cloaked in mystery.

The story of Catella and Ricciardo, along with the story of Madonna Zinevra, shows that, if we wish to position ourselves to make informed judgments, we must be aware of how the information we receive (and the form in which we receive it) will affect our judgment. Direct and indirect discourse can be used selectively to solicit approval (even if tacit) or blame. We would do well to remember these lessons from literature every time that we ourselves report events to others and every time that we listen to the accounts that others offer us.

¹¹ See Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Branca, vol. 1, p. 387.

* * *

I have long maintained that we must attend not only to single exemplary moments that invite praise or blame but also to the dialogue among the narrators that emerges as they are drawn to certain narrative moments, pause over them, draw out the narrative possibilities, contest the conclusions that others draw, and use the stories as ways of exploring ways of being in the world.¹² Many are the questions that the stories of Zinevra and Catella pose, so I cannot in good faith claim that the story I am about to tell you is the lone one. I urge readers to consider what other stories there may be. As for myself, when I begin with the story of a virtuous wife who responds to the husband who has wronged her, and when I begin to examine other wives who respond to husbands who are blameworthy, this is what I hear:

Against the bet of a man like Ambrogiuolo and in a certain sense against all odds, Madonna Zinevra upholds ideals of loyalty, resourcefulness, prudence, foresight, and commitment to the truth. When she defends herself and exposes the wrongdoing of others, she does so in a language that is presented as above reproach. With Zinevra, the narrators will begin in earnest a series of reflections about marital fidelity, about women's abilities, about their right to self-assertion, about their use of deception, and about the strategies that a wife might use to criticize blameworthy behavior in her husband. How legitimate is the kind of deception that Zinevra uses to unearth Ambrogiuolo's deceptions? How realistic is it to expect women to respond to adversity as she does? (Just for starters, how many women can go about for six years dressed as men? What if you don't happen to have collegial relations with a wealthy ruler outside the Western legal system? And how deep do the wells of forgiveness run if your husband has ordered you killed and left as repast for the wolves?)

Upon hearing Zinevra's story, Dioneo attacks Bernabò for his foolishness and showcases Bartolomea of Pisa, who advocates rights to sexual fulfillment that her husband Ricciardo Chinzica has denied her. Extraordinarily important, as Mario Baratto has shown is the moment when Bartolomea, quite unexpectedly, becomes the arbiter of the situation. She vituperates her husband for his pitiful sexual performance. Dioneo's story

¹² Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the "Decameron"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), especially the Introduction and Conclusion, and also Marilyn Migiel, "The Untidy Business of Gender Studies: Or, Why It's Almost Useless to Ask if the *Decameron* is Feminist," in *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, eds. Thomas C. Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Annali d'Italianistica, 2006), pp. 217–33.

turns on the question of male sexuality: if you're a real man, unlike Riccardo, you'll remember that women need to be satisfied and you won't try to advertise your abilities beyond what they are. The narrators — all of them — laugh. They approve of Dioneo's story and agree that Bernabo was a fool. As for what they think of Zinevra, we are not told. The question arises, however: Was Zinevra also a fool? Should she have acted and spoken like Bartolomea?

Catella (III, 6) is the next woman to assert herself as a wronged wife by bringing to light her husband's failings. In fact, we have every reason to believe that Catella will triumph, since she has the scales of the literary tradition tipped in her favor. In the sources and analogues for *Decameron* III, 6, when a woman sets about to expose her husband's infidelities, and seeks to do so by trapping him with a bed trick, she is generally guaranteed success.¹³ In some stories, even when she is an equally guilty partner, she substitutes herself for the woman with whom her husband believes he is having sex and, when she angrily confronts him, the shamed husband learns his lesson. In "Le Meunier d'Arleux" ("The Miller of Arleux"), the fabliau often considered to be Boccaccio's direct source, the wife not only manages to successfully substitute herself for the other woman, but her husband ends up acting as his own pimp when he allows another man to have sex with her too. Boccaccio has Fiammetta, the narrator of Catella's story, turn all this on its head. The literary tradition might say one thing, but *Decameron* III, 6 shows us that things don't always work out for the wife who wishes to expose her husband's infidelities, no more than things work out for a man like Ambrogiuolo who wishes at all cost to broadcast that women are unfaithful. When Catella finds herself in the darkened room, all the literary and historical narratives that put the wife in control get lost. What is foregrounded is Catella's excess in her attack on her husband. In addition, superimposed on the narratives of faithful wives who seek to teach their wayward husbands a lesson is a narrative of a faithful wife who maintains her own (and her husband's) honor: Lucretia. Lucretia takes the sword to herself. Now Catella is in a bind. The literary tradition predicts success; the narrative about Lucretia tells us that a suicide could be in the making. As it turns out, in the *Decameron*, the result is neither self-assertion nor suicide, but making do. For Catella, that means accept-

¹³ On the identified sources and analogues for III, 6, see A.C. Lee, *The "Decameron": Its Sources and Analogues* (1909 rpt; New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1972), pp. 79–91.

ing failure and humiliation, accepting her own excesses, and accepting that hers is a society that will not recognize the wrong done to her.

In the wake of *Decameron* III, 6, the narrators work off two possibilities: the wronged wife as played by Madonna Zinevra (who is a difficult exemplar to criticize, even though her kindness toward a husband who tried to kill her does strike some of us as inexplicable) and the wronged wife as played by Catella (who displays a kind of excess that we are invited to condemn, even if we know that she has been duped by Ricciardo). These are not the only two possibilities that the world offers us, of course, but the fact is that the narrators of the *Decameron* — like people in general — tend to work off binaries like this.

Neifile, the Queen of Day III, is the first to take up the challenge presented by Zinevra and Catella. In *Decameron* III, 9, her female protagonist Giletta di Narbona appears as a redeemed blend of those earlier wives. Not to be deterred by a husband (Beltramo) who sets her aside, Giletta successfully conceals her identity, substitutes herself for a woman with whom Beltramo intends to have sex, and succeeds in fulfilling the ostensibly impossible conditions he himself has established: she acquires Beltramo's ring and bears his offspring.

At pains to render Giletta a wronged virtuous wife, Neifile describes the sexual encounter between Giletta and Beltramo in a most summary fashion. Once another woman arranges for Giletta to lie with the count, this is what we are told:

Ne' quali primi congiugnimenti affettuosissimamente dal conte cercati, come fu piacer di Dio, la donna ingravidò in due figliuoli maschi, come il parto al suo tempo venuto fece manifesto. Né solamente d'una volta contentò la gentil donna la contessa degli abbracciamenti del marito ma molte, sì segretamente operando che mai parola non se ne seppe, credendosi sempre il conte non con la moglie ma con colei la quale egli amava essere stato; a cui, quando a partire si venia la mattina, avea parecchi belle e care gioie donate, le quali tutte diligentemente la contessa guardava. (III, 9, 49)

In these first embraces most affectionately sought out by the count, as it pleased God, the woman conceived two sons, as their birth later made evident. The noblewoman arranged for the countess to enjoy the embraces of her husband not only once, but many times. The whole matter was managed so secretly that no word was ever known about it, and the count believed unwaveringly that he was not with his wife but with the woman he loved. When he had to leave her in the morning, he presented her with a number of beautiful and precious jewels, all of which the countess preserved most carefully.

We might not find this exercise of discretion strange, but for the fact that, up until now in the novella, Giletta has been doing quite a bit of talking in direct discourse, mainly to other women who will provide her with necessary support for her plan to win back her husband. By drawing a veil over Giletta and Beltramo's sexual encounters, Neifile neatly circumvents the problem of what they might be saying to each other. There is no risk that Giletta could sound like a woman of whom an audience could disapprove.¹⁴

Our lasting memory of Giletta, then, comes near the very end of the story when dressed as a pilgrim and carrying her two children, she reenacts a version of a plea to authority that readers will recognize as Zinevra's:

E sentendo le donne e' cavalieri nel palagio del conte adunati per dovere andare a tavola, senza mutare abito, con questi suoi figlioletti in braccio salita in su la sala, tra uomo e uomo là se n'andò dove il conte vide, e gitatagli si a' piedi disse piagnendo: "Signor mio, io sono la tua sventurata sposa, la quale, per lasciar te tornare e stare in casa tua, lungamente andata son tapinando. Io ti richeggio per Dio che le condizioni postemi per li due cavalieri che io ti mandai, tu le mi osservi: e ecco nelle mie braccia non un sol figliuol di te, ma due, ed ecco qui il tuo anello. Tempo è adunque che io debba da te sì come moglie esser ricevuta secondo la tua promessa." (III, 9, 57-58)

Hearing that the ladies and knights had gathered in the count's palace and were ready to dine, she went forward — in the clothes she was wearing and with these children of hers in her arms — to the head of the room when she saw the count. Then, crying, she threw herself at his feet and said, "My lord, I am your unfortunate bride, who has long gone wandering through the world in order to allow you to return and remain in your home. I ask, by God, that you respect the conditions placed on me by the two knights I sent to you. Behold here in my arms not one but two children by you, and behold here your ring. The time has come therefore that I should be received as your wife, as you promised."

In passages preceding and following this one, Neifile refers insistently to Giletta as the "countess" ("contessa" [III, 9, 60]), reminding us that Giletta is Beltramo's legitimate spouse. Giletta reaffirms her own parity with Beltramo when she addresses him with the informal second-person singular

¹⁴ Yet, listening to the text, I wonder if it is not alerting us to the incomplete resolution that this silence offers. In the Italian, I register an insistent turn toward nouns that end in *-menti* (*congiugnimenti*, *abbracciamenti*) and adverbs that end in *-mente*: (*affettuosissimamente*, *solamente*, *segretamente*, *diligentemente*). This persistent refrain announces "you lie!" (*menti*), "she lies!" (*mente*).

even as she calls him her “lord.” Like Zinevra, whose words she echoes, Giletta remains humble supplicant and, like Zinevra, she receives new clothes and a sumptuous celebratory feast. Giletta also, like Zinevra, mutes her criticism of a husband who has not acted very admirably. As for the aspects of Zinevra’s behavior that could raise eyebrows, Neifile deftly transforms them. There is no cross-dressing, and no ripping open a bodice to reveal breasts. Rather, “proof” of Giletta’s femininity is displaced onto the twins that she holds in her arms even as she throws herself dramatically at Beltramo’s feet.

Up until this point, as I have provided textual examples of women who criticize men in indirect or direct discourse, and in oblique or abusive language as the case may be. I have not yet broached the issue of the women’s class or social standing. And that is because I believe that for the first third of the *Decameron*, while we are encouraged to believe that women who are truly classy will speak only in the most oblique of terms — witness, for example, the message sent by marchioness of Monferrato with her all-chicken banquet in *Decameron* I, 5 — we are not yet encouraged to believe that abusive language is a marker of the lower class woman. Beginning with Day IV of the *Decameron*, however, women of confirmed social standing do not criticize their husbands (or anybody else who is trying to act like a husband or even a prospective husband) in abusive language. If these women of the upper class criticize at all, as do Ghismonda in IV, 1 (told by Fiammetta) and the wife of Guglielmo Rossiglione in IV, 9 (told by Filostrato), they exit this life soon afterwards. Or they can, like Madonna Sismonda of VII, 8 (told by Neifile), benefit from the presence of a surrogate who can deliver a vituperative speech against the husband.¹⁵ Or, like Monna Giovanna of V, 9 (told by Fiammetta), they pull their punches by blaming first (though not in direct discourse that we could examine) and then offering extensive praise (granted, again in indirect discourse).

In fact, the case of Federigo degli Alberighi and Monna Giovanna is worth a second look, despite the fact that they are not yet married at the time when they exchange some crucial words. In the following passage, narrated by Fiammetta, Federigo degli Alberighi proves to Giovanna that she has indeed eaten his beloved falcon, which he has killed and served to her because he had nothing else to offer, and she responds to him:

¹⁵ Playing the part of the virtuous wife, Madonna Sismonda does not criticize her husband who claims to have beaten her and cut her hair. Since the acerbic criticism comes instead from her mother, Madonna Sismonda remains above reproach. For this observation, I am indebted to Kathleen Perry Long (conversation on August 31, 2005).

E questo detto, le penne e' piedi e 'l becco le fé in testimonianza di ciò gittare avanti. La qual cosa la donna vedendo e udendo, prima il biasimò d'aver per dar mangiare a una femina ucciso un tal falcone, e poi la grandezza dell'animo suo, la quale la povertà non avea potuto né potea rintuzzare, molto seco medesima commendò. (V, 9, 37)

Having said this, he had the feathers and the feet and the beak thrown before her as proof. The woman, upon seeing and hearing this, blamed him at first for having killed such a falcon in order to give it to a mere female to eat, and then, to herself, she praised greatly the nobility of his soul, which poverty had not blunted and which it would never be able to blunt.

This passage is doing a good deal to bolster the courtesy and good manners of both Federigo degli Alberighi and Monna Giovanna. The first challenge is presented by Federigo's gesture, which follows a most elegantly-phrased justification for his being without a falcon that Giovanna now requests as a gift. Having the leftover body parts of his falcon thrown before her "as proof" seems openly aggressive, but for the fact that the body parts stand as testimony to his just-concluded courteous statement. And how do the feathers and feet and beak "get thrown down"? Does Federigo do it himself, and much more nicely, as Musa and Bondanella assert when they translate "And after he had said this, he laid the feathers, the feet, and beak of the bird before her as proof?"¹⁶ Was it that he "caused the feathers, talons, and beak to be cast on the table before her," as McWilliam tells us?¹⁷ If Federigo directs a servant to bring out the bird's remains, it seems improbable that a servant would, without specific orders from Federigo, choose to "throw" them before Monna Giovanna. But then, given what we know about Federigo, it also is hard for us to accept that Federigo would tell a servant "Have the feathers and the feet and beak thrown before her as proof of this" ("le penne e' piedi e 'l becco le farai in testimonianza di ciò gittare avanti"). Given contradictory bits of evidence, many readers will eliminate details that do not conform to their assumptions. The second challenge to courtesy and good manners is posed by Monna Giovanna, whose first response is blame. Multiple rhetorical features of this passage lead us to see her as justified in her attack on Federigo, or as not really attacking him at all. First, if she is being excessive, it might only be in response to Federigo's barely hidden aggression. Second, she denigrates herself as a "mere female" at the same time that she blames Federigo. Third, as several other readers of this passage have pointed out

¹⁶ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. Musa and Bondanella, pp. 430–31.

¹⁷ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, p. 431.

to me, if we imagine Giovanna to have said something like “Really, you shouldn’t have!,” her reproach to Federigo could have the rhetorical force of a move to console him.¹⁸ Finally, her blame is counterbalanced by what seems (particularly given the syntax and metrical rhythms of the Italian) a lengthy moment of praise.

What is most curious about this passage is that it encourages us to see the praise cancelling out any possible blame. This is true for Federigo, whose courteous speech, delivered in direct discourse just before he has pieces of his bird thrown before Monna Giovanna, seems to guarantee that readers will not look unkindly on him. For Federigo, it appears that words speak louder than actions, perhaps because the words were rendered at length in direct discourse. And we find that Monna Giovanna receives similar protection. She delivers a reproach, but manages, thanks to a round of praise that she does not even deliver out loud, to emerge untainted by ungraciousness that can easily earn a woman harsh criticism, at least in the *Decameron*. For Monna Giovanna, it appears that mentally articulated words speak louder than words that are verbalized, perhaps because the mentally articulated words appear in a climactic moment of a lengthy sentence.

Once the *Decameron*’s narrators make sure that upper-class women have renounced any claim on the abusive language of Bartolomea and Cattella, that abusive language becomes the inheritance of women from whom the frametale narrators can distance themselves. It is a language that belongs to a comic register such as we find in the stories of Calandrino. When Tessa, Calandrino’s wife, finds him with another woman (Niccolosa) in IX, 5, she gets her nails into his face and screams:

Sozzo can vituperato, dunque mi fai tu questo? Vecchio impazzato, che maladetto sia il ben che io t’ho voluto: dunque non ti pare aver tanto a fare a casa tua, che ti vai innamorando per l’altrui? Ecco bello innamorato! Or non ti conosci tu, tristo? Non ti conosci tu, dolente? che preme doti tutto, non uscirebbe tanto sugo che bastasse a una salsa. Alla fé di Dio, egli non era ora la Tessa quella che ti ’mpregnava, che Dio la faccia trista chiunque ella è, ché ella dee ben sicuramente esser cattiva cosa a aver vaghezza di così bella gioia come tu se’! (IX, 5, 63–64)

You dirty rotten dog, this is what you do to me? You crazy old fool — damn the love that I’ve felt for you! So you didn’t think you had enough to do at home so you went around falling in love elsewhere! There’s a fine

¹⁸ This is a reading advanced by John Najemy and seconded by Kathleen Perry Long at a department colloquium where I presented my current work on the *Decameron* (October 19, 2006).

lover boy! Now don't you see what you're doing, you twerp? You don't, you miserable creep? If you got squeezed dry, there wouldn't be enough juice to make a sauce. By God, it wasn't Tessa who got you pregnant, and goddam whoever she is, because she really must be a piece of trash to take a fancy to a fine jewel like you!

Tessa seizes upon a vituperative language used by Bartolomea and Catella in private conversation with their husbands and showers it on Calandrino in a more public setting, where four other people (Niccolosa, Bruno, Buf-falmacco, Filippo) serve as witnesses. As the four spectators laugh, open criticism of a husband is reinforced as a marker of lower-class behavior.

* * *

At the end of Day X, there appears a twofold “solution” to the problems raised by the prospect of wives criticizing their husbands. The first solution is Panfilo's, and it appears in X, 9, the story of Messer Torello and his wife Adalieta (X, 9), which can be seen as the first of two conclusions to the storytelling.¹⁹ Panfilo renders Adalieta an exemplary wife to a husband who is above reproach.²⁰ At least when people behave in ways we recognize as exemplary, we can avoid instances where husbands act badly or wives speak badly about them.²¹

Then, in very final story of the series, Dioneo offers a most striking solution to the problem of critical wives. In a crucial moment in this novella, Griselda — the lower class woman who has been cruelly tested by her upperclass husband Gualtieri — is invited by him to comment on his new bride. Griselda offers a criticism that masks its status as criticism. Recognizing the superiority of her muted response, Gualtieri then reinstates her as a wife worthy of him. The passage reads as follows:

¹⁹ Although Franco Fido does not explicitly make this claim, his reading of X, 9 leads us to recognize this story as a privileged endpoint of the *frametale* narrators' interests. See his “Il sorriso di messer Torello,” in *Il regime delle simmetrie imperfette: Studi sul “Decameron”* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1988), pp. 11–35.

²⁰ Adalieta, as Irene Eibenstein-Alvisi has argued, is a “perfect wife” who functions as viable model for the genteel women narrators of the *Decameron*. See her essay “The *Decameron's* Perfect Wives,” chapter 5 of Irene Eibenstein-Alvisi, “The Dialogic Construction of Woman in the Italian Renaissance,” unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Cornell University, 2003).

²¹ Panfilo may be preparing for this solution, I believe, as he tells IX, 6, a story in which he revises the fabliau sources so that the husband is not a thief and so that the wife never has occasion to confront the husband for blameworthy behavior. For a summary of the possible sources and analogues for IX, 6, see A.C. Lee, *The “Decameron”: Its Sources and Analogues*, pp. 281–87.

... in presenza d'ogni uomo sorridendo le disse: "Che ti par della nostra sposa?"

"Signor mio," rispose Griselda "a me ne par molto bene; e se così è savia come ella è bella, che 'l credo, io non dubito punto che voi non dobbiate con lei vivere il più consolato signor del mondo; ma quanto posso vi priego che quelle punture, le quale all'altra, che vostra fu, già deste, non diate a questa, ché appena che io creda che ella le potesse sostenere, sì perché più giovane è e sì ancora perché in dilicatezze è allevata, ove colei in continue fatiche da piccolina era stata."

Gualtieri, veggendo che ella fermamente credeva costei dovere esser sua moglie, né per ciò in alcuna cosa men che ben parlava, la si fece sedere allato e disse: "Griselda, tempo è omai che tu senta frutto della tua lunga pazienza, e che coloro li quali me hanno reputato crudele e iniquo e bestiale conoscano che ciò che io faceva a antiveduto fine operava, volendoti insegnare d'esser moglie e a loro di saperla tenere, e a me partorire perpetua quiete mentre teco a vivere avessi ... (X, 10, 58-60)

... in the presence of all, he smiled and said, "What opinion do you have of our bride?"

"My lord," replied Griselda, "my opinion is very positive, and if she is as wise as she is beautiful, which I believe she is, I do not doubt at all that you will live with her as the happiest man in the world. But I beg you, as much as I can, that you not inflict on her the wounds you inflicted on that other woman, who was once yours, for I hardly believe that she would be able to bear them, because she is younger and also because she was brought up in great comfort, whereas the other woman had been in continuous hardship from the time she was a small child."

When Gualtieri saw that she firmly believed that the girl was to be his wife, and this notwithstanding, she said nothing but good, he had her sit beside him and said, "Griselda, it is now time that you should reap the fruit of your long patience, and it is time for those who have considered me cruel, unjust, and brutish to realize that what I did was directed toward a foreseen goal, given that I wanted to teach you how to be a wife, to show those other people how to handle a wife, and to create for myself perpetual serenity for as long as I should live with you...

Griselda abstracts herself from her own material experience by speaking about herself in the third person. Thus, if there is any discontent to be registered, it is displaced onto that "other woman" and the offense to Griselda is unrecognizable. She is the lower class woman *who shows the upper class woman how to speak*.²²

²² This passage would merit further analysis, particularly for the way it forces us to reevaluate our view of a husband, Bernabò, whom we might have been content to define as foolish rather than bestial. When Gualtieri states that others have marked him as "cru- dele e iniquo e bestiale" ("cruel, unjust, and brutish"), we must remember that these are the very words applied earlier to Bernabò. Zinevra had referred to her husband as "cru-

Or does she? Is Griselda (like Zinevra before her) put forward as a model of how women should respond to objectively blameworthy behavior in their husbands or is she (like Zinevra before her) meant to show us what women (and like them, anyone who wields less power) end up having to tolerate?

Praise or blame? That is the question before us. It is a question that Boccaccio posed repeatedly throughout the *Decameron* and, indeed, throughout his career. It is a question that we find ourselves grappling with repeatedly as we read the *Decameron* and other of Boccaccio's works. It is — as I have argued elsewhere — a question that threatens us with critical impasse, since we can find ourselves getting nowhere as we take sides about who to praise and who to blame.²³ So Petrarch and others in his wake found nothing but praise for Griselda's patience. Women today are likely to offer nothing but resistance to Griselda's example. Perhaps we are simply condemned to a cycle where, based on our own shifting values over time, we are destined to praise or blame the so-called "virtuous wives" of the *Decameron*?

To attempt to answer this question, I would like to modulate our methodologically aware and critical voices toward a voice that overlaps more with the pronouncements of the *Decameron's* non-analytic (and critical) wives.

In examining the story of Griselda, I have been struck by how much people seem to relish retelling it, and in particular how much they seem to relish retelling the scene I have just cited. I am referring not only to Petrarch, Chaucer, and other such writers whose retellings can be found in the Rare Book rooms of our research libraries. I am referring also to people whose retellings can be found on personal websites and in other

dele e iniquo" ("cruel and unjust" [II, 9, 69]). Dioneo had highlighted Bernabò's "bestialità" ["asinine stupidity" [II, 10, 3]]. The women of the group had all agreed with Dioneo that Bernabò had been a "bestia" ("fool" or "ass" [II, Conclusion, 1]). Thanks to an overlay from Dante's "mad bestiality" ("matta bestialitate"), which Dioneo recalls at the very beginning of the novella of Griselda, Bernabò's foolishness begins to look more like Gualteri's bestiality and brutishness. (For this particular observation about how moral and emotional charge of *bestialità* can change over the course of the *Decameron*, I am indebted to Michael Papio, who drew our attention to this during the discussion following my presentation of an earlier version of this essay at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.)

²³ In both my book *A Rhetoric of the "Decameron"* and in my essay "The Untidy Business of Gender Studies: Or, Why It's Almost Useless to Ask if the *Decameron* is Feminist," I have argued that the debate about whether the *Decameron* is misogynist or philogynist has produced an impasse in our thinking.

such arenas. Readers appear fascinated by a moment of “criticism and blame” that is barely recognizable as such. They assume the voices of Gualtieri and Griselda. They reenact the scene. They editorialize. They explore motivation and intention. They appear to take considerable pleasure in doing so.

Here is one of the most engaging renditions I have found:

She’s lost her children, remember: she thinks he murdered them. In fact, he merely took them away and had them raised secretly [sic] in Bologna, and now the boy is six and the daughter twelve, and he arranges it so the daughter, his daughter by Griselda, is brought ceremoniously into town as the young bride-to-be.

So Griselda’s [sic] standing quietly by in her crummy rags and Gualtieri asks her what she thinks of his beautiful young thing, the next Mrs. Gualtieri.

....“Oh, my lord,” she says. “She seems very beautiful to me. And if she is as wise as beautiful, I have no doubt that you will live with her as the happiest lord in the world.”

And here she does get in a word. (Trumpets! stuffed with rags for mutes) She doesn’t quite chide him, but she reflects so as to protect the young bride. Please don’t treat this one as you did your last wife, she says. That woman (herself, in third person) was tough, raised tough from the start — a peasant after all. This lovely one is so young, and has obviously been brought up “...in a more delicate fashion.”

The Marquis is so pleased now that he begins to fess up: Now’s the time for you to reap the fruit of your long patience, he tells her. And for everyone to realize that he had always had a plan — he wasn’t really cruel as some might think. “For I wanted to teach you how to be a wife, and to show these people how to know such a wife and how to choose and keep one, and to acquire for myself lasting tranquility for as long as I was to live with you.” He’s not a big risk-taker. At the very outset, he says, he was afraid she’d screw up his tranquility, so he tested her. And now she’s passed with flying colors.

And then he has her reinstated, introduces her to her 12 year old daughter and 6 year old son, sets them straight on who she is, sets up her poor old dad in a manner he’d never dreamed of, and everyone is really, really happy.²⁴

This passage is doing some very curious work. Adopting a complicit tone with us, the narrator sets out the details we need to remember as we witness the dialogue between Gualtieri and Griselda. Then the narrator

²⁴ Unfortunately, I no longer know who authored this. My notes show that I had found this passage at a website entitled “Patient Griselda” (date of access 21 January 2006), but the website is no longer available and the professor I believed to be the author has told me that she is not.

pauses over three sections of the story: Griselda's statement, in which open acceptance and oblique criticism co-exist; Gualtieri's response, in which open self-justification and oblique awareness co-exist, and a speedy rush to the happiest of endings (lest such an ending escape us). It seems manifest that the narrator is on Griselda's side. S/he evokes sympathy for what we would imagine to be Griselda's emotions and her physical condition. S/he celebrates (if in muted fashion) any attempt on Griselda's part to stand up to Gualtieri. Gualtieri's assertions to the contrary, the narrator leads us to see him as both cruel and capricious.

A reader might object that it would now be relatively easy to create a space for an ironic reading of a character like Griselda. After all, haven't many readers in the last thirty years been insisting on precisely such ironic readings, ones that display the enormous lengths we have to go to in order to insist on the happy ending?²⁵

This leads me to think about what might happen if we were to give the floor to a character like Madonna Zinevra, who continues to inspire admiration, even if some readers may perceive her as an unserviceable exemplar. So here below, I reproduce the full text of a letter, under the signature of Madonna Zinevra, that was written in response to an assignment that I gave to my spring 2006 First-Year Writing Seminar ("The Craft of Storytelling: The *Decameron*") at Cornell University.²⁶ Zinevra's letter, authored by Nathan Peter Sell, Cornell '09, reads²⁷:

My dear Abbot,

Firstly, I must congratulate you and Alessandro for finding each other and starting a beautiful marriage together. I also must commend you in your efforts of restoring the relatives of Alessandro to their previous wealth, the act being definite testimony to your undoubtedly firm devotion to your husband. From personal experience, I can tell you that loyalty and dedication to your loved one are the primary foundations of any marriage. My husband even tried to have me *killed*, but, I forgave him anyway, since he was impoverished and I couldn't just leave him like that.

²⁵ Shirley S. Allen is representative of the readers who believe that Boccaccio must want us to read X, 10 ironically. See her "The Griselda Tale and the Portrayal of Women in the *Decameron*," *Philological Quarterly* 56 (1977): 1–13.

²⁶ For Assignment 1d (part of an assignment sequence focused on II, 9), I had instructed students to assume Zinevra's voice and to write a letter to either the abbot/princess (II, 3) or Bartolomea of Pisa (II, 10).

²⁷ I have reproduced the assignment exactly as it was submitted to me, including with the one textual citation from p. 88 of McWilliam's translation of the *Decameron*.

But enough of me, I wanted to talk about a few things that you did while you were on your little pilgrimage. I did enjoy how you kept your true identity and purpose a secret even from the men following you on your journey. I know firsthand that this is no trivial task, as I was forced to parade around as a man for a number of years, all because my husband *tried to have me killed*, but that's neither here nor there. I think that you conducted yourself perfectly during your trip, and if I were in your shoes, I would have done just as you did. The way you directly but courteously addressed the Pope especially caught my attention, as you combined both your ambitious nature with your respect for proper authority. All of these facets of your character are truly laudable.

However, I do happen to disagree with the way that you went about introducing yourself to Alessandro. Now, my husband may be a bit hasty, jumps to conclusions, and isn't exactly perfect, but I know that at least he of all people would understand a decent approach from a woman, as opposed to an immoral proposal. I think you scared poor Alessandro half to death when you invited him to your bed and started to caress him while he was still under the impression that you were a man, thinking you were stuck "in the grip of some impure passion" (88). Then right there, on the spot, you ask him to take your hand in marriage. Now, I'm not the biggest fan of brash decisions, seeing as how one almost killed me (but of course all is forgiven!), but I cringed when you asked him to marry you just moments after revealing the fact that you are actually a woman. Imagine what the bewildered Alessandro must have been thinking! I understand that you were under a certain time constraint, but I still do believe that you could have exercised a bit more modesty.

In any case, I wish you all the best with Alessandro and the future that you two have before you. And if anyone ever asks you to hold a large trunk in your room, you say no to that person. I hope to hear from you soon!

Sincerely,
Zinevra

In this creative and nuanced response, Nate Sell does not limit himself to what a good many other readers can see, namely, the similarities between Zinevra and the abbot/princess (loyalty, respect for authority, intelligence, ambition) and the manifest divergence between them (the abbot/princess's forward sexual advances). Rather, his Madonna Zinevra struggles to suppress a terrible truth, only to have it peek through repeatedly: "My husband even tried to have me *killed*... But enough of me... I was forced to parade around as a man for a number of years, all because my husband *tried to have me killed*, but that's neither here nor there... Now, I'm not the biggest fan of brash decisions, seeing as how one almost killed me (but of course all is forgiven!)." Remarkable for their sophistication are Sell's timing and his ability to vary the ways in which Zinevra keeps returning to the site of emotional trauma only to keep tamping down any-

thing that would sound like open criticism of her husband. At less than 500 words, this letter from Madonna Zinevra provides insights into *Decameron* II, 9 that go far beyond what first-year university students are able to express in an analytic essay — indeed, it goes far beyond what most of us can express in the language and argumentation of academic discourse. It dramatizes the issue of control that is, I believe, at the heart of all of the instances of wifely criticism in the *Decameron*. It reminds us that a story like II, 9 poses questions like: What are women allowed to say? What might they want to say? What can they get away with saying? It tells us that happy endings often require discarding unhappy and disturbing details. Above all, I believe, this letter reminds us what *literature* can do. Although this letter was written by a very young person — or perhaps precisely because of that — it shows us how creative and literary responses can expertly capture the delicate balance of enthusiasm and unease, of praise and blame, that hovers in the final reconciliation scene of a novella like II, 9.

And, I might as well just say it: That delicate balance of enthusiasm and unease is quite distinctively Boccaccian. In the *Decameron*, we hear praise that is not quite praise and blame that is not quite blame. That is why we have such difficulty agreeing, as we read Boccaccio's masterpiece, whether certain behaviors are the object of approbation or not. The *Decameron*, which steadfastly refuses to tell an uncompromised story about what to praise and what to blame, invites us to reflect on how we form our opinions. It describes for us situations that will elicit a range of responses (often contradictory ones), and then, as a great and innovative literary text, it invites us to examine how we might be encouraged by its own (often contradictory) rhetorical formulations to accept certain judgments and to discard others. From this we can derive a crucial lesson about our responsibility to think critically about the assumptions we make, the evidence we cite, the judgments we proffer.

MARILYN MIGIEL

CORNELL UNIVERSITY