

## The Language of Women as Written by Men: Boccaccio, Dante and Gendered Histories of the Vernacular\*

Increasingly, critical practice has turned its focus to the reading of gender within the works of Giovanni Boccaccio — not just as the study of the representation of women within the *novelle* of the *Decameron*, but understood broadly as the convergence of language and gender in Boccaccio's *oeuvre*.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship in this vein comes to terms with the author's rhetorical and ideological engagement with women, ranging from studies of female discourse within his narratives to his challenging objectifications of women which resist totalizing claims. Some scholars argue that we cannot ask whether or not Boccaccio was a misogynist or a feminist, claiming that his hermeneutics challenge these categorizations (most recently, Marilyn Migiel). Others, such as Millicent Marcus, have asserted that detecting misogyny in Boccaccio's *novelle*, such as *Decameron* VIII.7, is a "misreading" because the *novella* itself critiques misogyny. Still others view the foregrounding of women producers of discourse within society as the origins of a feminist literary tradition (Teodolinda Barolini). To judge from the critical literature, Boccaccio's apparently contradictory stance, from the dedication to lovelorn women in the *Decameron*'s Proem to the anti-feminist diatribes of the *Corbaccio*, shifts problematically from one of

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<sup>1</sup> See Marilyn Migiel (*Rhetoric*) and the contributions contained in the volume *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, edited by Thomas Stillinger and F. Regina Psaki, including Millicent Marcus' "Misogyny as Misreading: A Gloss on *Decameron* VIII.7." Also see Teodolinda Barolini ("Notes" and "Le parole"). For diverse considerations of the *De mulieribus claris* in this spirit, consult: *Boccaccio's Heroines* of Margaret Franklin; "Dux femina facti: Virgil's Dido in the Historical Context," in Desmond 23–73; and Filosa, "Boccaccio tra storia e invenzione" and "Intertestualità."

philogyny to one of misogyny. This dualistic interpretation hinders a reading of his *corpus* — let alone of singular works — in one direction or the other. Gender studies in Boccaccio have yet to examine the ways in which his views on the vernacular as the “volgare delle femine,” vis-à-vis Dante (*Esposizioni Accessus*, 19) impact upon our reading of the *Decameron*’s authorial voice and its dedication to “vaghe donne” (*Decameron* Proem, 9).

In this article, I explore the subject of gender in Boccaccio through an analysis of his gendered history of the vernacular as the language of women. I posit that by means of an interpretation of Boccaccio’s gendered history of the vernacular one can achieve a different reading of the canonical negotiations of the Proem, the Introduction to Day Four, and the Conclusion of the Author in the *Decameron*. Ultimately, I argue that Boccaccio can be related to misogynist and non-misogynist ideologies by means of his own rhetoric of philogyny when seen as the result of linguistic debates within textual communities that can be discerned inside and outside of the *Decameron*.

There are several instances in Boccaccio’s *corpus* in which his Author (or, in the case of the *Decameron*, the “primary narrator”<sup>2</sup>) adopts a female persona or addresses a female audience. The narrator of the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, for example, is a woman who addresses “innamorate donne” (in the spirit of Ovid’s *Heroides*); the *Teseida* is dedicated to a fictional woman, Fiammetta; the Author of the *Decameron* addresses a female audience, and its storytelling *brigata* is populated with more women than men.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the *Decameron* highlights the role of women as producers and interpreters of discourse, from the seven female members of the *brigata* to numerous female characters who advocate for themselves and others with their words, such as Ghismonda and Madonna Filippa. Yet while female characters have been the subject of analysis, it is the Author of the *Decameron* — he who identifies with the “vaghe donne” and with the poets of the *stilnovo*, while also jockeying for a position

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<sup>2</sup> As Regina Psaki writes (Psaki “Women” 79), this primary narrator in the *Decameron* is “a very partisan speaker and a far from disinterested one” in relationship to his female audience.

<sup>3</sup> The willingness for Boccaccio to figure women as writers, speakers and readers contrasts with the strategy of misogyny that Gretchen Angelo finds in medieval French texts, namely Jean de Meun’s *Le Roman de la Rose*. She writes, “Male and female spheres of endeavor are clearly separate, and the written word falls within the province of men. The use of this type of misogyny implicitly defines every male reader as a scholar and consequently reorients the text toward a male audience” (Angelo 85).

within their ranks — who has escaped similar scrutiny regarding his relationship to gendered discourse. The gendered subject in Boccaccio's works, I would argue, can be read as both sociological (for example, in the study of female characters) and sociolinguistic (as in the ways in which language is gendered as a whole and in its grammatical parts).

The nature of Boccaccio's authorial self-fashioning in the *Decameron* requires that we shift our focus to a voice whose brief autobiography accounts for his transformation from "innamorato" to that of a poet in the service of ladies.<sup>4</sup> His service to women in offering the text of the *Decameron* is scripted in a false stance of humility in relation to the ranks of other stilnovist poets who write about love — Dante Alighieri, Guido Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia. At the same time, Boccaccio addresses his potential detractors, those humanists who favored only Latin production and translation and who had yet to accept the idea of vernacular production in lyric poetry, let alone in prose.<sup>5</sup> The combination of a female audience with interlocutors both instrumental (as in the case of the three lyric poets) and disinterested (as in the case of humanist detractors) in the establishment of a vernacular canon gestures to the complexity of literary production in the vernacular during a time of shifting ideologies, when Petrarch and other humanists at the vanguard of Latinate literary production ran counter to the linguistic project initiated by Dante in the *Commedia*.<sup>6</sup>

This complexity, I believe, is reflected in the words of the Author whom I read in part as a fictional elaboration of Boccaccio as a historical author. As the Author changes from one who once suffered like women, so does Boccaccio's language transform from a "maternal vernacular" (according to Dante's theorization of eloquence in the vernacular as the "materna locutio," *De vulgari eloquentia* I.vi.2) to a new literary vernacular in prose, one that is — and is not — different from the "volgare delle femine" (*Esposizioni* Accessus, 19). He speaks not in an original maternal vernacular, and not in the language of women (as Boccaccio claims in the *Esposizioni*) — yet he continues to write in the vernacular. Thus the "untidy business of

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Boccaccio's self-fashioning as "lover" in his major fictions, see Smarr, esp. 1–8.

<sup>5</sup> See Mazzocco (102) for an assessment of the *questione della lingua* and Bruni's view on vernacular production in poetry versus in prose (102).

<sup>6</sup> Desmond contrasts Stephen Greenblatt's theory of Renaissance self-fashioning in the case of Thomas More and Christopher Marlowe with that of Christine de Pizan, who consistently negotiates her gendered identity with her authorial one. See Desmond (195–96) and Greenblatt.

gender studies” (to cite Migiel’s titular phrase)<sup>7</sup> must consider the Author’s gendered identity — a once lovelorn man writing for an audience of lovelorn women — alongside the establishment of the vernacular as a literary language *despite* and *because of* its history as the language of women. It must see philogyny as a strategy to revise and benefit from the misogynist commonplaces of current linguistic and artistic ideologies. Furthermore, it must see philogyny as part of a rhetorical strategy to build vernacular authority within shifting textual communities, those that comprise the “litterati” (i.e., Petrarch, see *Esposizioni* XV.96), and those that comprise literature in the vernacular (i.e., the merchant class).<sup>8</sup>

In this essay, I propose that we view the dedication of the *Decameron* to women and its philogynous rhetoric as intrinsic to Boccaccio’s daring new project of composing the vernacular *Decameron*. In particular, by situating the self-fashioning of the Author within the context of Boccaccio’s reception of Dante, who first articulated the gendered linguistic difference of a maternal vernacular and a literary one in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, we can acquire a new vision of Dante’s linguistic influence on Boccaccio. I shall begin by problematizing the decision to write the *Decameron* in the vernacular in light of the concept of the “galeotto” and then of Boccaccio’s explication of Dante’s gendered history of the “volgare.” This informs my reading of Boccaccio’s interpretation of Dante’s vernacular in the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* and in the *Esposizioni*, in addition to the gendered definitions of the vernacular in the Epistle to Cangrande della Scala, the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia*.<sup>9</sup> I thus contextualize Boccaccio’s misogynist history of the vernacular for a Florentine audience at the beginnings of Renaissance humanism. This context is then compared to the language of the *Decameron* and its dedication to women in love in the Proem, which Boccaccio seems to contradict in a subsequent letter to Mainardo Cavalcanti (*Epistola* XXII). Finally, I address the Introduction to Day Four and its negotiation in erotic terms of canonical hierarchy. Ultimately I propose that we read Boccaccio’s authorial self-fashioning within the literary circles from which it originated (namely Dante) and for which it was theoretically destined, thereby locating the dependence of

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<sup>7</sup> See Migiel, “Untidy Business.”

<sup>8</sup> See Cazalé Bérard. See also Bruni for a broad interpretation of Boccaccio’s early literary production under the rubric of philogyny.

<sup>9</sup> While the authenticity of the Epistle still remains unclear, as Albert Russell Ascoli notes, I agree with his assessment that it remains an important document for Dante criticism and, most of all, independently as a cultural document. See Ascoli.

authorial masculinity upon a rhetorical philogyny.<sup>10</sup> Or, to echo Alison Cornish's affirmation as regards Cavalcanti's "Donna me prega": "We might with reason suspect that all this supposed talk to women, even in the context of the *dolce stil novo*, is really to impress other men, and then only an elite among them" (Cornish, "Lady" 173). In the case of Boccaccio, the dedication of the *Decameron* to women was truly to the literary elite of posterity.

Boccaccio's lifetime witnessed the project of attributing authority to the vernacular. From Dante onwards, as well as for other authors in French and Old English later on, such a project entailed distancing the vernacular from its "maternal" origins and feminine usage and lending it to the crafting of the language of erotic material, as manipulated by male writers. It meant exploiting the spoken vernacular as the language used by women for moments when a fictive audience was required (as in the *Decameron's* Proem), but restoring the written vernacular to the Muses. For Boccaccio, this meant that it was the Muses who, as he explains in the Introduction to Day Four, showed Boccaccio *how* to write, not the women whom he claims gave him inspiration. His Muses, I argue, are the emblems of classical instruction in literature; they provided him with the refined language that he could use while also claiming, with false humility, to speak in the language of women. And if Boccaccio's Muses are an "illustrious vernacular," then Dante is instrumental in his defense of that literary language.

#### I. "Go-between" Literature in the Vernacular: *Inferno* V, the *Decameron* and *Esposizioni*

A "galeotto" should inspire its female reader to fall in love. But what if we were to shift the paradigm, reading the "galeotto" as also intended for a male author reading a text, one who possesses the authority to judge its inherent value? Viewing these canonical negotiations as dependent upon the readership troped as female in the Proem and the Introduction to Day Four but ultimately destined for a male, literary readership, one notices the intersection of misogynist and philogynist discourses with literary *auctoritas*. And the important predecessor and interlocutor of that discourse – the first writer to theorize the "galeotto" – is Dante.

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<sup>10</sup> Again, to compare with earlier French production, Angelo posits that the misogyny that can be found in Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la Rose* serves to establish a masculine textual community and a masculine vernacular (Angelo 85).

The latter part of the full title of the *Decameron* — “cognominato Prencipe Galeotto” — suggests vast horizons for a reading of Boccaccio’s authorial voice vis-à-vis the *Decameron*’s relationship to Dante. “Galeotto” evokes a multiplicity of contexts proposed by *Inferno* V: Dante’s lyric history, courtly love and the roles of texts and readers.<sup>11</sup> Cited as the text’s “cognome” by Boccaccio both at the beginning of the work, before the Proem, and at its very end, after the Conclusion of the Author, the *Decameron* has been debated in its role as a “galeotto”: is it meant as counsel for women in love or as an admonishment towards women *not* to follow its examples of women in love? We can look to Boccaccio’s interpretation of Paolo and Francesca in his *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* for a possible response to that question. Since Boccaccio himself exculpates Francesca from any blame in her alleged adulterous act in his lengthy, *novella*-like commentary in *Esposizioni* V, claiming that she had been deceived by her father in marrying the ugly Gianciotto, it could be assumed that Boccaccio would ascribe blame as well to agents other than Francesca, granting power to a text to “condurre” to good or bad conduct (as reminiscent of Francesca’s own identification of blame with Love in her verse, “Amor condusse noi,” *Inf.* V.106). After all, Boccaccio would later write to Mainardo Cavalcanti that the *Decameron* should not fall into the hands of the women of his household, given the corrupting power of his *novelle* (*Epistola* XXII). If Boccaccio’s strategic elaboration of the tale of Paolo and Francesca in the *Esposizioni* reads as a *novella*, then his letter to Mainardo, I suggest, betrays his belief that in composing the *Decameron* he had written a “galeotto” in the spirit of *Inferno* V.

Reading the *Decameron* as a “galeotto,” as the text that has the power to sway hearts and silence reason, but most importantly as the text which Dante did *not* write, casts Boccaccio as a writer armed with the *ingegno* required to narrate the remnants of the *Commedia*’s uncrafted imaginary. Where Dante affords us a name or a title (as in “galeotto”), Boccaccio, as historian and storyteller, produces a *novella*-like biography or a collection of *novelle*.<sup>12</sup> Where Dante states the “nomina,” Boccaccio constructs the

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<sup>11</sup> The bibliography to *Inferno* V is vast. Barolini fully treats Boccaccio’s elaboration of the tale of Paolo and Francesca in the *Esposizioni* in her article “Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance and Gender.” Jonathan Usher treats this tale both in the *Filocolo* and in the *Esposizioni* in his essay, “Paolo and Francesca in the *Filocolo* and the *Esposizioni*.” María Rosa Menocal also discusses the importance of this “cognome” for Boccaccio in Menocal 178–202.

<sup>12</sup> Francesco Bruni observes in a similar fashion: “[...] mentre negli *exempla*, o anche in molti *fabliaux*, la determinazione storica o sociologica dei personaggi manca o è trat-



“consequentiae rerum.” The fact that Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron* in the vernacular would also suggest that his narrative in the *volgare* continues where Dante’s history reaches the ends of its narrative *fili*, crafting portraits where Dante provides sketches. Writing in the vernacular also implies joining a newly-formed literary community that will shape the emerging canon.<sup>13</sup> As the *Decameron’s* Author implies in the Introduction to Day Four, composing in the *volgare* allows Boccaccio to join the ranks of those who also wrote love poetry, such as Dante, Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia — and to compete with their lyric production by writing both in the Florentine vernacular *and*, for the first time for the emerging canon of Italian literature, in prose.<sup>14</sup>

There are three texts in which Boccaccio discusses Dante’s decision to write in the vernacular — in two of the redactions of the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* and the *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*. He treats the matter at greatest length and in gendered terms in the *Esposizioni*. The historical moment of the *Esposizioni*, between 1373 and 1374, deserves to be noted as a fraught moment not only for the reception of Dante’s poem *per se*, with its potentially heretical content, but also one during which the vernacular experiences an opposing value for merchants and humanists. If Boccaccio went against current literary cultural conventions earlier to write lengthy prose in the vernacular *Filocolo* and then the *Decameron*, Dante’s originality in this regard goes without saying.<sup>15</sup> But how does Boccaccio justify Dante’s choice of composing in the vernacular at this point in literary history, during which time, as scholars such as William Robins indicate, we witness the new mercantile “regime of the vernacular” alongside the advent of humanism?<sup>16</sup> As Erich Auerbach writes, the struggle between

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teggiata sommariamente, e il loro carattere è abbozzato in maniera schematica, unilaterale, tanto che negli *exempla* il personaggio non ha neppure un nome, nella *Divina Commedia* il Boccaccio trovava degli attori molto caratterizzati, e la rappresentazione del loro agire colto nel contesto individuante delle circostanze [...]” (Bruni 293).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Eisner analyzes Boccaccio’s formation of this imagined community by means of the Chigiano Codex and other texts, in his dissertation. See Eisner.

<sup>14</sup> In another indication of the community of male writers, Dante dedicates the *Vita nuova* to Guido Cavalcanti, “quelli che io chiamo primo delli miei amici, e disse allora uno sonetto, lo quale comincia *Vedesti, al mio parere, omne valore*” (III.14), and refers to “li fedeli d’amore” in the first *piede* of “A ciascun’alma presa” (III.9).

<sup>15</sup> See Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular*.

<sup>16</sup> Robins speaks of the institutionalization of the vernacular within the tribunals of the Mercanzia of the Commune of Florence in 1355, an act which afforded the vernacular an authority for the members of the merchant class that stands in opposition to those

Latin and Romance vernaculars in establishing literary primacy was not yet concluded.<sup>17</sup> Even if, as early as the thirteenth century in Italy, there existed a public of “literates who could read and write, and who could read and write in the vernacular more easily than in Latin” (as Armando Petrucci affirms<sup>18</sup>), the vernacular was not yet an illustrious literary language. It was soon advanced as one, however, by various authors, with the clearest example being Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*. Thus the growth of vernacular literacy in Italian accompanied the forging of a vernacular Italian literary canon.

Dante himself acknowledged the audience of the “volgari, ma non letterati,” both explicitly in the text of the *Convivio*, and implicitly in the vernacular language of the *Commedia*. In *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Erich Auerbach cites this passage from the *Convivio* as the “most significant evidence we have of a public educated in the vernacular in the early fourteenth century”<sup>19</sup>:

Chè la bontà de l’animo, la quale questo servigio attende, è in coloro che per malvagia disusanza del mondo hanno lasciata la litteratura [in Latin] a color che l’hanno fatta di donna meretrice; e questi nobili sono principi, baroni, cavalieri, e molt’altra nobile gente, non solamente maschi ma femmine, che sono molti e molte in questa lingua, volgari, e non letterati. (I.ix.5)

Dante chose to write in the vernacular because of the alleged demise of Latin literature, but also, as he affirms in a previous passage in the *Convivio* (I.ix.2), “non avrebbe lo latino così servito a molti”: Latin would not have served many to the same extent. Indeed, one of the possible projects of the unfinished *Convivio* (though this is much more the guiding principle of the *De vulgari eloquentia*) can be read as a defense of compositions in the vernacular (“Poi che purgato è questo pane da le macule accidentali, rimane ad escusare lui da una sustanziale, cioè da l’essere vulgare e non latino,” I.v.1).<sup>20</sup> Gesturing beyond the vernacular’s merits of accessibility to

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humanists endorsing Latin as the language of what Leonardo Bruni would later call the *studia humanitatis*. See Robins 112.

<sup>17</sup> “Only gradually could the vernaculars begin to compete with it [Latin]; only with Dante did they seriously take up the struggle with Latin; and not until the sixteenth century, with its vernacular humanism and the related classicism of the academies, was the struggle finally decided in their favor” (Auerbach 272).

<sup>18</sup> See Petrucci 178. The connection of this public with a burgeoning mercantile society has been made before; see also Cardini.

<sup>19</sup> See Auerbach 297.

<sup>20</sup> See Boli. For a discussion of Boccaccio’s unlikely reception of the *Convivio*, see Arduini.



a wider audience, Auerbach argues that Dante's predilection for the vernacular can also be read as the love for his native language ("lo naturale amore de la propria loquela"), which Dante also declares in the *Convivio* (I.x.5).<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to that declaration, in the *Esposizioni* Boccaccio claims that the Florentine poet wished to compose the *Commedia* in Latin. In speaking to an audience of "signori fiorentini" (Accessus, 3), he confronts the debated question, or the "dubbio," of a "litteratissimo" Dante composing in the vernacular by inventing a false beginning for the *Commedia* in Latin. Citing an event for which there is no material evidence, he recounts how Dante switched to the vernacular to appeal to the intellect of current lords:

Cominciò il presente libro in versi latini, così:

*Ultima regna canam fluvido contermina mundo,  
spiritibus que lata patent, que premia solvunt  
pro meritis cuicunque suis etc.*

E già era alquanti proceduto avanti, quando gli parve da mutare stilo; e il consiglio che 'l mosse fu manifestamente conoscere i liberali studi e' filosofici essere del tutto abandonati da' prencipi e da' signori e dagli eccellenti uomini, li quali sollevano onorare e rendere famosi i poeti e le loro opere: e però, veggendo quasi abandonato Virgilio e gli altri, o essere nelle mani d'uomini plebei e di bassa condizione, estimò così al suo lavoro dovere adivenire, e per conseguente non seguirnegli quello per che alla fatica si sommettea. Di che gli parve dovere il suo poema fare conforme, almeno nella cortecchia di fuori, agl'ingegni de' presenti signori, de' quali se alcuno n'è che alcuno libro voglia vedere e esso sia in latino, tantosto il fanno trasformare in volgare; donde prese argomento che, se volgare fosse il suo poema, egli piacerebbe, dove in latino sarebbe schifato. (Accessus, 75-77)

Here one witnesses Boccaccio's dilemma between the endorsement of humanist ideals, founded upon a traditional education in Latin (for whom literacy meant Latin literacy, the reading of Vergil, etc.), and Dante's decision to write in the vernacular.<sup>22</sup> If that Latin "maternal" text, the *Aeneid*, was abandoned by lords, princes and excellent men, then Dante would not

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<sup>21</sup> See Auerbach 310-12.

<sup>22</sup> See Padoan 35-43.

subject his poem to the same fate; he chose the vernacular as the language of poetry — a literary language that would bring him fame.<sup>23</sup>

As noted by Padoan, this is not the first instance in which Boccaccio would address Dante's decision to compose in the vernacular. Where "grandissimi litterati" express the doubt that Dante himself was not "litterato" if he chose to compose in the vernacular (*Esposizioni* XV.96), many "savi uomini" pose the "quistione" of the vernacular since Dante was "solennissimo" in "iscienz[i]a," as two redactions of the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* read (between 1351 and 1355). What was once inquiry takes the skeptical tone of doubt in the later *Esposizioni*. Additionally, the acknowledged functions and audiences for vernacular compositions differ. The first redaction of the *Trattatello* (191) identifies a larger "utilità" to Florentines and other Italians ("per fare utilità più comune a' suoi cittadini e agli altri italiani") since poetry in Latin only would have served the learned ("solamente a' letterati avrebbe fatto utile"). As well, Boccaccio writes, Dante accomplishes something original by composing in the vernacular, and also shows its beauty and his art in that achievement. This redaction continues by pointing out, as does the *Esposizioni*, that the liberal arts were abandoned by lords and other important men, and also includes the "first" Latinate beginning of the *Commedia*. In contrast, Boccaccio states here that Dante did not complete the *Commedia* in Latin because it would have been like putting bread to the mouths of nursing infants ("i lasciò stare; e, imaginando invano le croste del pane porsi alla bocca di coloro che ancora il latte suggano, in istile atto a' moderni sensi ricominciò la sua opera e perseguilla in volgare," *Trat.* [1] 192). Composing in the maternal vernacular, the language defined by Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia* as that which we learn by imitating our nurses ("vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitante accipimus," I.i.2–3) would thus guarantee wider comprehension for an "infantile" public.

The second redaction of the *Trattatello* traces Boccaccio's gradual ideological shift to the *Esposizioni*.<sup>24</sup> Absent is the affirmation that the ver-

<sup>23</sup> If Latin is not widely troped as a maternal language, Vergil's *Aeneid* would be in the text of the *Commedia*: "de l'Eneida dico, la qual mamma / fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando: / sanz' essa non fermai peso di dramma" (*Purg.* 21.97–99).

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the ideological and rhetorical challenges that Boccaccio faced in confronting the task of the *Esposizioni*, see Papio (3–37) who analyzes the "penitent" sonnets that Boccaccio composed after the lectures and their expression of disappointment in failing to enlighten the masses to the theological and philosophical truths of the poem. See also Padoan 45–70.

naacular had a broader audience; absent as well is the description of the originality of writing in the vernacular. The current state of the liberal studies as abandoned by princes and lords is foregrounded, together with the *Commedia's* "abandoned" Latin incipit. Instead, the vernacular poem has two new functions: first, it inspires the unlearned to study, and second, it enabled Dante to acquire great fame: "Di che seguì un bene, che de' versi non sarebbe seguito: che, senza tôr via lo esercitare degl'ingegni de' letterati, egli a' non letterati diede alcuna cagion di studiare, e a sé acquistò in brevissimo tempo grandissima fama, e maravigliosamente onorò il fiorentino idioma" (*Trat.* [2] 130). By the time of the *Esposizioni*, however, Boccaccio has adopted the language of humanist disdain for those unlearned in Latin.<sup>25</sup>

Composing in the vernacular was an unsuccessful strategy, Boccaccio asserts later in the *Esposizioni*; it risked oblivion for the *Commedia*. The works of Petrarch enjoyed an opposite *fortuna* because they had spread to those places where Latin literature was known. Here Boccaccio locates the poor reception of the *Commedia* in the fact that the poem was hidden by the cloud of the feminine vernacular ("la caligine del volgar materno").<sup>26</sup> In his gloss of Brunetto Latini's words "nel qual io vivo ancora," (*Inferno* 15.120), Boccaccio compares the familiarity of Petrarch's works with that of Dante's:

E, acciò che io a' nostri tempi divenga, non ha il nostro carissimo cittadino e venerabile uomo e mio maestro e padre, messer Francesco <Petrarca>, con la dottrina poetica riempita ogni parte, dove la lettera latina è conosciuta, della sua maravigliosa e splendida fama e messo il nome suo nelle bocche, non dico de' precipi cristiani, li quali li più sono oggi idioti, ma de' sommi pontefici, de' gran maestri e di qualunque altro eccelente uomo in iscienza? Non il presente nostro autore, la luce del cui valore è per alquanto tempo stata nascosa sotto la caligine del volgar materno, è cominciato da grandissimi litterati ad essere disiderato e ad aver caro? (*Esposizioni* XV.96, emphasis mine)

Dante's work, which has not enjoyed the same fortune, has been hidden under "la caligine del volgar materno," and is only gaining appreciation

<sup>25</sup> Padoan notes, "In questa nuova stesura si può notare una più rigorosa adesione del B. agli ideali umanisti, per il tono più deciso con il quale esalta la lingua latina e sottolinea l'atteggiamento di distacco dal volgo ignorante" (In Boccaccio, *Esposizioni* 774n89).

<sup>26</sup> This obviously contrasts with the defense of Dante's use of the vernacular in Boccaccio's *carmen*, "Ytalie iam certus honos": "[...] volui[t] futuris / quid metrum vulgare queat monstrare modernum" (V.8–9). See Gilson 45–47, Eisner and Houston, esp. 92–99.

now.<sup>27</sup> Todd Boli suggests that we read the “grandissimi litterati” of this passage as Petrarch and those literary elites that include Francesco Nelli, Zanobi da Strada, Lapo da Castiglionchio and Luigi Marsini, Petrarch’s correspondents.<sup>28</sup> Whomever Boccaccio had precisely in mind in this phrase, the cultural battle between Latin and the vernacular was being waged in explicit terms. Certainly the correspondence between Giovanni del Virgilio and Dante, in which the former exhorts the vernacular poet to compose his poem in Latin, speaks to this tension.<sup>29</sup> The interpretation of this textual moment — one crucial to our understanding of how Italian medieval writers canonized their own works — has not taken into account that the vernacular could have held less capital in this moment because of its gendered history, or that such a history was a part of the cultural battle between Latinate production and the establishment of a vernacular canon. But where the gendered status of the vernacular appears to be a disadvantage to Dante, Boccaccio will see opportunity for his own literary production, by complementing the vernacular’s lesser status with a false topos of humility and the rhetoric of philogyny. Before turning to the *Decameron*, I now examine how Boccaccio’s allusions in gendered terms to a history of the vernacular continue in his reception of the *Commedia*’s language in the *Esposizioni*.

## II. Writing in a Maternal Language, Writing in the Language of Women: From Dante to Boccaccio

Commentators up to the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, including Pietro Alighieri and Benvenuto da Imola, as well as the authors of the *Ottimo Commento*, the *Codice cassinese* and the *Chiose ambrosiane*, rarely use the term “volgare materno” or “lingua materna.”<sup>30</sup> Few (if any) commentators, it ap-

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<sup>27</sup> Is this the result of Petrarch’s particular social identity as a composer of a new, Ciceronian Latin? See Celenza for a relevant discussion. Simon Gilson also notes these passages for a revelation of the “contemporary situation of humanist unease” (45–47).

<sup>28</sup> See Boli 408.

<sup>29</sup> See Wicksteed and Gardner.

<sup>30</sup> The *Ottimo Commento* uses the phrase “la materna lingua” in the gloss of *Purg.* XXIV.55–62 (“non sanno più che la materna lingua”). Pietro Alighieri refers to a “materna rima” in his commentary to *Inf.* X and *Purg.* XXIV.1–36, and to a “materna lingua” in his gloss to *Purg.* XI.79–142. “Lingua materna” also appears: in the *Codice cassinese*’s commentary on *Purg.* XI.97; in Benvenuto da Imola’s gloss of *Purgatorio* XI and the discussion of Guido Guinizelli (97–99); in *Purg.* XXIV when glossing the verses

pears, problematize Dante's vernacular in its relation to a maternal language or the language of women — and, most importantly, none of them seems to employ gendered terms to defend Dante's decision to write in the vernacular. Yet crucially, for Boccaccio, the mother tongue becomes *the language of women* (“il volgare delle femine”), rather than the maternal language defined by Dante in the *Convivio* or in the *De vulgari eloquentia*:

Oltre a questo, lo stilo comico è umile e rimesso, acciò che alla materia sia conforme; quello che della presente opera dire non si può, per ciò che, quantunque in volgare scritto sia, nel quale pare che comunichino le feminette, egli è nondimeno ornato e leggiadro e sublime, delle quali cose nulla sente il volgare delle femine. Non dico però che, se in versi latini fosse, non mutato il peso delle parole volgari, ch'egli non fosse più artificioso e più sublime molto, per ciò che molto più d'arte e di gravità ha nel parlare latino che nel materno. (*Esposizioni Accessus*, 19)

While Dante locates the illustrious vernacular as having evolved from the “vulgar materno” in his own texts, here Boccaccio distances Dante's literary vernacular from the vernacular spoken by women but does not differentiate between them in categorical terms. He argues that Dante's poetry is “ornato e leggiadro e sublime” despite being crafted in the vernacular. Regardless of how Boccaccio attempts to circumvent this issue, Dante's literary language is still the language of women. Boccaccio would not render that explicit, though the author of the Epistle to Cangrande della Scala would do so.

If Dante is the author of the Epistle to Cangrande della Scala, then he himself offers a gender for the vernacular in words that bear a striking thematic similarity to this moment in the *Accessus* of the *Esposizioni*:

Et per hoc patet quod Comedia dicitur presens opus. Nam si ad materiam respiciamus, a principio horribilis et fetida est, quia Infernus, in fine prospera, desiderabilis et grata, quia Paradisus; ad modum loquendi, remissus est modus et humilis, quia locutio vulgaris in qua et muliercule comunicant. (31)

The language of the poem is “dimesso e umile” (reminiscent of the “umile e rimesso” of the passage from the *Accessus*) because it is written in the vernacular language spoken by women. In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante praises the maternal vernacular, “la lingua materna,” or, as Cornish has stated, to make “an axiom of an oxymoron: the vulgar is nobler.”<sup>31</sup> He

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discussing Bonagiunta (34–39) and Guittone da Arezzo (55–57). Cited from the Dartmouth Dante Project <<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>>.

<sup>31</sup> See Cornish, “Lady” 176.

might as well be the first thinker to theorize the maternal origins of the language we learn as infants while imitating our nurses (“vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitante accipimus” (I.i.2–3)).<sup>32</sup>

If Dante acknowledges that the vulgar is the tongue that women speak, and even if the illustrious vernacular is an artistic (and artificial) transformation of the “lingua materna,” he would not trope the feminine vernacular with language that describes its incomprehensibility or its inaccessibility — or its inferior value. As Cornish writes, “The mother tongue is superior to the tongue learned in school. The lady is better than the old male authority” (Cornish, “Lady” 178). Even though *grammatica*, the language produced by a refinement of the maternal vernacular, is not one and the same as the maternal vernacular, Dante’s definition of the vernacular embraces the maternal language as sublime. Furthermore, the *Commedia* alludes to poetic language as nurturing and feminine, such as his description of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, which is described as his mother and his nurse (as cited above). For Dante, the vulgar tongue, and poetry in the vulgar tongue, as well as literary antecedents in the vulgar tongue, are maternal or serve a maternal function.

Dante’s original and extensive enterprise of establishing the vernacular as a legitimate literary language does not eliminate Boccaccio’s apparent need for Boccaccio’s gendered defense in the *Esposizioni*. Why did Boccaccio deem it necessary to revisit this issue? One possibility could be the way in which Dante embraced the vernacular regardless of its maternal origins: he did not achieve a separation between the “lingua materna” and the language in which men write to the satisfaction of the cultural elite.<sup>33</sup> Evidence of this in Dante’s time can be found, again, in the exchange between Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio, where the latter accuses Dante of casting his pearls before swine (“nec margaritas profliga prodigus aspris,” *Egloge* I.21). To this accusation, Dante poignantly responds that del Virgilio takes issue with his “humble words that fall onto the lips of women” (“comica [...] verba / tum quia femineo resonant ut trita labello,” II.52–53). Dante points to a view of the vernacular as the language spoken by women as the cause of del Virgilio’s discomfort with the *Commedia*’s language.

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<sup>32</sup> For a full treatment of Dante’s negotiation of grammar to the Italian vernacular as evoked by his manipulation of the cultural symbol of the nursing mother, see Cestaro (esp. 49–76) on the significance of this reading for the *De vulgari eloquentia*.

<sup>33</sup> See Cestaro.



Apprehension of a feminine vernacular is not simply a matter of a misogynist trend in emerging humanist thought, but seems indicative of the theory that vernacular production could be seen as “feminizing” its audience.<sup>34</sup> This framework has been advanced by scholars of Middle English texts of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century; as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has written, “If women are targeted as a special group that ‘needs’ works in English, the vernacular may have the potential to feminize its male audience by aligning them with non-Latin-literate women” (121–22). And it is here in the *Esposizioni* that the gendered status of the *Commedia*’s language stands as a primary concern. Late medieval authors, not only in Italy and England but also in France and Spain and later in the New World, went through extensive efforts to differentiate the vernacular from a traditional view on its role as “mother tongue” to instead a language of literary authority.<sup>35</sup> As Gretchen Angelo writes in reference to Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*, “Misogyny served as a hallmark of *translatio studii*, allowing male authors to place themselves in an illustrious line of scholarship. It simultaneously weakened the association of vernacular literature with the feminine by creating a masculine textual community and a masculine vernacular” (85). During the time of *translatio studiorum*, a poem written in the language of women for an audience of men posed a substantial ideological obstacle for its reception.

If writing within the vernacular already challenged existing literary conventions, “vernacularizing” a vernacular poem could be interpreted as the reduction of poetry to the primary function of the vernacular itself: the dissolution of the literary word to the spoken word, circulating within the “vulgar” crowd.<sup>36</sup> Understandably, then, the first *dantista* sustained that “vulgarizing the poem” (that is, delivering the lectures of the *Esposizioni*) was a failed project. In verses written to a correspondent who accused Boccaccio of ignoring the humanist ideals of disdainful detachment from the people who are unable to appreciate poetry, Boccaccio would later claim that Apollo had punished his body for having “vilmente prostrate” the Muses to the “vulgo dolente” (*Rime* 122, 123, 124, 125). Boccaccio accepts this accusation and writes that it was “follia” (*Rime* CXXIII.8) to assume this task, one that he would never attempt again.

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<sup>34</sup> See Wogan-Browne *et al.* 120–22.

<sup>35</sup> See Angelo 86. See also Lusignan.

<sup>36</sup> In the first chapter of her recently published book, Alison Cornish investigates the “anxiety of *volgarizzamento*” as experienced by Boccaccio while working on the *Esposizioni* (*Vernacular Translation* 16–44).

When is the project of vernacularizing the *Commedia* a successful one — one that does not risk offense or oblivion? If vernacularization can be read broadly as the creative influence and critical interpretation of a source text within the genres of commentary, fiction and chronicle in a secondary text as variously defined as “o favole o parabole o istorie” in the Proem itself, then the *Decameron* succeeds where the *Esposizioni* could have met with historical resistance. The *Decameron* can also be termed a “galeotto” in that it mediates two decades earlier the difficulties of readership and reception for a new vernacular canon discussed for the *Esposizioni*: a go-between written in the vernacular for a female audience, the same audience established by the stilnovist poets cited in the Introduction to Day Four, and written with the assistance of the Muses. If none of the earlier commentators before Boccaccio’s time addressed the gender of the vernacular, then perhaps that can be attributed to the fact that Boccaccio was not only a commentator but an author positioning himself within that same canon. Only the author who used “il volgare delle femine” to compose *novelle* for an audience of women would identify such an inherent risk — and also take measures to defend himself adequately. Taking this possibility into consideration, I now explore the implications of the gendered history and defense of Dante’s vernacular for the Author’s voice in the *Decameron*.

### III. The Real Muses of a Literary Vernacular: The “donne innamorate” of the *Decameron*

Of the historical female readership of his hundred *novelle*, we know of one to be certain: Christine de Pizan, who was greatly influenced by both the *De claris mulieribus* and the *Decameron* in composing the *Cité des dames* (1405).<sup>37</sup> The question of historical readership leads inevitably to the letter by Mainardo Cavalcanti of 1372<sup>38</sup> — not coincidentally, around the time of the *Esposizioni* — which has complicated our reading of the *Decameron*’s dedication<sup>39</sup>:

<sup>37</sup> See Quilligan’s discussion of Boccaccio’s activities as “compiler” and Christine de Pizan’s interpretation of that rhetorical stance (Quilligan 38). See also Holderness.

<sup>38</sup> For this dating of epistle 22 (as opposed to the oft-cited date of 1373), see Ricci 163–71.

<sup>39</sup> This is Victoria Kirkham’s translation from *The Sign of Reason in Boccaccio’s Fiction* (118–19). The original text, *Epistola XXII.19–24*: “Sane, quod inclitas mulieres tuas domesticas nugas meas legere permiseris non laudo, quin imo queso per fidem tuam ne feceris. Nosti quot ibi sint minus decencia et adversantia honestati, quot veneris in-

I cannot praise your having allowed the honorable ladies of your household to read my trifles, rather I beg you to give me your word you will not do so again. You know how much they contain that is less than decent and offensive to propriety, how much sting from the unwelcome Venus, how many incitements to vice even for those of iron will; and even if they do not drive to indecent behavior illustrious women, most especially those with brows marked by holy chastity, nevertheless illicit burnings slip in with silent step and not infrequently penetrate and irritate unchaste souls with the obscene wasting of concupiscence, a thing to be avoided at all costs [...]. Readers will suppose me a smutty panderer, an incestuous old man, an impure person, a foul-mouthed scandalmonger, avid to bruit about people's wickedness. I will not always find someone to stand up and excuse me by saying, 'He wrote this in his youth, compelled by the authority of one more powerful.'

The contradiction between the dedication and the later letter to Cavalcanti poses a formidable challenge. Just as his concerns in the *Esposizioni* over the vernacular are more sensitized to a misogynist humanist audience than they are in the *Trattatello*, Boccaccio might have changed his perspective on a female readership between 1350 and 1372.

While Boccaccio could be said to have changed in many regards between his earlier literary production (the period that ends circa 1350) and later, more Latinate production, the assertion that Boccaccio categorically changed in every ideological aspect of his views on art because of his encounter with Petrarch has been debated.<sup>40</sup> Textual evidence that shows Boccaccio's later work as compilations of earlier material and revistations of earlier rhetorical strategies and discourses speaks to a continuity within his *corpus* that challenges such a totalizing claim.<sup>41</sup> Simply put, Boccac-

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fauste aculei, quot in scelus impellentia etiam si sint ferrea pectora, a quibus etsi non ad incestuosum actum illustres impellantur femine, et potissime quibus sacer pudor frontibus insidet, subeunt tamen passu tacito estus illecebres et impudicas animas absceña concupiscentie tabe nonnunquam inficiunt irritantque, quod omnino ne contingat agendum est [...]. Existimabunt enim legentes me spurcidium lenonem, incestuosum senem, impurum hominem, turpiloquum maledicum et alienorum scelerum avidum relatoem. Non enim ubique est qui in excusationem meam consurgens dicat: 'Iuvenis scripsit et maioris coactus imperio.'" Rhiannon Daniels interprets the "nugas meas" as a possible reference to all of his vernacular works, and not just the *Decameron*. See Daniels 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> The most recent critic who has advanced the idea of 1350 as an extreme *svolta* in Boccaccio's career from one of "filoginia" to "misoginia" is Francesco Bruni (43ff.).

<sup>41</sup> As Padoan writes, "Noteremo invece il frequente ritorno nel *Comento* di espressioni e di circonluzioni già ricorrenti nel *Decameron*, e che si rivelano perciò veri e propri moduli narrativi, il ripetersi di giudizi, dai quali evidentemente la personalità dello scrittore è

cio's production changes in ways that Boccaccio criticism has grown accustomed to noting. Perhaps it is time to revisit these formulaic commonplaces. What if, by means of a revisitation of the discursive polarity of misogynist and philogynous rhetorical strategies, we were to view Boccaccio's literary production as a continuation of fluctuating modes? If his scribal activity in transcribing and compiling his work involved periodic revisitations of his own manuscripts at different points in his life, perhaps criticism should view the watershed encounter with Petrarch in 1350 as revolutionary to his thought but not divisive to his *corpus*. In a similar vein, the existing holograph of the *Decameron*, the codex Hamilton 90, which dates to 1370, still retains what Kirkham calls the "admirably chivalrous gesture" of its dedication to women in love.<sup>42</sup>

Entertaining the hypothetical situation of a *Decameron* without a dedication to women in love indicates the importance of buttressing of an authorial voice in the Proem, the Introduction to Day Four and the Conclusion of the Author. I see the Author's amatory stance, though separate from Boccaccio himself, as necessary for an author who wishes to insert himself into a nascent vernacular canon. Without the Author's voice at the beginning, the near-middle, and the end of the collection, the *Decameron* would feel ahistorical, and lose its relationship, however emblematic, with its imagined critical reader. The voice that is not explicitly Boccaccio's is still one that must accompany the *novelle* in their diffusion, in order to define their relationship to the emerging tradition as forged by Dante and stilnovist poets upon their reception.<sup>43</sup>

Migiel accomplishes this integrated reading of the Author's voice as a separate narrative when she addresses the author's shift to an audience of male readers (potential detractors) in the Introduction to Day Four. This strategy allows Boccaccio to hide behind his fictive female audience established in the Proem in order to anticipate and deflect criticism: "If that Author were to address himself to an audience that were more critical, more discriminating, he would find himself in a tight squeeze" (*Rhetoric*

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tanto compenetrata da ridirli quasi tali e quali, pur in opere così differenti" (33). See also Olson 45–65.

<sup>42</sup> Kirkham 117. See also Branca and Ricci.

<sup>43</sup> Kirkham argues that the Proem betrays the influence of Ovid's *Heroides*: "[it] reveals a poet at play with Ovid and mindful of his Dante. Informed by the sources that were his, we can hear a voice speaking not for the lovelorn, but for the lustful" (*Sign of Reason* 117). She reads the *Decameron* as "male guidance for ladies at loose ends" (*Sign of Reason* 128). Marilyn Migiel does not read the *Decameron* as guidance, since it does not always "illustrate the deleterious consequences of illicit love" (*Rhetoric* 5).

6). Once the Author has ingratiated himself with his female readers in the Proem, he opens Day Four by defending, though humbly, his choice to compose in the Florentine vernacular. Where he once believed that the wind of envy only shook the tallest towers and the highest treetops, he has found himself deceived (“estimava io che lo ’mpetuoso vento e ardente della ’nvidia non dovesse percuotere se non l’alte torri o le piú levate cime degli alberi: ma io mi truovo della mia estimazione ingannato”)<sup>44</sup>:

Per ciò che, fuggendo io e sempre essendomi di fuggire ingegnato il fiero impeto di questo rabbioso spirito, non solamente pe’ piani ma ancora per le profondissime valli mi sono ingegnato d’andare; il che assai manifesto può apparire a chi le presenti novellette riguarda, le quali non solamente in fiorentin volgare e in prose scritte per me sono e senza titolo, ma ancora in istilo *umilissimo e rimesso* quanto il più si possono. (IV.Introduction, 3, emphasis mine)

So that he might avoid criticism, the author has chosen to dwell amongst the lowlands and deep valleys, composing his “novellette” in a humble and lowly style (“umilissimo e rimesso”). Boccaccio referred in the *Accessus* of the *Esposizioni* to Dante’s comic style as “umile e rimesso,” just as Dante referred to his own style in the Epistle to Cangrande as “remissus est modus et humilis” (31). These two characterizations of style appear, as noted earlier, in contexts that identify the vernacular as the language of women.

Though the Introduction to Day Four does not immediately identify the vernacular as the language of women, it reads as a lengthy defense of the vernacular as the language of women (the “discrete donne” being addressed, together with the “ciance” they speak) and of literary language as the language of the Muses, the refined language of abstract, idealized women. The Author rehearses a series of accusations, most likely invented, against which he must shield himself and his work: that he loves women too much; that it is not an “onesta cosa” (§5) for him to please and console them; that he should turn to earning money for nourishment instead of going hungry to compose these stories; and, finally, that his stories are historically inaccurate. He adds an additional accusation, though, which becomes the central concern for the Introduction after the tale of Filippo Balducci:

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<sup>44</sup> Branca indicates here the echo of this sentence with *Paradiso* XVII.133–34: “Come vento, / che le piú altre cime piú percuote” in his notes to his edition of the *Decameron* (459n2).

E molti, molto teneri della mia fama mostrandosi, dicono che io farei piú saviamente a starmi con le Muse in Parnaso che con queste ciance mescolarmi tra voi. (IV.Introduzione, 6)

If Dante jeopardized fame because his poem was hidden under the “cloud of the maternal vernacular,” Boccaccio’s imagined critics advise him to stay with the Muses on Parnassus rather than to mix with his ladies by means of these “ciance,” or gossip. Instead of dwelling not only with women, but with stories written within the feminized vernacular, the language of gossip, he should dwell with the Muses.

To fortify his response to these critics, the Author conveys the story of Filippo Balducci, a Florentine of modest means who found himself alone with his two-year-old son when his beloved wife passed away.<sup>45</sup> Out of grief, Filippo directs himself and his son to a hermetic life in which their acts of devotion would not be distracted by worldly things. His son, now eighteen years old, finally accompanies him on a routine trip to Florence to get provisions. Upon arrival in the city, the son is full of amazement at the sights of worldly splendor, asking his father questions. When he sees a group of young women, his father tells him that they are evil, and tells him that they are called goslings (“papere”) so that he might not cultivate any feelings for them. The father’s strategy is ineffective, as the son forgets everything else in the world but those goslings, begging his father to procure him one. He disagrees with his father, stating that they are not evil, but the most beautiful thing he has ever seen:

Io non so che voi vi dite, né perché queste sieno mala cosa: quanto è, a me non è ancora paruta vedere alcuna così bella né così piacevole come queste sono. Elle son piú belle che gli agnoli dipinti che voi m’avete piú volte mostrati. Deh! Se vi cal di me, fate che noi ce ne meniamo una colà sú di queste papere, e io le darò beccare. (IV.Introduzione, 28)

Filippo’s son makes a distinction between the painted, angelic women he has seen, and the “belle giovani donne e ornate,” expressing a preference for the latter. I would like to suggest here that this distinction between “donne” and these female abstractions, here “papere,” anticipates the distinction between the “donne” being addressed by the Author and the role of the Muses articulated later in the Introduction. Filippo’s son, like the Author, finds a value in these ladies as objects of pleasure, just as the Author will insist upon the value of “donne” as a source of pleasure. In both

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<sup>45</sup> The story of Filippo Balducci has received much critical attention. See Virgulti for a review of the antecedents for this *novella* in the *exemplum* tradition and for an analysis of its relationship to other *novelle* in the *Decameron*.



cases, Filippo's son and the Author wish to give pleasure to these ladies: in the case of the former, the son will give them something for their beaks ("io le darò beccare"); in the case of the latter, the Author will give them stories which might give them pleasure (at the end of the Proem, he writes that Love has given him the power to "attendere a' lor piaceri").

Although what Filippo's son gives the ladies to "beccare" is unclear and debated (if the "food" is a phallus, are their "beaks" vaginas or mouths?), the ambiguous sexual symbols in this passage leave it open to wide interpretation. I argue for a reading of the *novelletta* that reads Filippo's "food" for the goslings as a sexualized form of the poetic nourishment that the Author claims for himself to give as an author of love lyric. In the Author's defense of himself as being able to love women in his old age, he indicates that the phallic leek has a white end but a green tail ("E quegli che contro alla mia età parlando vanno, mostra mal che conoscano che, perché il porro abbia il capo bianco, che la coda sia verde," IV.Introduzione, §33). As such is the case for the phallic leek, so can the older Author please women; Guido Cavalcanti, Dante Alighieri and Cino da Pistoia (the last poet "vecchissimo") were also able to please women by composing verses in their old age. The Author is just as potent and able as Filippo's son to give courtly ladies sexual and literary nourishment, as did his literary predecessors writing in vernacular lyric.

While "donne" and the lyric production that gives them sexual gratification are, on the one hand, what one could call Boccaccio's sexualized courtly poetics,<sup>46</sup> the Muses on Parnassus are the abstract representations of a classical literary inspiration and production. I read this moment as Boccaccio's careful definition of the *Decameron* as a work belonging to the canon of vernacular lyric production in Italian, and *not* to the emerging humanist practice of *volgarizzamenti* and Latinized production. Lyric poets such as Dante compose in a literary language for a female audience that is based on a feminized vernacular, but credit the Muses with inspiration and guidance. By the time of Boccaccio, not only is composing in a feminine vernacular still relatively new, but claiming the Muses as a source of inspiration relinquishes the origins of his vernacular work to a non-vernacular source. Boccaccio's discussion of "le Muse" as "donne" should thus be read as a defense of the stilnovist tradition by which "donne" inspire and receive literary production:

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<sup>46</sup> I take inspiration here from Barolini's essay cited above, "Le parole son femmine" (175 *et passim*).

le Muse son donne, e benché le donne quel che le Muse vagliono non vagliano, pure esse hanno nel primo aspetto simiglianza di quelle, sí che, quando per altro non mi piacessero, per quello mi dovrebbero piacere; senza che le donne già mi fur cagione di comporre mille versi, dove le Muse mai non mi furono di farne alcun cagione. Aiutaronmi elle bene e mostraronmi comporre que' mille; e forse a queste cose scrivere, quantunque sieno umilissime, si sono elle venute parecchie volte a starsi meco, in servizio forse e in onore della simiglianza che le donne hanno a esse; per che, queste cose tessendo, né dal monte Parnaso né dalle Muse non mi allontano quanto molti per avventura s'avisano" (IV.Introduzione, 35–36).

The Muses are ladies, and even though ladies are not worth what the Muses are worth, Boccaccio writes, they resemble them at first sight. Furthermore, the Muses have never caused him to write any poetry, whereas ladies have. The Muses, though, have shown him *how* to write, and they might indeed have helped the author compose these *novelle* because of their affinity (“somiglianza”) with ladies themselves. The fact that the Muses have shown him how to write raises a question that has not been addressed in Boccaccio criticism: are the Muses grammarians or literary precursors?

To answer that question, one might turn, yet again, to the *Esposizioni*, where he defines them as instruments of style and also reviews their literary pedigree. In *Esposizioni* 1, he corrects Boethius' Lady Philosophy (in the *De consolatione philosophiae*) when she claims that the Muses are prostitutes of theater (“meretricule scenice”). Boccaccio identifies this moment as the product of Boethius' unwell mind, caused by exile, and defends the Muses as instruments that must be used according to the judgment of the artificer: “E che le Muse sieno qui instrumento adoperante secondo il giudicio dell'artefice, e non secondo il loro, ottimamente il dimostra la Filosofia [...]” (I.litt. 110). If the Muses are poetic instruments, then in *Esposizioni* II they are the nine daughters of Jupiter and Memory, whose appearance Boccaccio rehearses and contests in Isidore of Seville's *Etimologiae*, in Macrobius' *Super somnio scipionis*, and in Fulgentius' *Mythologiae* (II.litt. 15–34). The Certaldese here indicates the reasons why these precursors would be hailed for their assistance in obtaining, digesting, assimilating and judging knowledge (“scienza”). If the Muses are ladies, then they are classical poetic agents who facilitate knowledge and the process of composing verse — or, as the Author in the Introduction to Day Four writes, “aiutaronmi elle bene e mostraronmi comporre que' mille.” But they are not interlocutors in the way that “donne” can be, nor are they the source of language. Boccaccio thus transforms these markers of classical literary style into empty symbols — into goslings, if you will —

that can be “prostituted” for the vulgar crowd, as in the case of Dante’s poem, but that can only be symbolically instrumental in defining his new style in the *Decameron*.<sup>47</sup>

In a quite different text, the *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio would write that the Muses are not ladies, but words: “dicono che tutte le buone cose son femmine: le stelle, le pianete, le muse, le virtù, le ricchezze” (259). That the feminine gender of these words is insignificant is then noted by the author, who writes (echoing Juvenal), “Egli è così vero che tutte son femmine, ma non pisciano” (230). Boccaccio here reveals the integral being of words, the possibility that they themselves can assume a life of their own. But he is not entirely believable here. The Muses cannot perform bodily functions, such as urination, because they are words, just like “le stelle” and “le pianete.” If misogyny reduces language to its gendered feminine elements — to words — and then denies their material correlates, then ladies can be reduced to “goslings,” to crudely physical vehicles of sexual pleasure and literary fame.<sup>48</sup> Philogynist discourse can easily reveal itself as misogynist discourse: the rejection of the value of language is also the rejection of “in-namorante donne” and also the nursing female body — the source of language.

## Conclusion

The feminine vernacular can be reduced to words, to fragments (or to fragments of things in the vernacular, to evoke Petrarch). Dante, in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, addresses the feminine lexicon of a maternal vernacular as that which must be removed, in addition to those infantile words and urbane words — even though he would use some of those words in the text of the *Commedia*.<sup>49</sup> In the Conclusion of the Author in the

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<sup>47</sup> See also Papiro (5–7 and 77) for a discussion of Boccaccio’s view of the “meccanici” versus the “Muse,” the difference between utilitarians (enemies of the Muses) and those dedicated to poetry and philosophy. See also his notes to his translation *ad Esp.* 1.litt §§106–11 (615n63–66).

<sup>48</sup> In terms of the *Corbaccio*’s relationship to the vernacular, Cornish observes (42): “The widow of the *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio’s last vernacular work, stands in for the vulgar readership that he had first courted and later disdained.”

<sup>49</sup> “In quorum numero, nec puerilia, propter sui simplicitatem, ut mamma et babbo, mate et pate; nec muliebria, propter sui mollitiem, ut dolciada et placevole; nec silvestria, propter hausteritatem, ut greggia et cetra; nec urbana lubrica et reburra, ut femina et corpo, ullo modo poteris conlocare. Sola etenim pexa irsutaque urbana tibi restare videbis, que nobilissima sunt et membra vulgaris illustris.” (II.vii.4)

*Decameron*, the Author must defend his integration of a sexualized lexicon by recalling that both men and women use these words in their language:

E se forse pure alcuna particella è in quella, alcuna paroletta piú liberale che forse a spigolistra donna non si conviene, le quali piú le parole pesan che' fatti e piú d'apparer s'ingegnan che d'esser buone, dico che piú non si dee a me esser disdetto d'averle scritte e generalmente si disdica agli uomini e alle donne di dir tutto dí "foro" e "caviglia" e "mortaio" e "pestello" e "salsiccia" e "mortadello." (§5)

That this response is to a "picky" woman for whom words weigh more than deeds deserves attention. If the worth of the literary vernacular is in the hands of the literate, those who judge the content of that language are here evoked as women. The vernacular comes from women, is spoken by women and will be judged by them; indeed, women may value words *more* than deeds. The Author's task — his *fatto* — of composing stories in the *parole* of a feminine vernacular will be judged by those who create, teach, and speak language, from its maternal origins to its use in gossip. And women have the power to criticize the deed of the *Decameron* on the basis of the language it uses. But here, at the end of the *Decameron*, the vernacular becomes the language which both men *and* women speak: "agli uomini e alle donne di dir." The vernacular is composed of both masculine and feminine words, of "foro" and "caviglia."

A reading of the vernacular as solely feminine, for the *Decameron*, is thus an imprecise one. As much as it speaks to the historical tension inherent in composing in the vernacular, it also masks the result of the linguistic metamorphosis inherent in the male author's craft, who transforms these feminized vessels of form, these *parole*, into the eroticized content of desire. The authors of those texts — the *fatti* themselves — are men who fashion the vernacular as feminine, but who cannot utterly transpose the social and artistic exchange of *parole* to an exclusively feminine world. Nor is that their objective, I would argue. Literary interlocutors of posterity, chief among them Dante, serve as much as an inspiration to compose both verse and prose. In revisiting the phrase "le Muse son donne," it is then, perhaps, those men who come closer to resembling "donne" rather than so many "papere."

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