

“Muttonhead” in the Modern and Medieval:
A New Translation of the *Decameron*

Wayne A. Rebhorn succeeds in retaining the quiddities of Giovanni Boccaccio’s original *Decameron* while rendering a medieval Italian text intelligible to the modern reader of English.¹ His scrupulously detailed translation infuses the text with fresh energy and delicately preserves Boccaccio’s titillating use of language. However, like any translator who is naturally constrained to compromise aspects of the original text, Rebhorn must make some sacrifices. In an interview published in the online journal *Quarterly Conversation*, Rebhorn states: “I’ve been teaching the *Decameron* for years and been feeling increasingly dissatisfied with the two choices I had, Musa/Bondanella (Signet) and McWilliam (Penguin)” (in Donoghue 2013). He concludes: “I honestly think my translation — which is in American English — is better than Musa/Bondanella, which is over 30 years old now, and is every bit as good as McWilliam.” In the Acknowledgements section of Rebhorn’s *Decameron* he states that the translations of Musa/Bondanella and McWilliam have helped him to create his own translation. A brief cross-comparison of Rebhorn’s translation with the 1982 translation of Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella and the 1995 translation of G. H. McWilliam highlights both the merits and shortcomings of his work. It is foreseeable that Rebhorn’s version will persuade educators to reconsider the most effective translation for use in the classroom.

In his thorough introduction, Rebhorn states: “The work I have produced is thus, to some extent, betwixt and between two worlds, the modern world of the English-speaking reader, and the medieval world of the Italian-speaking author” (lx). He specifies that “it is more the first than the second” (lx). The introduction to Day Six exemplifies the mixing of these two worlds. Licisca and Tindaro, members of the household staff, fall into a caustic but entertaining argument. Licisca explains the argument to Elissa, Queen of Day Six. A comparison of the passages below illustrates

¹ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Translated by Wayne A Rebhorn. New York, London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013. Pp. 947. \$39.95. ISBN: 978–0393069303.

that earlier translations of the *Decameron* refer to Tindaro as “fellow.” Reborn, however, uses the more modern and American term “guy” to refer to Tindaro. As the passage continues, Licisca recounts an anecdote using a satirical metaphor to describe the first time Sicofante had sexual intercourse with his wife. Reborn refers to the Sicofante’s sexual organ as “Messer Mace.” It is noteworthy that Reborn clarifies the meaning of *messer* in his detailed headnotes. He explains that he has retained its use “where it serves to underscore the satire, since the person in question is hardly deserving of the honor the honorific signifies” (lxxi). Reborn, like Musa and Bondanella, seeks to retain the foreign charm of the original text. His use of the title *messer*, although perhaps unintended, enhances the English text with its original Italian flavoring, ensuring that the reader’s mind is set in medieval Italy. Furthermore, his use of alliteration is aesthetically pleasing to the ear. Most importantly, however, the meaning of the playful double entendre is not lost on the American reader, as perhaps it is in the translation of McWilliam who uses the British slang term “John Thomas” to refer to the penis; perhaps unsurprisingly, he does not provide a footnote or endnote to clarify its significance.

Boccaccio (Branca ed.)	Reborn 2013	McWilliam 1995	Musa/Bondanella 1982
Madonna, costui mi vuol far conoscere la moglie di Sicofante e, né piú né meno come se io con lei usata non fossi, mi vuol dare a vedere che la notte prima che Sicofante giacque con lei messer Mazza entrasse in Monte Nero per forza e con ispargimento di sangue; e io dico che non è vero, anzi v’entrò pacificamente e con gran piacer di quei d’entro. (6.intro.9)	“My lady, this guy wants to teach me all about Sicofante’s wife, and just as if I weren’t acquainted with her at all, he would have me believe that the first night Sicofante went to bed with her, Messer Mace entered Black Mountain by force and with much bloodshed. But let me tell you, that’s not true; he entered it peacefully and to the general contentment of those inside.” (473)	‘Madam, this fellow thinks he knows Sicofante’s ³ wife better than I do. I’ve known her for years, and yet he has the audacity to try and convince me that on the first night Sicofante slept with her, John Thomas had to force entry into Castle Dusk, shedding blood in the process; but I say it is not true, on the contrary he made his way in with the greatest of ease, to the general pleasure of the garrison.’ (445)	“My lady, this fellow thinks he knows Sicofante’s wife better than me, as if I had no idea of who she was, and he has the nerve to try to make me believe that the first night Sicofante slept with her, Messer Hammerhead took the Black Mountain by force and with some loss of blood; but that’s not true and, on the contrary, I say he entered with ease and to the general delight of all the troops stationed there.” (381)

Rebhorn's use of punctuation is more contemporary when compared with the punctuation choices of his fellow translators. His punctuation style renders Boccaccio's Latinate syntax more easily comprehensible to the reader. He uses the period where his predecessors prefer the subtler semicolon, and he prefers the semicolon where they employ a quick comma. Rebhorn veers away from the punctuation provided to Boccaccio's text by Branca. His sensitive use of the period offers the Anglophone reader a brief respite from Boccaccio's longwinded sentences. With a simple period, he slows down the pace of the text and welcomes the reader to examine meaning in greater depth, which is often obscured by flowery figurative language.

Rebhorn's translation accounts for parts of the text that may render the reader of English confused. In a concise endnote, he explains that the word *Sicofante* is a name of Greek origin and of dubious significance:

Although *Sicofante* sounds like the English "sycophant," it is not connected with that word. Rather, it is a Greek-based name, like those of the servants in the *Decameron*, and since the etymology of the word is uncertain, it is impossible to know if Boccaccio means anything by it other than to say that Sicofante belongs to the same class of characters as Lisca and Tindaro. (903)

Rebhorn is indeed the only translator to empathize with the intellect of the non-medieval reader of English, whom he warns not to be misled by the similarity of sound between the name *Sicofante* and the English noun "sycophant." Rebhorn, however, does not posit any possible interpretations regarding its significance; the information he provides is practical but bland and guarded. His primary motive is to clarify potentially perplexing parts of the text so that the reader engages more easily with them; he is reluctant to venture boldly outside of these parameters. While Musa and Bondanella's translation is devoid of explanatory details, McWilliam includes supplemental information in an endnote:

The name, like those of the "mechanicals" in the frame story, is of Greek origin, and means literally "a displayer of figs," which in Italian could imply one who makes obscene gestures. But B. probably chose the name merely to convey an impression of the character's simple-mindedness. (838)

In the preface to his translation, McWilliam explains that his "notes hazard interpretations of some of the more enigmatic words or phrases in Boccaccio's text" (xxvii). McWilliam's speculative analysis of the name *Sicofante* is not only insightful but interesting. However, both Rebhorn and McWilliam overlooked the considerable influence that Boccaccio's scholarly studies had upon his work, which perhaps more accurately explain

why Boccaccio chose to name his character *Sicofante*. At the time in which Boccaccio was writing the *Decameron*, he had already studied the work of Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254–184 BC). In Plautus’ comedic play *Trinummus*, one of the characters is a skillful impostor called *Sycophanta*. The word “sycophanta” appears in six other comedies written by Plautus. It is likely that Boccaccio’s *Sicofante* owes much to the theatrical parasite derived from Plautus’ work.

Rebhorn demonstrates his dexterity as a translator through his careful use of register, as he brings Boccaccio’s wide range of unique characters to life in English. The register of language that Rebhorn employs is contingent upon the role that each character plays. In the introduction of Day Six, Liscia’s use of language is informal and subtly peppered with slang; her use of speech is appropriately in line with her role as a pragmatic, un-sentimental servant woman. In Rebhorn’s translation, Liscia indignantly calls Tindaro an “ass,” as opposed to the more antiquated and British term “arse.” “Ass” is a term that is perhaps more commonly used in American English to refer to one who behaves like an idiot. In general, Rebhorn uses American English. In McWilliam’s translation, Liscia calls Tindaro an “ignorant lout.” Although his word pairing is pleasing to the ear, the register of his language does not appropriately capture the speech of a medieval housemaid. In Musa and Bondanella’s translation, Liscia refers to Tindaro as a “beast of a man”; Rebhorn’s translation of the text, “ass of a man,” follows the same syntactic pattern. However, the derogative term “ass” is perhaps cruder than the term “beast.”

Boccaccio (Branca ed.)	Rebhorn 2013	McWilliam 1995	Musa/Bondanella 1982
Vedi bestia d’uom che ardisce, là dove io sia, a parlare pri- ma di me! Lascia dir me. (6.intro.7)	“Look, you ass of a man,” she said, “how dare you, in my presence, speak before I do! Just let me talk.” (473)	‘See here, you igno- rant lout, how can you dare to speak first, when I am present? Hold your tongue and let me tell the story.’ (445)	“See here, you beast of a man, how dare you speak before I do when you see me standing right here before you! Let me talk!” (381)

As the introduction to Day Six continues, Rebhorn’s translation of Liscia’s diatribe exemplifies the mingling of modern and medieval language. Liscia refers to Tindaro as a “muttonhead,” as opposed to using a more modern adjective like “knucklehead,” as we find in Musa and Bondanella’s translation. Rebhorn chooses to retain some of the text’s archaic character, as he deems appropriate. The effect of interweaving modern language with dated language is twofold; the reader is better able to relate

to the text while never forgetting that the book's frame story takes place during the Black Death of 1348.

Boccaccio (Branca ed.)	Rebhorn 2013	McWilliam 1995	Musa/Bondanella 1982
e questo pecorone mi vuol far cono- scer le femine, come se io fossi nata ieri! (6.intro.10)	"Yet this mutton- head wants to teach me about women as if I were born yesterday!" (473)	'Yet this great oaf tries to teach me about women, as though I were born yesterday.' (445)	"And this big knuckle- head wants to teach me about women, as if I was born yesterday!" (381)

In Rebhorn's introduction, he details his translating tactics. In particular, he discusses how he translated the characters' names. He explains:

In general, I have kept the names of Boccaccio's characters in their original Italian forms. Giannotto is always Giannotto, never Little John, let alone Jehannot, as he is for some translators who turn Boccaccio's Italianized version of what is in at least one story set in France back into its French original. (lxii)

The tale of Frate Cipolla (6.10) demonstrates Rebhorn's decision to preserve the characters' original names. The main character is called "Frate Cipolla." Rebhorn includes a footnote to explain the meaning of the name in English. He also suggests Boccaccio's reason for naming his main character Frate Cipolla. He explains:

*Frate Cipolla's name means "Brother Onion," a vegetable whose many layers with no real "center" and whose particular odor are quite suggestive when one considers what Frate Cipolla does in the Story. (503)

Prior translations do not attempt to clarify *why* Boccaccio chose to call the corrupt protagonist Frate Cipolla. In an endnote Rebhorn explains that Certaldo was most likely Boccaccio's place of birth. Oddly enough, he neglects to acknowledge that the onion of Certaldo has been famous since the Middle Ages. It was such an integral component of the town's identity that it was incorporated into medieval Certaldo's coat of arms. Although at times Rebhorn provides inadequate supplemental facts, he has astutely devised a clear system in which to present additional information.

In order to retain Boccaccio's zest, Rebhorn integrates the original Italian into the text and offers a translation in a footnote. The inclusion of a footnote highlights the significance of the name, which may not be immediately obvious to the reader. In some tales, Rebhorn feels that the reader's comprehension of a character's name is essential to the understanding of the tale's plot. As such, he provides more immediate clarifica-

tion in a footnote, as opposed to an endnote. This practice is implemented in other tales, such as in Ser Cepparello's tale (1.1) and Chichibio's tale (6.4). In Rebhorn's translation pertinent information is readily available, allowing the reader's imagination to remain immersed in the events of the tale.

Rebhorn has astutely reproduced Boccaccio's ingenious wit, which renders the characters multifaceted and memorable. The personality of some characters is reflected in their given names. In some instances, Rebhorn has translated the original Italian names of these characters into English, as he understands that they are intended to be comical. He explains, "There are a few cases, however, where the name is a nickname that is intended to provoke laughter, and in those cases I have elected to turn it into English, lest the reader miss the joke involved" (lxiii). For example, in the story of Frate Cipolla, the reader meets the character "Guccio Balena," whom some townspeople also call "Guccio Imbratta" and "Guccio Porco." Rebhorn translates the names as "Guccio the Whale," "Guccio the Slob" and "Guccio the Pig" (504). Instead of translating the names into English, Rebhorn could have included a footnote, endnote or gloss definition. However, it is possible that he believed that this would hinder their humorous effect. In an endnote, Rebhorn also provides an Italian translation of the names accompanied by relevant background information. McWilliam, however, employs the opposite translation strategy. He retains the characters' names in their original Italian and provides an English translation of the names in an endnote. McWilliam does not provide footnotes in his translation, solely in his introduction. The disadvantage of this tactic is that only the truly committed and curious reader will take the time to flip to the back of the book to inquire about the name of a secondary character. As such, any humor that Boccaccio may have intended to create is lost.

In Rebhorn's introduction, he expresses his ideas about translation and the role of the translator: "Translation makes strangers feel familiar, but a good one should also allow us to sense something of the alien in our midst. A good translator is, in short, a go-between or middleman, linking the foreign with the domestic, the strange with the familiar, while preventing the former from being completely absorbed into the latter" (lx). Rebhorn has done an excellent job of fusing the foreign with the domestic. In the article "Brief Study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation," Wenfen Yang provides an overview of the translation strategies she calls "domestication" and "foreignization." She explains: "Generally speaking, domestication designates the type of translation in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted to minimize the strangeness of the

foreign text for target language readers, while foreignization means a target text is produced which deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original” (Yang 2010, 77). Rebhorn has primarily domesticated his translation. However, he deliberately retains some of the original text’s foreignness as seems appropriate to the context. For example, he refers to time by the canonical hours, retains some common Italian words, and preserves the original Italian names of some Italian characters. In the book *Is That a Fish in Your Ear*, David Bellos notes: “A genuine educational and social purpose can be served by maintaining items of the source text in the translation” (Bellos 2011, 49). Rebhorn harmoniously blends the Italian into the text, which draws more attention to the book’s origins and instills the novice student of Italian with the slight sensation that she has read the original *Decameron*. As such, the modern reader is not tempted to overlook the history and setting of the book.

A brief Acknowledgments section is tucked between the Author’s Conclusion and Notes section at the back of the book. In this section, Rebhorn explains that he has “learned a great deal from previous translators of Boccaccio’s book” (861). He mentions the translations of John Payne (1886), Charles S. Singleton (1982), J. M. Rigg (1903), Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (1982), Guido Waldman (1993), G. H. McWilliam (1995) and J.G. Nichols (2008). A comparison of Rebhorn’s translation with the work of his fellow translators reveals that he relies heavily on the translations of others. This is most apparent in his translation of the *Decameron*’s inventive humor, clever slang and ornate descriptions, which are an integral part of the original text but complex and difficult to translate.

Undoubtedly, Rebhorn is at times uncomfortable infusing the text with his own creative translation of the more inventive parts of the text. One example of Rebhorn’s reticence to take risks is evident in Ferondo’s tale (3.8). The protagonist, Ferondo, saccharinely describes his wife, whom he refers to by various pet names. Rebhorn’s translation is almost identical to McWilliam’s translation. Rebhorn merely freshens up the language in his text; he abandons the outdated “aye” in favor of “in fact.” Musa and Bondanella concisely emphasize Ferondo’s fervent feelings with an exclamation mark.

Boccaccio (Branca ed.)	Rebhorn 2013	McWilliam 1995	Musa/Bondanella 1982
“Ohimè,” disse Ferondo, “tu di’ vero, e la piú dolce: ella era piú melata che ’l confetto.” (3.8.51)	“She was the sweetest, too - in fact, sweeter than a sugarplum.” (274)	‘She was also the sweetest; aye, sweeter than a sugar-plum.’ (261)	“and she was also the sweetest: she was sweeter than a sugar plum!” (223)

Later in the story, Ferondo continues to cloyingly describe his wife. It is evident that Rebhorn closely examined past translations, extracting and combining various components of other translators’ work. When the text presents highly creative language, Rebhorn borrows intentionally from past translators. It should be noted, however, that past translators of the *Decameron* also implemented this collaborative practice, and rightly so. In this regard, perhaps Rebhorn merits praise for humbly recognizing his own creative limitations while paying tribute to the work of his fellow translators. Thus, although Rebhorn’s translation is indeed clear, in some instances he is hesitant to imbue the text with his own idiosyncratic flair.

Boccaccio (Branca ed.)	Rebhorn 2013	McWilliam 1995	Musa/Bondanella 1982
e alla moglie mia caciata, melata, dolciata. (3.8.66)	“and my cheesy-weesy, sweet honeybun of a wife.” (276)	‘and my cheesy-weesy, honey-bunny, sweetie-weetie wife.’ (262)	“and my cheesy-weesy honey-bunny of a wife.” (224)

Rebhorn is bolder when it comes to reviving the text’s meaning. In Griselda’s tale (10.10), her patience is repeatedly tested by her new husband, Gualtieri. He is astonished by his new wife’s unwavering composure and self-sacrifice. In earlier translations, Griselda’s poise and self-control are attributed to her “goodness.” For example, in Guido Waldman’s 1993 translation he writes: “They considered that Gualtieri had been remarkably astute, even if they felt the way he had put his wife to the test had been excessive and well intolerable. Above all, they agreed that Griselda had shown herself a paragon of goodness” (677). In Rebhorn’s translation he writes: “They all declared that Gualtieri was very wise, although they thought that the tests to which he had subjected his wife were harsh and intolerable, but they considered Griselda to be the wisest of them all” (850). Rebhorn attributes Griselda’s behavior not to “goodness” but rather to her “wisdom,” which exceeds that of her husband. Earlier texts commend Gualtieri for his astuteness and Griselda for her “goodness.” “Good” is indeed a vague and often insipid adjective. I commend Rebhorn for

venturing to imbue the text with a more specific meaning, one that is likely to resonate more powerfully with the contemporary reader.

It is noteworthy that Rebhorn has updated the layout of the book, inviting the reader to relish and linger at leisure. The book, which contains 947 pages, is dressed in a striking white jacket and its *mise en page* is visually appealing. The reader is no longer forced to strain her eyes to read the text, as is required by many of the earlier, visually burdensome translations. The pages are larger than average, as is the font size. The text is flanked by wide margins and each line is generously separated from its neighbors. Rebhorn's use of space seems to extract weight from the pages, offering respite to the reader's eyes. Each tale is clearly introduced with a bold heading and begins anew on a fresh page.

Rebhorn's clear-cut introduction comprises fewer than 50 pages in which he describes various significant aspects of the *Decameron* and his translation of it: Boccaccio's life, the historical context upon which his frame story is based, the structure of the book and his translation tactics. The introduction is appropriately suited to the needs of the inexperienced reader of medieval literature. It seems likely that Rebhorn's target reader is indeed the student as opposed to the accomplished academic. For example, Rebhorn does not presume that the reader is already acquainted with pertinent historical events. Rebhorn explains: "Boccaccio's framed collection of stories takes an actual event, the plague that invaded Europe in 1347–48 and carried off as much as a third of the population in some areas..." (xxxvi–ii). McWilliam's extensive and elaborate introduction, which consists of over 100 pages, is perhaps better suited to the seasoned scholar or, at any rate, to a reader who is already somewhat familiar with the 14th century. McWilliam opens his introduction by subtly snubbing the "casual" reader: "Few people would take seriously [Boccaccio's] contention that the *Decameron* is an improving work of literature specifically designed to assist young ladies in the throes of love. The gentle irony underlying the outwardly serious declaration of his aims is obvious to all but the most casual of readers" (xxxix). McWilliam has perhaps unintentionally catered his translation to a more erudite crowd.

In McWilliam's preface to the second edition, he explains that his revised introduction focuses on the details of Boccaccio's life. He details the contents of his introduction:

Without necessarily provoking a superabundance of thought, what the new introduction to the Penguin Classics *Decameron* attempts to provide is a fairly detailed and informative account of Boccaccio's life and literary output, special attention naturally being paid to those lesser works of his

that seem to have a direct bearing on the eventual formation of the *Decameron* itself. (xxv)

McWilliam provides an abundance of supplemental information to the “monoglot, non-specialist English reader” and the “many students of Italian” to whom he seems to be aiming his translation. Is this information enlightening or merely overwhelming to the reader who has yet to understand basic background information about the *Decameron*? McWilliam explains some aspects of the text “for the benefit of those readers who are unacquainted with the conventions of medieval literature” (xxv). However, he fails to provide additional details about the plethora of medieval authors he references in his introduction. His introduction does not consistently accommodate the needs of the non-specialist reader.

Rebhorn has rendered his translation of the *Decameron* natural and lively; the reader is quickly transformed into an eager listener and an honorary member of the *brigata*. His translation allows the reader to navigate smoothly through Boccaccio’s varied register of language. Furthermore, he offers the reader a plethora of interesting supplementary information in his introduction, footnotes and endnotes. Rebhorn understands the mind of the modern reader. Students who are discouraged by the use of outdated English, not well acquainted with the Italian Middle Ages, or sensitive to the format of their reading material will find that Rebhorn’s version meticulously maps out meaning, rendering a long and heavy text seemingly light and transparent.

I strongly recommend Rebhorn’s 2013 translation of the *Decameron* for use in the high school and university classroom.

ÈILIS KIERANS

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

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