

## A Tale of Two Confessions: The *Roman de Renart* and the *Corbaccio*

The critical debate surrounding the *Corbaccio* could be summed up in the question: Is Boccaccio in earnest or not? Answers to this question have largely depended on two factors: the dating of the work's composition (whether it was written in the 1350s, soon after the *Decameron*, or a decade later, in the 1360s),<sup>1</sup> and the literary source that critics have identified as Boccaccio's primary inspiration. Setting aside the former concern, the latter has yielded a panoply of possible sources, whether classical, patristic, or medieval, and which need not be mutually exclusive. In terms of the question posed above, these can once again be divided into two broad categories. The more traditional line sees the *Corbaccio* as an earnest (and possibly autobiographical) rejection of love and a retraction on the author's part of his earlier vernacular works. The sources offered for the anti-feminist views propounded by the figure of the husband range from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* to Walter Map's *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum ne ducat uxorem* (both copied by Boccaccio in the Zibaldone Laurenziano and evoked in the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*), while its expressionistic language has been identified as particularly indebted to Juvenal's *Satire 6* (Cassell 1973, 353-55; Porcelli 1992, 564-66). Recently, Elsa Filosa and Francisco Rico have suggested independently that the model for the apologetic nature of the *trattato* vis-à-vis Boccaccio's earlier fictional works may have been none other than Petrarch's *Secretum* (Filosa 2005, Rico 2012), though another option would be the pseudo-Ovidian *De vetula*, as has been proposed by Francesco Bruni (Bruni 1974). The opposing line of thought, which has come primarily from the American branch of Boccaccio studies, sees the *Corbaccio* as essentially parodic in nature, ironically denouncing the very tenets its characters put forward. Robert Hollander has suggested that the *Corbaccio* stands to the *Decameron* just as Ovid's *Remedia amoris* stand to the earlier *Ars amatoria*, i.e., as a complementary work that in no

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<sup>1</sup> For the problem of the *Corbaccio*'s dating, see Padoan's introduction in Boccaccio 1994a, 415); Padoan 1963a and 1963b; and Hollander 1988.

way negates the preceding one (Hollander 1988), all while borrowing the vitriolic tone of the *Ibis* (Hollander 1998). Regina Psaki has also advanced this interpretation by reading the treatise as a parody of Dante's *Commedia* — one that cannot possibly be taken at face value (Psaki 1993). Most recently, James Kriesel has interpreted the *Corbaccio* as an intentional misreading of the Ovidian *Remedia*, aimed at ridiculing the two protagonists and the Petrarchan beliefs that they seem at least in part to incarnate (Kriesel 2019). Since Boccaccio is the one author of whom everything and its opposite has been said, perhaps such a state of affairs is not all that surprising.

Before attempting to take sides in the argument, it may be worth noting that this already lengthy list of possible sources still fails to account for some of the essential characteristics of the *Corbaccio*. The first is the conspicuously confessional nature of the dialogue between the protagonist and the late husband. While both the *Secretum* and *Inferno* 1 are undeniably replete with penitential undertones, neither makes such explicit references to the sacrament of confession as the *Corbaccio* does. The other is Boccaccio's expressionistic *pluristilismo*, which sets the late work apart from the sustained *stile mezzano* of his earlier poetry and prose.<sup>2</sup> Whereas these two works make use of a relatively limited lexical register, the *Corbaccio* relies on marked stylistic contrasts achieved via the juxtaposition of rhetorically elaborate periods and a courtly lexicon within the domain of the corporeal grotesque. This play of stylistic variation is without precedent in Boccaccio's *œuvre* and may very well reflect the different genre and purpose of the *umile trattato* with respect to the earlier *Centonovelle*, aimed as it is more at *utilità* than *diletto* (*Corbaccio* 5). Even if this were the case, however, such an explanation would not account for the sources that Boccaccio might have had for such stylistic heterogeneity. After all, neither the *Adversus Jovianum* nor the *Dissuasio Valerii* adopts the lower lexical registers favored by the late husband in Boccaccio's narrative, despite their conspicuously didactic intentions. The same can be said of Ovid, who had explicitly been Boccaccio's literary model since the *Filocolo*, where the author tells his work to follow not in the great footsteps of Virgil and Dante, but in the humbler, middling ones of the Roman love poet (*Filocolo* 5.97). Even in the *Remedia amoris*, Ovid maintains a middle, elegiac style, perhaps to defend himself from those who accuse him of taking inspiration from a wanton muse (*Remedia amoris* 359–62). Despite evoking the principle of *convenientia* to

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<sup>2</sup> The term is a variation on F. Bruni's, who coins the term *letteratura mezzana* to describe Boccaccio's work (Bruni 1974, 11).

defend his verse after having described the revolting nature of cosmetics, Ovid stops well short of the terminology that Boccaccio would later go on to employ, and even the curses of the *Ibis* do not display such vitriol as the late husband does. Among classical sources, this leaves Juvenal's sixth satire as the most likely precedent for Boccaccio's stylistic choices in the *Corbaccio*, as has been noted by Padoan, Hollander, and a number of others.<sup>3</sup> What seems to be largely lacking from this literary genealogical line, however, is a Romance connection, and indeed few vernacular works have been suggested as possible sources for the *Corbaccio* if one sets aside for a moment the *Commedia*, which the beginning of the dream vision seems to so conspicuously, and perhaps even parodically, evoke. Considering Boccaccio's penchant for Old French sources, such as *Floire et Blancheflor* for the *Filocolo*, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* for the *Filostrato*, as well as the *fabliaux* that account for about a quarter of the *Decameron's* *novelle* (Brown 2014, 127),<sup>4</sup> it would stand to reason that in its stratigraphy of sources the *Corbaccio* might also have a precedent in the *langue d'oïl*.<sup>5</sup>

In 1958, the French linguist and philologist Jean Bourciez published a brief article, "Sur l'énigme du *Corbaccio*," in an attempt to explain the origins of the work's enigmatic title. After a few linguistic considerations, he sets these aside to claim that a certain author "a de façon manifeste influencé le grand florentin" (Bourciez 1958, 332). The author in question is the anonymous poet of the third *branche* of the Old French *Roman de Renart* (according to Strubel's edition, but numbered seventh in the Martin edition cited by Bourciez), known as "La Confession de Renart." Bourciez claims that "L'imitation est nette" and goes on to list four parallel passages, along with a fifth which, according to him, explains Boccaccio's title (Bourciez 1958, 332). Here are the passages in question, taken from Martin's edition of the *Roman* and the Einaudi edition of the *Corbaccio*:

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<sup>3</sup> For the relation between the *Corbaccio* and Juvenal's *Satire* 6, see Padoan's introduction (Boccaccio 1994a, 422); Hollander 1998 esp. pp. 392–94; Bourciez 1958, 333; Porcelli 1992, 565.

<sup>4</sup> See also Marchesi 2004, 89–92 for a discussion of Boccaccio's knowledge and use of the Old French *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* in the *novella* of Lisabetta da Messina.

<sup>5</sup> On the 'layered' or stratigraphic nature of the *Decameron* and its intertextual allusions, see Marchesi 2004, xiii–xxii. For a discussion of Boccaccio's *oïl* sources in the *Corbaccio*, see Mazzoni Peruzzi, who argues that "nel *Corbaccio* ha un ruolo fondamentale la componente, davvero massiccia, della cultura francese, che risulta costantemente presente nel testo, venendo in tal modo a costituire un filtro letterario di primaria importanza" (Mazzoni Peruzzi 2001, 227).

1) La mer seroit avant tarie  
 Qu'ele fust de cel mal garie.  
 L'en ne porroit sa rage esteindre (*Roman* 1973, 527–29)  
 The sea would sooner be dried  
 Than she would be cured of this ill.  
 One could not put out her rage.<sup>6</sup>

Egli è per certo quel golfo una voragine infernale; la quale allora si riempirebbe, o sazierebbe, che il mare d'acqua o il fuoco di legne. (*Corbaccio* 293)

2) Ele a toz jors le con bae,  
 En meins de leu a l'en gae  
 Un palefroi a qatre piez.  
 De qatre soudees d'oingt viez  
 Ne seroient les fronces pleines  
 Que la vielle a entre les eines. (539–44)  
 She always has her cunt wide open,  
 A four-legged palfrey would  
 pass through in a smaller space.  
 Four dimes of unguent  
 would not fill the folds  
 that the old hag has between her thighs.

La bocca, per la quale nel porto s'entra, è tanta e tale [...] L'armata del re Roberto qualora egli la fece maggiore, tutta insieme concatenata, senza calar vela, o tirare in alto timone, a grandissimo agio vi potrebbe essere entrata... (292)

3) De bele feme est baux pieches:  
 Mes de vielle est le cuir sechiez. (545–46)  
 Beautiful are the parts of a beautiful woman:  
 But the leather of an old one is dry.

...due bozzacchioni, che già forse acerbi pomi furono a toccare dilettevoli, e a vedere similmente... (288)

4) Ce est li gorz de Satenie  
 Que quant que il ateint s'i nie. (629–30)  
 This is the gorge of Satenie  
 Which all who reach refuse.

Come che nel vero io non sappia assai bene da qual parte io mi debbia cominciare a ragionare del golfo di Settalia... (291)

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<sup>6</sup> All of the translations of the *Roman de Renart* are mine.

5) Renart, molt par est ses cons baux!  
 Hersent ja es ce uns corbaux.  
 C'est une estrie barbelee... (477–79)

Renart, her cunt may seem beautiful!  
 In fact, Hersent is a crow.  
 She's a bearded witch...

Bourciez concludes the list of parallel passages by suggesting that “il paraît difficile de ne pas voir un étroit rapport entre les textes allégués,” which leads him to suppose that “le titre est directement emprunté à la septième branche de *Renart*” (Bourciez 1958, 333). His comparative analysis ends there, however, as he goes on to evoke other possible sources, including Juvenal's sixth satire and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, before eventually settling for uncertainty: “Il faut, je crois, repousser tout système trop rigide, car la question paraît, en somme plus simple [...] Boccace a fondu des souvenirs livresques émanant de sources diverses” (Bourciez 1958, 337).

Given Boccaccio's tendency to play fast and loose with his sources, Bourciez's caution and unwillingness to read too much into any single intertextual relation is understandable, and so far the only scholar to have followed up on his discovery has been Simonetta Mazzoni Peruzzi, who has confirmed the *Roman*'s position as a source for the *Corbaccio* (Mazzoni Peruzzi 2001, 153–54, 181). She has also gone a step further to argue that these textual links indicate broader thematic affinities between the two works and can play a significant interpretive role (Mazzoni Peruzzi 2001, 156).<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, it may be revealing to inquire into the implications of these parallel passages, whose proximity would seem to suggest that the author must have had a copy of the *Renart* text at hand while composing the *Corbaccio* (Mazzoni Peruzzi 2001, 154–55).<sup>8</sup> This fact is, in itself, perplexing, or at least surprising: the *Decameron*, which owes a number of its tales to the Old French *fabliau* tradition, does not contain any explicit references to

<sup>7</sup> Though she confirms that “tutta la sacrilega e oscena confessione di Renart, cui fa da vivacissimo contrappunto la violenta invettiva contro Hersent del nibbio confessore, è stata sicuramente un motivo di ispirazione fortemente suggestiva per il Boccaccio” (Mazzoni Peruzzi 2001, 181), Mazzoni Peruzzi does not go on to draw out the implications of this parallelism, limiting herself to suggesting that the *Corbaccio* exhibits the same parodic “*vis comica*” as the Old French source (Mazzoni Peruzzi 2001, 274).

<sup>8</sup> Mazzoni Peruzzi examines the passage concerning the *golfo di Setalia* to argue that Boccaccio must have used a witness from the same branch as ms. H (Paris, Arsenal ms. 3334) or, alternatively, ms. L (Paris, Arsenal ms. 3335) of the *Roman*. That said, the passages in the *Corbaccio* seem in fact to be much closer to the version transmitted by ms. A, which forms the basis for Ernest Martin's edition.

the *Roman de Renart*, despite the latter's belonging to largely the same period, the second half of the 12th century and its also being in octosyllabic verse.<sup>9</sup> Chaucer, by comparison, would go on to make use of both *fabliaux* and the *Roman de Renart* (in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*) while composing his *Canterbury Tales* some forty or so years later. This discrepancy inevitably raises the question: why did Boccaccio seemingly not use the *Roman* in the *Decameron* and, by contrast, why did he subsequently decide to make use of it and activate it as an object of allusion here in the *Corbaccio*?

An initial explanation can be evinced from the context in which Boccaccio decides to employ his source: the passage in question comes at a very particular point in the dream vision, when the late husband, in describing his former wife to the protagonist, begins to speak “delle occulte parti ricoperte da' vestimenti” (*Corbaccio* 274). Needless to say, such an intimate subject requires some prefacing, which he duly provides, voicing the very fears and doubts of his interlocutor: “Che cose sono quelle di che costui parla? chente è il modo, chenti sono i vocaboli? o convengons'elle a niuno, non che a uomo onesto e il quale ha li passi diritti verso l'eterna gloria?” (*Corbaccio* 275). The shade justifies himself by arguing that “una fetida parola nello intelletto sdegnoso adopera più in una piccola ora, che mille piacevoli e oneste persuasioni, per gli orecchi versate nel sordo cuore, non faranno in uno gran tempo” (*Corbaccio* 277). His didactic, indeed curative purpose requires a new, more effective lexical field, which aims to act as a “beveraggio amaro” that will counteract all of the “cose dilettevoli e piacevoli” (*Corbaccio*, 280) that the author had previously imbibed, precisely by being *fetida* (a word that does not make even a single appearance in the *Decameron*).<sup>10</sup> For this purpose, Boccaccio resorts to a lexical domain that had, until then, remained foreign to his literary works: that of the bodily grotesque. What follows is a less than complimentary portrait of the widow as he begins with her face: “Era costei [...] quando la mattina usciva dal letto, col viso verde, giallo, maltinto d'un colore di fummo di pantano, e broccuta

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<sup>9</sup> Although the *Roman de Renart* does not seem to have been the direct source for any of the *Decameron's* *novelle*, it may have nevertheless provided the inspiration for tales such as 1.1, where Cepparello's false confession seems to offer the exact opposite of Renart's unrepentant confession, or else in 6.10, where Frate Cipolla's pseudo-sermon bears a certain resemblance to the one given by Renart in Branche 5a, “Le Puits.”

<sup>10</sup> It is a term that Boccaccio also notably excludes from his *Esposizioni*, where he borrows Dante's definition of comedy from *Epistle* 13, but replaces “fetida et horribilis” (Dante, 13.29) with “dolori e [...] tribulazioni” (Accessus 26 in Boccaccio 1994b). My thanks to Simone Marchesi for bringing this to my attention.

quali sono gli uccelli che mudano, grinza e crostuta e tutta cascante...” (*Corbaccio* 283). At this point, “procedere più avanti” (*Corbaccio* 287) means literally going downwards, thus contravening every rule of courtly description, as he proceeds to her breasts (the aforementioned *bozzacchioni*, which are compared to a “viscica sgonfiata,” *Corbaccio* 289), then her stomach (“la ventraia la quale di larghi e spessi solchi vergata come sono le toricce, pare un sacco voto, non d’altra guisa pendente che al bue faccia quella pelle vota che gli pende dal mento al petto,” *Corbaccio* 290), and finally her sex. Just as Mikhail Bakhtin noted in his chapter on the grotesque image of the body in Rabelais, the body becomes a series of cavities and protuberances, ever in a state of consuming, defecating, copulating or degrading over time (Bakhtin 1984, 316–18). And it is precisely here, in this context so antithetical to anything he had ever written previously, that Boccaccio decides to resort to the *Renart*. Perhaps the Old French *Roman* was too irredeemably anti-courtly to be integrated into the refined ambiance of the *Decameron* (where the deconstruction of courtly narratives and symbolic attitudes takes on different and more mediated forms, such as in the cautionary *novella* of Tancredi and Ghismonda). For the anti-courtly project of the *Corbaccio*, however, it was just what the doctor ordered.

Stylistically speaking, the *Roman de Renart* is therefore in all likelihood the closest model for the *Corbaccio*, even more so than Juvenal’s *Satire* 6, but the narrative and thematic parallels between the two texts extend far beyond the stylistic borrowing exhibited by the parallel passages above. Not only do they both resort to the imagery of the grotesque body, but both texts also stage a confession of sorts (or perhaps a parody thereof), and both are profoundly satirical, though the target of their satire remains to be determined. It is the close intertextual relation between these two works that will constitute the focus of the remainder of this contribution, in the hope of shining further light on what the enigmatic *Corbaccio* is seeking to accomplish. To begin examining the analogies between the two works, it may serve to contextualize Boccaccio’s borrowings, both in terms of the source and the target text.

The diegetic part of the “Confession de Renart” begins with the hero’s infiltrating a Benedictine abbey with the goal of raiding its chicken coop, which he half-successfully does, until he is caught and given a sound beating by a group of monks. Seemingly contrite, he wishes he had a priest nearby to whom he could confess his sins, possibly playing on the difference between priests (who could confess and absolve members of their parish) and

monks, who usually could not.<sup>11</sup> In a parodic reversal of the sacred, the Benedictines become “malfés” ‘devils’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.170), as Renart tries to save his hide. Having later fallen asleep on a hay bale, he wakes up only to realize that the water in the nearby Oise has risen, leaving him stranded, at which point he is joined by a kite, Hubert, to whom he immediately decides to confess. But if the inveterate criminal makes for a peculiar penitent, the bird makes for a no less peculiar confessor: arguing that monks and priests are all madmen, he affirms that only sinners are worth their salt, and that only perjurers, traitors, heretics, and hypocrites are saved from damnation (*Roman de Renart* 3.340–42). From this jolly sermon, he proceeds straight to confessing Renart, but it turns out that the fox also has a few issues with the genre. After declaring that he is a sodomite, a “renoiés chrestiens” ‘renegade Christian,’ and a heretic (*Roman de Renart* 3.340–42), he goes on to explain at length why he could never become a monk (he cannot speak Latin, is allergic to manual labor, and is no fan of self-deprivation), before offering suggestions for how to make life in monasteries healthier (do away with chastity altogether). But all of this is merely a preface to the main part of his confession, which is not a confession at all, but rather an encomium of his beloved Hersent’s “hole.” The kite, however, is not impressed, and matches Renart’s panegyric with an even more spirited *vituperatio* of the she-wolf and her *pertuis*. Courtly *druerie* finds itself transformed into *puterie* (*Roman de Renart* 3.493–94) as the beloved herself very nearly becomes the living incarnation of the Whore of Babylon, a grotesque source of evil (*Roman de Renart* 3.540–41). The author of the *branche* thereby unites the two main traditions of *descriptio*, which go back to epideictic rhetoric: *laus* and *vituperatio*. While the fox offers a comic sexualization of the archetypical praise of the beloved, the kite offers something akin to a *vituperium in vetulam*, whose classical models were to be found in Ovid and Propertius, and whose medieval variants included the 12th-century *Proverbia quae dicuntur super natura feminarum* and the third book of Andreas Capellanus’s *De Amore* (Orvieto and Brestolini 2000, 51).

Why the *arceprestre*, as he is called (*Roman de Renart* 3.704), decides that this would make for an effective confessional technique is unclear. It is certainly not recommended by 12th-century penitentials which, if anything, recommended discretion, especially where sexual sins were concerned (Payer 2009, 60). As Thomas Aquinas writes in a gloss on the fourth book

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<sup>11</sup> As Thomas of Chobham writes in his *Summa confessorum*, “claustrales et eremite qui nullam habent parochiam nec aliquam curam animarum, nullum possunt recipere ad confessionem” (A. 5, Q. 2<sup>a</sup>). Furthermore, Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council specified that confessions were to be made exclusively to one’s own parish priest.

of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a confessor must be "dulcis, affabilis atque suavis. / Prudens, discretus, mitis, pius atque benignus" 'agreeable, affable, and gentle. Prudent, discrete, humble, pious and kind' (D. 17, Q. 3, in Aquinas 1947–56). He is furthermore "to exhort the penitents, putting them at ease, encouraging them to trust in the mercy of God, all with the goal of eliciting heartfelt sorrow and genuine confession" (Payer 2009, 54).<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, Hubert does none of that, and indeed repeats on several occasions that Renart will almost certainly be damned.<sup>13</sup>

It may be safe to say that Hubert's method is not ecclesiastical but classical; its origins are to be found not in medieval penitentials but in Ovid's *Remedia amoris*. The poet recounts how "Profuit adsidue vitiis insistere amicae, / Idque mihi factum saepe salubre fuit" 'It helped me to harp continually on my mistress' faults, and that, when I did it, often brought me relief' (*Remedia amoris* 315–16), and so he instructs his readers, "Qua potes, in peius dotes deflecte puellae, / Iudiciumque brevi limite falle tuum" 'Where you can, turn to the worse your girl's attractions, and by a narrow margin criticise amiss' (*Remedia amoris* 325–26). This criticism of the beloved relies on the proximity of vices to virtues; for this approach to be effective, however, the lover must somewhat beguile his own judgment, venturing beyond the boundaries of truth. But the "molt religieux hermoüfle" 'very pious clergyman' (*Roman de Renart* 3.754) goes so far beyond these boundaries that his description of Hersent can in no way be reconciled with Renart's own, and the self-convincing that is at the heart of Ovid's tongue-in-cheek advice is no longer possible within this confessional dynamic. Although the purpose of confession was not only purificatory but also instructional (after all, parishioners needed to know what constituted a sin in order to confess it), the *monde à l'envers* imposed from without by the kite contrasts too radically with Renart's for it to fulfil its didactic purpose.<sup>14</sup> To make matters worse, Hubert even goes so far as to claim that as a clergyman he would never venture beyond the bounds of truth:

<sup>12</sup> See also Goering and Payer 1993, 26–27, and Thomas of Chobham's *Summa confessorum*, 240.

<sup>13</sup> In a particularly ironic role reversal, Renart reminds him that "N'est pas coustume a confessor / Que il laidenge le pechor / Quant il se fait a lui confés!" (*Roman de Renart* 4.785–87).

<sup>14</sup> Gratian himself, in his *Decretum*, stated that the confessor also has the function of instructing the penitent, "Doceat loquendo, instruat operando..." (D. 6, c. 1, § 3). On the didactic purpose of confession and its close relation to preaching, see Murray 2015, 156; Rusconi 1981, 67–85. On the topic of sermons on penitential themes, see also Wenzel 2005, 145–69, and 1958.

Je ne t'en dirai ore plus  
 Qu'il n'afiert mie a renclus  
 ne a moine ne a provoire  
 Qu'il die cose qui n'est voire. (*Roman de Renart* 3.603–  
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I will say no more  
 For it does not befit a cloistered man  
 or a monk or priest  
 That he should say things that are not true.

Logically enough, the fox doesn't take too kindly to this impudent vituperation of his beloved. Both Ovid and later Boccaccio's late husband offer "sucos [...] amaros" 'bitter juices' (*Remedia amoris*, 227) as cures for love, but the kite's medication is too bitter a pill to swallow, and so the patient revolts against the doctor. Instead of ending in absolution, which would have allowed the penitent to subsequently receive Holy Communion,<sup>15</sup> it ends with a rather different type of ingestion, as Renart eats his confessor.

As is often the case in the *Roman*, it is unclear whether it is the protagonist or his victims that are more the target of its satire. The kite falls victim to his own hypocritical ploy: despite being a "molt religieus hermoifle / Qui quiet par cest pais la pes / Et se fait volentiers confés / Le malade et le pecheour" 'very pious clergyman / Who seeks peace throughout the land / And gladly confesses / The ill man and the sinner' (*Roman de Renart* 3.654–757) and being interested exclusively in sinners, as mentioned earlier, he is still fatally naïve. For some reason, he believes that "onques Renars a son provoire / Vousist or faire un malvais plait, / Car trop a aillors mesfait. / Or a tant fait qu'il est a chief" 'never would Renart now wish to do / an evil deed to his priest / For he has sinned too much elsewhere / Now he has done so much that he is at an end' (*Roman de Renart* 3.708–11). In other words, he truly believes in Renart's contrition, which, especially at the turn of the 13th century, before the gradual formalization of the sacrament of penitence sanctioned by the Fourth Lateran Council, was considered the

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<sup>15</sup> Renart refers to the Eucharist explicitly in the earlier encounter with the monks:

"Se prestre eüsse,  
 Corpus domini receüsse  
 Et a lui confés me feïsse;  
 Tous mes pechiés li regehisse!  
 Ne m'en peüst venir nuls mals:  
 Se morusse, si fusse saus!" (*Roman de Renart* 3.159–63)

main part of confession, in addition to being its *sine qua non* precondition.<sup>16</sup> But, of course, Renart can never be penitent, despite his many shows of contrition.<sup>17</sup> This miscalculation on the priest's part is not the only sign of his inexperience, since on more than one occasion, it is the fox himself who must instruct the confessor, reassuring him and asking to be assigned his penance (*Roman de Renart* 3.799).

Setting aside the penitent's lack of contrition, the confession seems to fail for two main reasons. The first is the incompetence of the officiant, which may very well have reflected the inexperience of many priests in confessional matters at the turn of the 13th century, which the twenty-first canon of Lateran Four was meant to redress, and which played a part in the creation of the mendicant orders, whose main functions were precisely preaching and administering confession (Goering 2004). The second cause, which follows logically from the first, is the nature of the confession itself: the kite mistakenly (and fatally) applies an Ovidian paradigm and a rhetorical practice to a confessional context, in which these two cannot possibly function. If a lover can rid himself of his infatuation by exaggerating his beloved's faults, that is not to say that a third person can forcibly rid him of said love by doing the same. Hubert's *vituperatio* does not in any way alter Renart's amorous (and in this case, particularly courtly) view of Hersent, but merely transforms him into an antagonist—one who must be deceived and dispatched. The kite's misuse of rhetoric raises the question of its legitimacy in preaching and confessing: although Augustine (1995, book 4) and authors of the later *summae praedicandi* had argued that preachers should resort to the principles of classical rhetoric, doing so ignorantly, or excessively conflating sermonizing and confessing, could clearly backfire. The *Roman* may be satirizing not only the hypocritical priest, but the very practice of confession itself: the problem is not so much that it is disorderly, as Robert of Flamborough would later go on to lament (Payer 2009, 61), but

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<sup>16</sup> One of the most famous examples of this can be found in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, Book 4, Distinction 17, Chapter 1. For a discussion of how the sacrament of confession changed during the 12th century and on the eve of the Fourth Lateran Council, see Biller 1998 and Baldwin 1998.

<sup>17</sup> For example, *Branche* 4, "Le Pèlerinage de Renart" stages not only more confessions but even a penitential pilgrimage, which is quickly interrupted when they decide to commandeer Ysengrin's house and empty his pantry.

that its ever-greater repeatability (of which Renart repeatedly takes advantage),<sup>18</sup> as well as the dynamic that it establishes between confessor and confessant, may render it ineffective.

The encounter staged a century and a half later by Boccaccio offers some uncanny resemblances. It too, as mentioned earlier, is quite explicitly penitential in appearance: having heard from the late husband why he came to his rescue (paralleling Virgil in *Inferno* 2), the protagonist recounts how “una contrizione sì grande e pentimento mi venne” (*Corbaccio* 67) that he weeps, employing the same metaphor that Dante does in *Purgatorio* 30 for his own moment of contrition.<sup>19</sup> The language is technical and precise, while the reference to an earlier instance of literary penitence underscores the confessional nature of the encounter. Towards the end of the husband’s sermon, he adds how “Io avevo con la fronte bassa, sì come coloro che il lor fallo riconoscono, ascoltato il lungo e vero parlare dello spirito [...] lagrimando il viso alzai” (*Corbaccio* 374), explicitly emulating the position of the penitent, and even subsequently despairing of ever being forgiven for his sins. The late husband reveals himself to be somewhat of a better confessor than Hubert, however, and so he assures the protagonist that

La divina bontà è sì fatta e tanta che ogni gravissimo peccato, quantunque da perfida iniquità di cuore proceda, solo che buona e vera contrizione abbia il peccatore, tutto il toglie via e lava della mente del committitore e perdona liberamente. (*Corbaccio* 378)

This emphasis on the power of contrition is confirmed by the echo of Manfredi’s words in *Purgatorio* 3, where the latter explains that “la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia, / che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei” (*Purg.* 3.122–23). In this consolatory vein, he goes on to mention the “buona contrizione e ottima soddisfazione” of even greater sinners and assures him that “te sì compunto veggio che già perdono della offesa hai meritato” (*Corbaccio* 379–80). This last remark reflects 14th-century penitential practices, which moved increasingly away from the tariffed penance that characterized the pre-Lateran period, where absolution was only granted after satisfaction

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<sup>18</sup> Although repeated penitence was allowed as early as the Council of Chalon-sur-Saône of 650 (Vogel 1969, 16), it was nevertheless looked down upon until the advent of tariffed penance during the Carolingian period (Murray 2015, 22–24; McNeill and Gamer 1990, 14), and only became widespread with the gradual formalization of the sacrament of confession and the dissemination of *libri poenitentiales* (McNeill and Gamer 1990, 29).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. “non solamente mi parve che gli occhi di vere lagrime, e d’assai, si bagnassero, ma che il cuore, non altrimenti che faccia la neve al sole, in acqua si risolvesse” (*Corbaccio* 67) and *Purg.* 30.85–99. For a more extended discussion of the parallels between the *Corbaccio* and the *Commedia*, see Psaki 1993.

had been done, to a form of penance whereby penitents' shame in the act of confessing represented the main part of their satisfaction, and hence absolution was usually granted immediately (Vogel 1969, 31; Murray 2015, 29). There is, however, a work of satisfaction for the lover to carry out, and after having solemnly declared his penitence, he asks the spirit to advise him further:

Dio, che, solo, i cuori degli uomini vede e conosce, sa se io dolente sono e pentuto del mal commesso, e se io così col cuore piango come cogli occhi; ma che per contrizione e per satisfazione tu in speranza di salute mi metti, avendo io già l'una, carissimo mi sarebbe d'essere da te amaestrato di ciò che a me s'appartenesse di fornire l'altra. (*Corbaccio* 381)

His work of satisfaction will be to abhor all that he once loved and to vilify his former beloved in a literary work that will reveal her true nature to the world (which may or may not be the *Corbaccio* itself). Does this imply that the *Corbaccio* might therefore be a successful version of the *Renart*, one which culminates in a successful contrition, confession, and absolution? Could Boccaccio have used the Old French *Roman* antiphrastically, putting right what had gone somewhat awry in the original? But then, one must ask, why choose such a problematic model-text to begin with?

The *Corbaccio* and the “Confession de Renart” share two irregularities in terms of the sacrament of penance. The first concerns the authority of the confessor: despite being called an *arceprestre*, Hubert's inexperience with confession and the fact that he had children (before Renart ate them, that is), cast a certain degree of doubt on his priestly reputation. His questionable Latin-cum-Old-French, “Sainhiés soie, dist li huas / De fiat voluntas tuas / Et de debitoribus noster / De credo in deum pater!” ‘May you be crossed, said the kite / By fiat voluntas tuas / And by debitoribus noster / By credo in deum pater!’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.723–26), a mishmash of the *Pater Noster* and the Nicene Creed, becomes a model of ineffective prayer, as it fails to placate Renart, and seems to pave the way for the failure of the confession, which results in anything but absolution. Hubert seems to furthermore lay claim to two parallel spheres simultaneously: the ecclesiastical and the feudal one. He is referred to the narrator as “dans Hubers” ‘Sir Hubert’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.333), which may either denote a nobiliary title or simply be a term of address fitting for an ecclesiastical figure; what complicates this, however, is Renart's final ploy, in which he proposes that, “Por vos enfans que je menjai, / Vostre home ici en devenrai; / Si nous entrebaisons en foi!” ‘For your children that I ate, / Your liege will I here become / Thus let us kiss in faith!’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.801–03). Here, he addresses the kite not as his confessor but precisely as a feudal lord (and as the father

of the victims). The reparations for the crime are to be made not in accordance with a penitential scheme but with one of secular justice. And it is precisely this temptation to overstep his ecclesiastical boundaries that proves to be the priest's undoing, as the kiss of forgiveness (which comes to replace the formula of absolution) becomes an act of devourment.

Boccaccio's choice of confessor is no less heterodox: it is especially interesting that he should have chosen a soul from purgatory, seeing as this specific realm of the netherworld was particularly connected with penance, and indeed Aquinas, in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, treats the two together in Distinction 21. If in *Purgatorio* 30, Dante at least opts for one of the blessed (along with an entire angelic host) to hear his confession, the choice of the widow's late husband is a rather more questionable one. By the 14th century, it was agreed that although one could confess to a layman *in extremis* for lack of a priest, a layman could neither absolve nor assign any penance. Aquinas is quite clear that,

sed quando necessitas imminet, debet facere poenitens quod ex parte sua est, scilicet conteri, et confiteri cui potest: qui quamvis sacramentum perficere non possit, ut faciat id quod est ex parte sacerdotis, absolutionem scilicet, tamen defectum sacerdotis summus sacerdos supplet. [...] quamvis ille qui laico confessus in articulo necessitatis, consecutus sit veniam a Deo, eo quod propositum confitendi quod secundum mandatum Dei concepit, sicut potuit, implevit; non tamen adhuc Ecclesiae reconciliatus est. (Aquinas 1947–56, 4, D. 17, Q. 3, A. 3, Re. Quaest. 2.)

But when there is an imminent need, the penitent should do what is from his part, namely, have contrition, and confess to whomever he can. Even though he cannot complete the sacrament, such that he would do what is the priest's part, namely, absolution, still the Highest Priest will supply the lack of a priest [...] although that person who has confessed to a layman in a moment of need did obtain forgiveness from God because he fulfilled, as well as he could, the intention he had formed of confessing according to God's mandate, nevertheless, he is still not reconciled to the Church.

Of course, one might be tempted to gloss over such details in the context of a literary work, and even more so in a dream vision, had Boccaccio not insisted on using such precise, technical language related specifically to the sacrament of confession. Though the late husband may be more successful than Hubert, this does not necessarily render the confession and its attendant sermons any more valid.

The second irregularity concerns the aforementioned language or, better yet, languages, of the two confessions. The dialogue between Renart and Hubert juxtaposes two forms of discourse: the first is the encomiastic one adopted by the fox in his description of Hersent's sex, which self-consciously

re-uses a number of *topoi* originally belonging to the genre of courtly romance, while the second is the scopic one of the *vituperium in vetulam*. Renart, for his part, thus describes it as both what “plus tost li done mal” ‘gives him the most grief’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.457) and simultaneously what “done plus en un jour / De bien, de joie et d’onor / Que bouche d’onme ne puet dire” ‘gives more in one day / Of good, joy and honour / Than a man can say’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.451–53) with the vagina replacing love as that which paradoxically can give both pain and joy. Renart further refers to his beloved with the traditional courtly term “douce amie” (*Roman de Renart* 3.36) and in his indignation, the fox protests to Hubert that “En vous a molt malvais renclus, / Qui mesdites de la plus france / Qui ains portast capel de venque” ‘You are a very bad monk, / Who slander the most honorable / Lady to ever wear a periwinkle hat’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.616–18). He is effectively accusing the kite of libel for insulting his beloved and suggesting that he should find “une autre amie / qui plus sache de cortoisie / Et qui soit un petit plus gente” ‘another beloved / who knows more of courtliness / And is a bit more noble’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.577–79). But this debate is not one between the courtly and the corporeally grotesque or between the carnal and the spiritual: after all, the confessor is certainly no more spiritual than the sinner, and both are concerned with the same referent, i.e., the female sexual organ.

Rather, by framing the same referent by means of two different discourses, both of which are fantastically hyperbolic albeit in opposite directions, the *branche* reveals the utter unreality of both. Hersent is probably not the root of all evil with a bottomless pit as Hubert describes her, but in all likelihood the she-wolf is not the most virtuous of courtly damsels, either. This ambivalence or doubleness is one of the defining traits of the Renart cycle as a whole, with its characters who seamlessly transition from being members of a royal court to raiding chicken coops, and one that largely depends on a juxtaposition of styles and linguistic registers. The third *branche* offers a number of such examples, such as the mock-epic tone that the narrator adopts in describing how Renart wages war against the Benedictine monks, “conme cil / Qui est issus de maint peril” ‘as one / Who has escaped great peril’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.183–84) and must suffer great “martire” ‘martyrdom’ (*Roman de Renart* 3.190) in the process. But the main target of this branch is surely religious discourse, which finds itself parodied not only in the (false) confession but also in the perverted *Pater noster* that the fox recites before sleeping (in which he asks God to protect all thieves and traitors), and in his blessings-turned-imprecations. These parodies of the

epic, the sacred, and the courtly operate by placing their traditional linguistic registers in contact with lexical fields that they customarily exclude (not only scatology and sexuality but also various forms of crime, knavery, and *engin*).

The *Corbaccio* enacts this very same lexical and stylistic juxtaposition, albeit more systematically and on a larger scale: if one is to accept that the *trattato* is the very work of penitence imposed by the late husband, then one must see it as a work of disclosure. The confessor-figure enjoins the lover to write “E in quanto puoi, fa’ che a lei nel tuo parlare lei medesima mostri e similmente la mostri ad altrui” (*Corbaccio* 386). The author must seemingly pull back the veil of illusory appearances to reveal both to herself and to others the widow’s true nature. And yet this must also somehow be reconciled with the husband’s claim that it is the lover who is primarily to blame, which the latter admits, conceding that he acted like “una bestia senza intelletto” (*Corbaccio* 109). The husband himself accuses the protagonist of “bestialità” (*Corbaccio* 200) for confusing the Muses with women of flesh and blood. It is therefore not so much the referent (the widow) that is in need of unmasking, as the courtly mode of reference itself and hence, by extension, its author. Just like the *Renart*, the *Corbaccio* may be said to stage a convergence of two different discourses: an aulic, amorous one, and a corporeal-grotesque one. Except, as in the “Confession,” both discourses are essentially out of place. The protagonist admits of himself that “né senno né prodeza né gentileza c’era (alla cortesia, quantunque il buono animo ci fosse, non ci avea di che farla)” (*Corbaccio* 106). Though he might at times like to imagine that he lives in a courtly fantasy, he does not. This, in turn, means that his first impulse upon seeing the widow, which is to “mettere ogni mia sollecitudine in fare ch’ella divenisse mia donna, come io suo servidore diverrei” (*Corbaccio* 88) is also a rather incongruous one. The protagonist finds himself entangled in a courtly dream that has precious little relevance to the world in which he is trying to enact it:

mi trovai io in più modi stoltamente avere operato; e massimamente in credere troppo di leggeri così alte cose d’una femina, come colui raccontava, senza altro vederne; e appresso per quelle, senza vedere né dove né come, ne’ lacciuoli d’amore incapestrarmi e nelle mani d’una femina dare legata la mia libertà e sottoposta la mia ragione. (*Corbaccio* 110)

The difference between a *femina* and a *donna*, which Dante underscores in the *Vita nova* while prefacing “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,” may primarily lie in the eye (and even more so, in the language) of the observer.

Like Hubert, the late husband proceeds to counteract the courtly language of love poetry via the excess of its opposite, the language of grotesque

corporeality. The depiction of the female body is just as preposterous and incredible here as it is in the *Roman*—after all, as the parallel passages above show, many of the similes are the same. The function of the grotesque is not to offer itself as any more real than the courtly fantasy it denies and substitutes itself for, but rather to underline the illusoriness of both. Just as the sudden expressionistic *pluristilismo* of the *Corbaccio* denies any one style absolute hegemony, and thus the illusion of being able to represent a world transparently, so the image of the grotesque body fractures the smooth surface of the courtly worldview to expose its fantastical nature. Boccaccio goes a step further, however, since unlike Hubert, the husband also systematically dismantles the courtly values of *leggiadria*, *gentilezza* and *cavalleria* (*Corbaccio*, 248, 365), which underlie the narrator's worldview and consequently his discourse. What ends up being reformed is not the widow (whom the narrator expressly tells the book to avoid in the *congedo*) but the protagonist himself and the way in which he writes.

What Boccaccio does in adopting Dante's stylistic heterogeneity in the *Corbaccio* is effectively to go one better. In the *Commedia*, *pluristilismo* is presented as a necessary form of *convenientia* for a poem that depicts not only differing eschatological fates but a motley variety of characters and sins, some requiring the tragic tones of epic, others those of comedy; in Dante's words, "ne la chiesa / coi santi, e in taverna coi ghiottoni" (*Inf.* 22.14–15). Boccaccio, by juxtaposing contrasting stylistic registers in the description of the same referent, reveals that *convenientia* is not always as straightforward as it seems since between the matter and its literary rendition there is always the figure of the author, who may adopt any of a variety of voices. If Dante had implicitly claimed that to describe the entire after-world one needed a *comedia* capable of accommodating every genre and style, Boccaccio pulls back the veil on the writer and his rhetorical artifice to disclose that *convenientia* may simply be a matter of literary, and therefore rhetorical, convention. Is Boccaccio in earnest, then? Why certainly, though mostly about not being too earnest.

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