When Il Grasso Becomes Calandrino: *La Novella del Grasso Legnaiuolo* and the Productive Failure of Literary Imitation

"O himmè! sarei io mai Calandrino, ch'io sia sì tosto diventato un altro senza essermene avveduto?" (Manetti 1976, 9). The fat woodworker Manetto, known to his acquaintances as Il Grasso, poses this question to himself near the beginning of Antonio Manetti's version of *La Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* (1480s). The architect Brunelleschi has decided to play a *beffa* on Il Grasso in retribution for the latter's absence at a group dinner. Orchestrating a series of encounters from the street to the prison to the home, Brunelleschi aims to convince Manetto that he has become someone else: precisely, his acquaintance Matteo. Il Grasso poses the above question after his first experiences of being addressed as "Matteo." His question serves to establish an explicit intertextual relationship between Brunelleschi's *beffa* and the *beffe* that Bruno and Buffalmacco play on Calandrino in the *Decameron*.

In this essay, I will argue that the various versions of *La Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* present their trickster protagonist Brunelleschi as engaged in a game of one-upmanship with his Decameronian namesake, Bruno. This relationship of one-upmanship is already present at times among the storytellers of the *Decameron*, particularly on Day Ten.[1] On the one hand, in his *beffa* Brunelleschi employs methods similar to those that Calandrino's *beffatori* use to trick him, particularly the 'chance' encounter on the street of *Decameron* 9.3. On the other hand, Brunelleschi fundamentally alters the aim of the *beffa*, substituting an alteration in identity for Calandrino's alteration in sensation. In this way, the *Novella del Grasso* grafts together two distinct intertexts: *Decameron* 9.3 and the tradition of Vital de Blois' Latin elegiac *Geta*, a poem that adapts Plautus' *Amphitryon* and was translated and expanded into the Italian *Geta e Birria* toward the end of the fourteenth century. Departing from the tradition of *Amphitryon* and the *Geta*, and approaching that of *Decameron* 9.3, Brunelleschi's *beffa* seeks not to nullify the identity of its dupe, but rather to impose a new identity in the place of the old. The two intertexts, however, do not precisely fit. From their combination results an ambiguity concerning the exact nature of the transformation that has taken place: has

[1] Hollander and Cahill discuss this dynamic in Day Ten of the *Decameron* (1997, 152–54).

Il Grasso entered a new body or does his body now have a new name and identity? Through Il Grasso's own attempt to answer this question, one can see emerge a persistent, questioning self that employs the first-person pronoun to seek understanding and that constitutes itself as an object of knowledge.

In analyses of the *Novella del Grasso*, critics often cite Il Grasso's reference to Calandrino in Manetti's version, yet most often do not give significant attention to this moment of intertextuality. Critics have noted both the similarities and the differences between Il Grasso and Calandrino as literary characters and between their respective novellas.[2] Yet few critics have offered more complex readings of Il Grasso's citation of Calandrino, other than noting the sufficiency or insufficiency of this textual allusion. Among those who have given it greater attention, Michael Sherberg considers the reference as revelatory of the reason for which Il Grasso falls for the prank: the citation of Calandrino is an "example of how Grasso confuses fiction, probably through its oral retelling, for history" (1983, 24, n. 15). Like Sherberg, André Rochon also reads the reference to Calandrino as representative of Il Grasso's problematic relationship to literary antecedents. For Rochon, however, the allusion reveals how fiction itself is useless in Il Grasso's interpretation of his own life, as Il Grasso has no access to the meanings transmitted by the texts of humanistic culture (1975, 310, n. 409). Finally, Ronald Martinez argues more forcibly for the role of the Calandrino cycle, particularly 8.3 and 9.3, as a literary model for *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*. In addition to noting certain similarities of phrases between 9.3 and *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, Martinez remarks that it is the Calandrino novellas that first develop "the notion that the self was a social construct manipulable by language and art" (2003, 32).

I follow here the insights of Sherberg, Rochon, and Martinez by reading *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* as a novella that not only takes the Calandrino novellas in the *Decameron* as a model (in terms of wording, plot, thematic interests, etc.), but that exists in a state of productive tension with its Decameronian predecessor. No single study thus far has been devoted to examining the ways in which *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* imitates Boccaccio's Calandrino *novelle*, and, more importantly, what the implications of this literary relationship would be for an interpretation of that which many consider to be the best Italian novella of the fifteenth century.[3] I will argue that this intertextual relationship is one that structures the *beffa* of *Il Grasso legniauolo*. Il Grasso is not merely similar to Calandrino; the *Novella del Grasso*

[2] For similarities between the two *beffati*, see: Pompeati 1927, 657; Lanza 1990, 95; and Ascoli 2016, 214, n. 14; between the *beffe*, Rochon 1975, 256; Manganelli 1998, xliii; Di Blasi 1985, 79; and Ascoli 2016, 216, n. 17; and in wording, Di Blasi 1985, 89, n. 11. For differences, particularly in the character of Il Grasso compared to Calandrino, see: Chiappelli 1953, 204; Tartaro 1971, 224; Rochon 1975, 309–10; Borsellino 1983, 286; Savelli 1994, 31–32; Manganelli 1998, xlii; Bartoli 2003, 10; and Barolski 2016, 140.

[3] See Pullini 1958, 60; Borlenghi 1962, 22; Gioseffi 1967, 9; and Lanza 1990, 94.

and the Calandrino cycle do not merely present analogous problematics of fiction and linguistic construction. Il Grasso's reference to Calandrino in Manetti's version of the novella points to a fundamental organizational principle of Brunelleschi's *beffa*. This *beffa* is a clever intertextual game, one that seeks to surpass the trick of *Decameron* 9.3 through combining it with the model of the *Geta*. A reading of the *Novella del Grasso* with and against both the Calandrino cycle and the *Geta* allows for an understanding of this novella as a site in which the possibilities and dangers of literary imitation become visible. Il Grasso's inner psychology emerges precisely in the gap between intertexts. The novella's interest in the psychology of the *beffato*, which scholars have long noted,[4] is inseparable from problems of intertextuality.

Before turning to the novella, I note here two interpretive choices that a critic of the novella must make. First, any analysis of *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* must take into account the complexities of its transmission and the existence of multiple written versions of the novella.[5] There are three principal prose versions of the *Novella del Grasso*. The first, whose earliest witnesses can be dated to 1430–35, survives in ten codices completed across the fifteenth century.[6] I will follow Rochon in collectively calling these manuscripts the "Vulgate." Even if there are important differences among the individual witnesses, on the whole the wording, structure, and narrative order of the text in these manuscripts converge. The second version is extant in one manuscript, the BNCF's ms. Palatino 200, initially edited and published by Michele Barbi in 1927. Rochon dates it to the 1470s. The third, also extant in only one manuscript (BNCF, ms. Magliabechiano II.II.325) is attributed by most critics to Antonio Manetti. Rochon dates it to the 1480s. Manetti's version adopts, generally speaking, the entire narrative of the Vulgate, while making significant additions to it, including elements from Pal. 200.[7] Since I am in large part interested in this essay in the relationship between the *Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* and the *Decameron*, I will generally be analyzing the Vulgate texts of the novella in order to show the ways in which this novella responds to the *Decameron* already in its earliest versions. In other words, the intertextual relationship is not one that Manetti adds to the Vulgate, but rather is present in the novella from the earliest extant manuscripts.[8] Such an approach will also allow me to highlight the ways in which different witnesses respond variously to the opportunities and challenges of

[4] For one example among many, see Rochon 1975, 308–26.

[5] For a good summary of these complexities, see Rochon 1975, 251–53.

[6] For a list of these manuscripts, see Rochon 1975, 215, and for dating, 239.

[7] For a table of differences between the Vulgate and Manetti's version, as well as examples of the ways in which Manetti expands the Vulgate, see Rochon 1975, 224–33.

[8] Rochon, for example, on the whole more interested in Manetti's version than in the Vulgate, adopts the opposite approach, focusing precisely on those passages that Manetti adds to the Vulgate.

their own intertextuality. This approach will thus differ from that of other critics, who almost universally adopt Manetti's version as being that in which the narration of the events is lengthiest and the psychological portrayal of Il Grasso most extensive.[9] In particular, for their ease of consultation, I will look at the three Vulgate texts that Rochon includes as appendices to his seminal article on the work: The Riccardiana's ms. Ricc. 2825 (Rochon 1975, 339–49), and BNCF's mss. Magliabechiano II.IV.128 (Rochon 1975, 349–59)[10] and ms. Palatino 51 (Rochon 1975, 359–72).[11] Riccardiano 2825, dated November 16th, 1437, is perhaps the earliest of the ten Vulgate manuscripts, and is the sparest of the three I will be referencing here. Though favoring Ricc. 2825, I will switch among the manuscripts depending on the passage of interest, while noting at all times the variants. Where it seems appropriate, I will additionally mention the ways in which Pal. 200 and Manetti develop the Vulgate or diverge from it.

Furthermore, beyond these issues of textual lineage there remains the question of whether the *beffa* that Brunelleschi plays on Il Grasso was a real historical occurrence. With its use of dates and historical characters and places, the novella certainly posits its own historicity. This move may nonetheless be part of a common tactic present in other literary works of the Middle Ages and Renaissance to establish the authority of its narration and to evoke interest in the events narrated.[12] In this essay, I will not be concerned with the question of whether the *beffa* 'really' happened or not.[13] By narrating the events as a novella, the writers of *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* were of necessity interested in Brunelleschi and Il Grasso as 'characters.' When analyzing them, therefore, I will be speaking of their literary

[9] Billeri 1984, who examines the early versions of the novella in her work, is the principal exception.

[10] The version in Magliabechiano II.IV.128 is also printed in Procaccioli's 1998 edition of *La Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo*.

[11] The page numbers I will use when citing the Vulgate witnesses will refer to these appendices. For certain passages of particular interest, I will also cite ms. Vat. lat. 4830, the only complete Vulgate manuscript to have been digitized at the time of writing: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.4830>.

[12] For all these issues, including the dating of the different versions and the historical identity of the characters, see Rochon 1975, 214–255. The use of a familiar, historically real background to present a marvelous event is a method Boccaccio employs throughout the *Decameron*. See Rochon 1975, 255; Baratto 1984, 35ff; and Forni 1995, 306–08, 317.

[13] Critics who see in the novella problems that Brunelleschi approached in his artistic career, particularly those of perspective and manipulation of space, tend explicitly or implicitly to treat the events as historical. See for example Gioseffi 1967, Bartoli 2003, Tafuri 2006, Bach 2007, Atkinson 2016, as well as Procaccioli 1998. Those who look at issues of interiority and/or Neo-Platonism, on the other hand, tend to limit their analyses to Manetti's text. See Chiappelli 1953, Borsellino 1983, Sherberg 1983, Martines 1994, Savelli 1994, Zampieri 1998, Turner 2015, Ascoli 2016, and Mortimer 2019.

representations, of the creations of writers whose creativity was both engaged with and determined by their own historical moment.

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In his choice to present Il Grasso as questioning whether he has turned into Calandrino,[14] Antonio Manetti points to connections between his novella and those of the *Decameron* of which his contemporaries and his followers indeed took note. In the manuscript Vat. lat. 4830, for example, the scribe of *Il Grasso* follows the end of this novella with, on the very same page, Leonardo Bruni's novella *Seleuco*, a tale that begins with a scene of a group of young men and women reading a novella from the "cientonovelle composto dallo excellente poeta Giovanni boccacci."[15] In the century following Manetti, writers — as well as popular expression — paired more specifically the two literary figures of Calandrino and Il Grasso. Benedetto Varchi, in his dialogue on the Tuscan language, *L'Hercolano* (published 1570), writes, "quando alcuno dubita, che chicchessia non voglia giostrarlo, e fargli credere una cosa per un'altra, dice: tu mi vuoi far Calandrino, e talvolta il Grasso legnaiuolo" (in Rochon 1975, 212). According to Varchi, Calandrino and Il Grasso are interchangeable in this expression and hold similar meanings. Implicit in the expression is the notion that both characters are manipulated through a trickster's intervening to alter their beliefs. Moreover, four editions of the *Decameron,* published in 1516, 1518, 1522, and 1525, include the novella of *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* as an appendix, falsely attributing the novella to Boccaccio, thus indicating a perceived relationship between *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* and Boccaccio's *centonovelle* (Rochon 1975, 220–21; Procaccioli 1998, xx).

That the *Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* in some way seeks to imitate the Calandrino cycle of the *Decameron* would have indeed been evident to any fifteenth-century reader of the novella from the novella's opening pages. Most obviously, the principal *beffatori* and the *beffato* are real Florentine artists in both the Calandrino cycle and in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*.[16] One can note the similarity of names between Bruno, the principal trickster of the Calandrino cycle, and Brunelleschi, as well as between Donatello, Brunelleschi's conspirator, and Nello: similarities that cannot be dismissed in a novella that turns on the distinction between the names of

[14] In Pal. 200, a campanion of Brunelleschi, who also enters Il Grasso's home and imitates this latter's voice while Brunelleschi imitates the voice of Il Grasso's mother, tells Il Grasso, "Tu mi darai ad intendere ch' io sia Calandrino, a dire che tu se' me" (Barbi 1927, 137).

[15] Folio 72^{r} (arabic numeral 95 *supra*). Digitized version available at: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.4830>.

[16] On the historical identities of Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Calandrino, see Branca in Boccaccio 1976, 1410–11, and Watson 1984, 44.

Manetto Ammannatini and Matteo Mannini.[17] Through a similar confusion of identities as that between Manetto and Matteo, Brunelleschi in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* becomes Bruno, the ingenious artist-trickster who can fool his artist friends.

Il Grasso, by contrast, is from the beginning of the novella presented as a literary descendent of Calandrino. Both are artists of a sort inferior to that of those who trick them. While Il Grasso is a woodworker (rather than an architect or sculptor),[18] Calandrino is a painter who does not wish to be one, as his way of describing painting to Bruno and Buffalmacco reveals. For Calandrino, the practice of painting is tantamount to "tutto dí a schiccherare le mura a modo che fa la lumaca" (8.3.29). Moreover, both go by nicknames, in distinction to their *beffatori* who go by their given names.[19] That both *beffati* go by nicknames emphasizes their social as opposed to familial identities. Like the names they go by, both characters receive their understanding of the world through social imposition during the *beffe* played on them.[20] In addition, both characters live with a female counterpart — for Calandrino, his wife Tessa, and for Il Grasso, his mother Monna Giovanna — whose absence from the scene allows the *beffa* to take place.[21] The *beffe* stage a conflict between urban, homosocial relationships and domestic, heterosocial relationships.[22] Though only implied in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, the resolutions of the *beffe* entail an altercation or act of violence between the two sexes. This is true in *Decameron* 8.3, 9.3, and 9.5. In the Vulgate manuscripts as well as in Manetti's version, Il Grasso gives as one of the reasons he desires to leave Florence for Hungary a "differenzia ch' i' ho avuta con mia madre" (Ricc. 2825, 348).[23] The writers of the *Novella del*

[17] Martines 1994, 241; Procaccioli 1998, xv; and Groebner 2007, 66 note the similarity between Manetto and Matteo's names and its playful quality. Bach 2007 discusses the role of name transformations and significations in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* in reference to Plato's *Cratylus*.

[18] On this point see Rochon 1975, 265.

[19] While Calandrino likely corresponds to the historical figure Giovannozzo di Perino (see Branca in Boccaccio 1976, 1410–11; Watson 1984, 44; for the meaning of the name Calandrino, based on the bird *calandra*, see Betti 1977, 518), Il Grasso corresponds to Manetto Ammannatini (Magl. II.IV.128 gives Il Grasso's full name at the beginning; only Manetto is given in Ricc. 2825, Pal. 51, and Manetti's version). See Martines 1994, 241.

[20] This is of course a feature of the genre of the *beffa* more broadly, and connects *Il Grasso* to numerous other Decameronian novellas, such as 3.8 and 7.9. For a discussion of further Decameronian echoes in the novella, see Rochon 1975, 256–57.

[21] This is true for all four Calandrino *beffe* in the *Decameron*. As Martines 1994 notes of Il Grasso's mother, "If she or a wife or other relatives had been at home on the fatal night, the use of other and more difficult snares for trapping Grasso would have been necessary" (238). See also Ascoli 2016, 218, n. 22. On the importance of Tessa in dissolving the *beffe* of 8.3 and 9.3, see Marchesi 2004, 107.

[22] On male homosocial relationships in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, see in particular Ruggiero 2006.

[23] On the relationship of Il Grasso to his mother, see in particular Rochon 1975, 324–6, including n. 484. Martines 1994 hypothesizes that this lacuna in the narration, hinted at only by the "dif-

Grasso also portray its eponymous dupe in ways that call to mind the Decameronian youths' descriptions of Calandrino. Both Il Grasso and Calandrino are "semplici," as critics have noted.[24] Il Grasso's friends speak of his "bizzarria" toward the beginning of the novella (Ricc. 2825, 339), which calls to mind Calandrino's quickness to anger with his wife,[25] as well as the idea of Calandrino as a man of "nuovi costumi" (8.3.4). As the *Novella del Grasso* progresses, the writers continue to play with these common character traits, repeatedly mentioning Il Grasso's "melancholy" — particularly during his stay in prison — a word that calls to mind the last sentence of 8.3, "e lasciandol malinconoso colla casa piena di pietre" (65).[26] The manuscript Pal. 200 develops these similarities even further by describing Il Grasso's stinginess (Barbi 1927, 133), a vice he would share with the Calandrino of 8.6 and 9.3.[27] Both Calandrino and Il Grasso are thus given to antisocial emotions and behaviors; in both cases, these antisocial traits seem to elicit the *beffe* played on them and the accompanying social derision that they suffer.

Finally, the writers of the *Novella del Grasso* repeat the language of *Decameron* 9.3 as they present the fifteenth-century Florentine dinner group agreeing to and planning the upcoming *beffa*. "E rimasisi insieme de' modi e dell'ordine che ciascuno tenere dovesse in dargli a credere che fosse uno che aveva nome Matteo, seguì la sequente sera…" (Magliab. II.IV.128, 350).[28] While Filostrato describes Bruno, Buffalmacco, and Nello's plotting with: "E senza troppo indugio darvi avendo tra sé ordinato quello che a fare avessero, la seguente mattina…" (9.3.6). The opening of the *Novella del Grasso* thus establishes a horizon of expectations for its readers, who are led to compare the novella's tricksters and dupe to those of the *Decameron*'s Calandrino cycle.

The opening scene of the *Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* nonetheless presents this intertextual relationship as one of not mere imitation but indeed of competi-

ferenzia" that Il Grasso mentions, may cover the fact that Il Grasso takes out his anger at the *beffatori* by beating his mother when she allows him to see that he was the victim of a *beffa*. This would of course link Il Grasso's character and his actions to Calandrino's in 8.3.

[24] Pompeati 1927, 657; Lanza 1990, 95. For Calandrino as "semplice," see 8.3.4–5.

[25] Rochon 1975, 312–13 notes that Boccaccio defines "bizzarro" in his *Esposizioni*: "noi tegnamo bizzarri color che subitamente e per ogni piccola cagione corrono in ira, né mai da quella per alcuna dimostrazione rimouver si possono" (Boccaccio 1994, 8.lit.69). Magliab. II.IV.128 describes Il Grasso as "di natura più tosto irato che no" (349).

[26] The traits of *bizzarria* and melancholy also link Il Grasso to the Geta of *Geta e Birria*. After Geta's encounter with Arcade, "Con gran maninconia tornando a dietro, / Più di se' passi il Geta, ripien d'ira, / Dice…" (*Geta e Birria*, §106). On the connections between the *Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* and *Geta e Birria*, see below.

[27] Billeri 1984, 91 notes this shared quality of avarice.

[28] I have chosen Magliab. II.IV.128 here as the closest parallel to *Decameron* 9.3. Ricc. 2825 and Pal. 51 give minor variations of word choice, word order, and syntax. Ricc. 2825 gives "la presente sera" instead of "la sequente sera."

tion. Il Grasso has failed to show up to a group dinner to which he usually comes. The other members of the dinner group wonder what could have kept him away, and, feeling scorned by his absence, contemplate how best they might exact retribution.

> "Deh, perché non facciamo noi a lui qualche natta, acciò che non s'avvezzi per sue bizzarrie a lasciarci?" A cui uno degli altri rispuose: "Oh, che gli potremo noi fare, se non fagli pagare una cena o simili zacchere?" Era in questa brigata che cenato avevano insieme uno, il quale aveva nome Filippo di ser Brunellesco, il quale per la virtù sua fu da molti conosciuto. Costui era molto usato col Grasso e bene conosceva la sua condizione; perché, fra sé medesimo fantasticando, come quello che aveva profondissima fantasia, poi che alquanto fu stato sopra di sé, cominciò a dire: "Brigata, se noi vogliam, e' mi sta l'animo che noi faremo del Grasso una bella beffa, tale che noi n'aremo ancora insieme grandissimo piacere; e quello che mi pare da fare si è che noi gli diamo a credere ch'egli sia di sé medesimo trasmutato in uno altro e che non sia più il Grasso, ma che sia diventato uno altro uomo." (Magliab. II.IV.128, 349–50)[29]

The inception of the joke repeats key elements of the plots of *Decameron* 8.6 and 9.3. Whereas Calandrino refuses to offer Bruno and Buffalmacco dinner, here Il Grasso refuses to come to dinner. In both cases, the eventual dupe refuses to participate in a group meal, calling upon himself the group's 'derision,' the attempt to punish him with laughter.[30] Indeed, the first option which an anonymous member of the group proposes to punish Il Grasso is precisely that which Bruno and Buffalmacco pursue in 8.6 and 9.3: to make Il Grasso pay for their dinner. For a moment, it might seem to the reader as if the *brigata* were about to get revenge on Il Grasso by forcing him to play the role of Calandrino, tricked into paying for dinner.

The word "zacchere" that accompanies the anonymous group member's suggestion — "fagli pagare una cena o simili zacchere" — points elsewhere, however.[31] The word, signifying bits of mud, is found in *Decameron* 6.5, in which Giotto (another Florentine painter) and Forese da Rabatta are described as having "piedi in quantità zaccherosi" during their wet and muddy trip to Florence (6.5.12).[32] This word metaphorically becomes a "vocabol generico di tutte le cose vili, e di poco

[29] Magliab. II.IV.128 chosen here for its fuller development of this passage. Differences in wording with ms. Ricc. 2825 and ms. Pal. 51 are noted below.

[30] Fontes 1972 notes this role of the *beffa* as a "sanction" in the Calandrino cycle (30). See also Holmes 2013, 362–63.

[31] "Che gli potremo noi fare, se non fargli pagare una cena o simile zacchera?" (Ricc. 2825, f. 339). "Oh, che gli potremo noi fare, se non fagli pagare una cena o simile zacchere?" (Pal. 51, f. 360). The variations in gender agreement are found in the fifteenth-century manuscripts.

[32] The *Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini* (*TLIO*) gives Pegolotti's *Pratica*, p. 16.5, as offering another example of this meaning.

pregio."[33] The word "zacchere" thus characterizes the aim of Bruno's and Buffalmacco's *beffa* — getting a free dinner — as something paltry and trivial, linked to the material realm of food and mud.[34] The phrase implies that the idea of making Il Grasso pay for dinner is a well-worn trope, known to at least two generations of readers of the *Decameron* by the early fifteenth-century.

The writers thus create a contrast between the anonymous group member's suggestion and Brunelleschi's idea of making Il Grasso believe he has become someone else. In this way, Brunelleschi takes on the role of Bruno in *Decameron* 8.6. To Buffalmacco's initial suggestion of finding the thief of Calandrino's pig with the bread and cheese test, Bruno responds by implying the test is too well known: whoever would submit to the test "avvederebbesi del fatto e non ci vorrebber venire" (33). Brunelleschi adopts the role of his literary predecessor Bruno, using his *virtù* to invent a novel, creative alternative to an initial commonplace. Brunelleschi's creative act of surpassing Bruno is thus ironically modeled on Bruno's own act of surpassing Buffalmacco.

Particularly in one ms. of the Vulgate group, Magliab. II.IV.128, and to a lesser degree in Ricc. 2825 and Pal. 51, the writers emphasize Brunelleschi's mental response to the *brigata*'s initial suggestion.[35] Brunelleschi retreats into his own "imagination," a mental faculty that the writer emphasizes by repeating it twice ("fantasticando," "fantasia"). The duration of this charged silence of the work of the imagination is put into relief by the series of subordinated clauses that delay the main verb and thus the resumption of speech: "cominciò a dire." This moment of withdrawal into himself — "fra sé medesimo" — taken to mastermind the joke foreshadows the inner dialogue that Il Grasso, the sufferer of the joke, will undertake in the attempt to understand what has happened to him. Il Grasso's retreat into his thoughts is necessitated by Brunelleschi's. Importantly, it also sets Brunelleschi apart from his predecessors, Bruno and Buffalmacco. The Decameronian storytellers of the Calandrino novellas do not emphasize the labor of the *beffatori*'s thought processes. Boccaccio's youthful narrators represent the conception of the trick-

[33] *Il Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, 1612. Though *Il Vocabolario* was published nearly two centuries after the Vulgate of *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, the metaphorical meaning they give fits aptly with the obvious meaning of the text. It is clear that "simili zacchere" does not mean throwing Il Grasso in the mud, even if doing so would also be imitating Bruno and Buffalmacco in their treatment of Maestro Simone (8.9).

[34] Dante indeed ties gluttony to mud, as the gluttons suffer under "Grandine grossa, acqua tinta e neve / per l'aere tenbroso si riversa; / pute la terra che questo riceve" (*Inf.* 6.10–12).

[35] In ms. Ricc. 2825, Brunelleschi's thought process receives less description: "perché, stato alquanto sopra di sé, cominciò a dire…" (339). Pal. 51 gives, "perché, stato alquanto sopra di sé pensando, così cominciò a parlare…" (360). Vat. lat. 4830, however, corresponds to Magliab. II.IV.128: "per che fra se medesimo fantastichando come quello che aueua profondissima fantasia, poi che alquanto fu stato sopra di se chomincio a dire…" (f. 64ᵛ).

sters' *beffe* as resulting from dialogue rather than from solitary inward thought. In both *Decameron* 8.3 and 9.3, Bruno and Buffalmacco quickly decide between themselves what must be done to trick Calandrino: "essi quello che intorno a questo avessero a fare ordinarono fra se medesimi" (8.3.38), "E senza troppo indugio darvi avendo tra sé ordinato quello che a fare avessero, la seguente mattina…" (9.3.6). Unlike Bruno and Buffalmacco, Brunelleschi creates a *beffa* through an inner thought process that is placed in opposition to conversation with the group around him. These different modes of invention of the *beffe* relate to the ways in which the tricksters carry them out. Bruno and Buffalmacco's dialogic pranks are subject to constant improvisation: in 8.6, Bruno invents the trick with cookies and aloe in the moment of talking to Buffalmacco and Calandrino, after the two tricksters have already stolen his pig. In 9.3, Bruno arguably invents the idea of Calandrino's pregnancy after hearing Calandrino's own description of his illness.[36] Brunelleschi's *beffa*, on the contrary, is conceived from its outset as an 'architectural' whole, each stage of the joke foreseen, or rather "fore-phantasized." Following Manetti's version, Brunelleschi demonstrates his "maraviglioso ingegno et intelletto" (5), adding "intelletto" to the "ingegni" with which Bruno and Buffalmacco trick Calandrino (9.3.33).

Brunelleschi's *beffa* both recognizes its Decameronian intertext even while altering it. The joke implicates itself in a game of similarity and difference as it presents the Calandrino *novelle* in a new form. Following the rules of this game, Brunelleschi must repeat certain aspects of Bruno's own pranks. This occurs primarily with the intertext of *Decameron* 9.3. For example, the belief that the *beffa* proposes to induce in the dupe will last a set duration of time (three days in each case).[37] And most notably, the *beffa* will rely on a series of 'chance' verbal encounters that take place just outside the home.[38] Thus, locked out of his house, Il Grasso is accosted on the street by Donatello. Donatello says, "Buona sera, Matteo; vai tu cercando il Grasso? e' se n'andò pure testé in casa" (Magliab. II.IV.128, 351), and then continues on his way. Donatello thus steps into the role of Nello, who had greeted Calandrino with, "Buon dì, Calandrino" (§6), before stopping to ask him, "Haiti tu sentita stanotte cosa niuna? tu non mi par desso" (§8).[39] In both cases, the initial abrupt encounter on the street is orchestrated such that the dupe must infer for himself what change in himself would elicit the words that his interlocutor has spoken to him. With his interlocutor pausing to speak for only a moment, the

[36] For this argument, see Marchesi 2004, 113.

[37] For the timeline of the *beffa* in *Il Grasso*, see Rochon 1975, 305.

[38] Cf. *Decameron* 9.3.6: "quando Calandrino di casa uscisse, non essendo egli guari andato."

[39] As Martinez 2003 notes, this phrase is picked up in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* by the man to whom Il Grasso/Matteo supposedly owes money: "vedremo là se tu sarai desso, o sì o no" (Ricc. 2825, 341). In Magliab. II.IV.128, this phrase becomes "vedremo se tu sarai esso" (352), and in Pal. 51, "vedremo là se tu sarai desso o no" (363).

dupe is forced into becoming an active interpreter of signs, to play the detective in a scene where the clues have been all set up and the riddle to be solved is his very self. In both cases, the dupe is in part the sufferer, in part the agent of his own *beffa*.[40]

Brunelleschi nonetheless changes the *beffa*'s aim. Rather than make Il Grasso pay for dinner, Brunelleschi wishes to convince him he has become someone else, "che noi gli diamo a credere ch'egli sia di sé medesimo trasmutato in uno altro e che non sia più il Grasso, ma che sia diventato uno altro uomo." The most obvious source for Brunelleschi's new aim is Plautus' *Amphitryon* and in particular its medieval and early Renaissance adaptations. The plot of Plautus' play became popular in the twelfth century following Vital de Blois' *Geta*, a Latin elegiac versification of the story of the *Amphitryon*. Vital de Blois renames Sosia as Geta; Amphitryon and Geta, rather than going to war, leave home to study philosophy in Athens. Geta, finding himself duplicated by Arcas (Mercury) upon returning home, considers his own reduction to "nothing" to be the result of his study of logic. In the late fourteenth century or perhaps early fifteenth century, a certain writer or writers, generally agreed to be Ghigo di ser Attaviano Brunelleschi and Domenico da Prato, translated and adapted Vital de Blois' *Geta* into Italian as *Geta e Birria*. To Vital's poem, the Italian narrative in verse adds an opening scene in which Anfitrione and Almena depart from each other and lengthens the characters' monologues and dialogues, especially that between Geta and his wife Birria.[41]

Scholars have long noted the importance of the Italian *Geta e Birria* for *La Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo*.[42] Most obviously, in both works, a trickster seeks to convince a dupe that he is not who he thinks he is, playing with that which constitutes the dupe's certainty of his own identity. Then, the opening scene of Brunelleschi's *beffa* is modeled on the encounter between Arcade (Mercury) and Geta when Geta returns to his home.[43] After meeting Il Grasso at his woodworking shop and taking leave under pretext that his mother is ill, Brunelleschi goes to Il Grasso's house, picks the lock, and locks the woodworker out of his own home. Brunelleschi then imitates Il Grasso's own voice and presents himself as having the same memories as Il Grasso by mentioning the latter's recent encounter with Brunelleschi. This scene adapts the narrative of *Amphitryon*, *Geta* and/or *Geta e Birria*, in which Mercury narrates Sosia's act of stealing wine (*Amphitryon*, ll. 429–30) or Geta's secret act of stealing money and sleeping with a courtesan or an old woman (*Geta*, ll. 375–92, *Geta e Birria*, §§124–28). The scene specifically imitates, how-

[40] As Sinicropi 1975 writes of Calandrino in 9.3, "la vittima comincia a partecipare attivamente alla creazione dell'irreale" (215). See also Sinicropi 1975, 195, as well as Marchesi 2004, 107 & 112.

[41] On the tradition of the medieval *Geta*, see Bisanti 2019–20, 4–8 as well as Rochon 1975, 258.

[42] For a thorough exploration of the ways in which the *Novella del Grasso* parallels the *Geta* and *Geta e Birria*, see Rochon 1975, 258–62.

[43] On the similarities between these two scenes, see Rochon 1975, 259–60.

ever, the tradition of Vital de Blois and the Italian *Geta e Birria*. While in Plautus' play, Sosia meets Mercury outside his house, and thus Sosia sees his own double, in Vital de Blois' poem, as in *Geta e Birria*, Arcas/Arcade stays behind the locked door, never showing himself. Brunelleschi similarly does not show himself to Il Grasso.[44] In addition, Il Grasso's decision to wait outside the house in the hope that someone will address him as Il Grasso (Ricc. 2825, 341), repeats Geta's decision to do the same after his encounter with Arcas/Arcade (*Geta*, ll. 422–24; *Geta e Birria*, §§144–45). On the other hand, Plautus may not be completely absent from the *Novella del Grasso*. The novella indeed makes literal a metaphor from Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* according to which the trickster is conceived as an architect (ll. 209, 901–02, 915–17).

If *Geta e Birria* were written primarily by Ghigo di Attaviano Brunelleschi, as most fifteenth-century manuscripts attest, then it would have been an appropriate subject for Brunelleschi's elaborate intertextual and intratextual play with names. *Geta e Birria* was already perceived to be linked both to *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* and to the *Decameron* in the fifteenth century. The manuscript of *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* in Riccardiano 2254 is found in a codex that also contains Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* as well as *Il Geta e 'l Birria*. In Riccardiano 2825, moreover, the *Novella del Grasso legnaiolo* and *Birria e Geta* follow each other.[45] On the other hand, *Geta e Birria* appears with Boccaccio's *Ninfale Fiesolano* in Riccardiano 2259, and with *Il Corbaccio* in Magliabechiano II.38.[46] Boccaccio himself had copied the Latin *Geta* into his *miscellanea Laurenziana* (Laur. Plut. 33.31ff. 67^{v}–69^{r}). Armando Bisanti has documented the ways in which Boccaccio's reading of the *Geta* is discernible in his own work, whether as explicit reference or in borrowed situations. Boccaccio cites and summarizes the *Geta* in the *Teseida*, the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, and the *Amorosa visione* (Bisanti 8–18). Scholars have long seen in the stoning of Calandrino in *Decameron* 9.3 an echo of the stoning of Birria in the *Geta*.[47] Beginning in the late fifteenth century, scribes, and then scholars, mistook the writer of the Italian *Geta e Birria* to be Boccaccio himself, perhaps due to a misinterpretation of G.B. as Giovanni Boccaccio, instead of Ghigo Brunelleschi.[48]

The *beffa* targeting Il Grasso departs from *Geta e Birria* in important ways, however. First, as Giulio Savelli notes, in *Amphitryon* and *Geta e Birria* the dupe becomes no one, not someone: in *La Novella del Grasso*: "lo scopo della beffa non

[44] Pal. 200 gives an alternate version of this opening scene, however, in which an encounter is staged between the two Grassos (Barbi 1927, 137).

[45] See Rochon 1975, 258.

[46] For these last two examples, see Arlía 1879, xiii–xiv.

[47] Bisanti 2019–20 gives a helpful bibliography (18, n. 75), to which one may add Martinez 2003, 227.

[48] See Vittore Branca's note in Boccaccio 1974, 654, as well as Queux de Saint-Hilaire 1872, viii, and Arlía 1879, ix–xiii. On Boccaccio's transcription of the *Geta*, see also Petoletti 2018, 230.

è la sottrazione di qualcosa — l'identità — ma la sostituzione — di una identità con un'altra" (1994, 29). Vital de Blois' *Geta* emphasizes that Geta, after encountering Arcas as himself, becomes "nihil" (ll. 5–7, 173–77, 280, 358, 395, 398, 405).[49] The author of the Italian *Geta e Birria* is even more interested than is Vital de Blois in the reduction of Geta to nothing. He introduces the scene between Geta and Arcade by describing how "Geta a se parv'esser zero" (§96),[50] after which Geta says to himself, "Mi veggio fatto nulla" (§109),[51] or "sono fatto niente" (§142). In this way, Brunelleschi's joke also aims to surpass another intertext. Rather than merely negating Il Grasso's identity, the *beffa* aims to persuade Il Grasso to accept the imposition of a new one. Vital de Blois' twelfth-century poem parodies early scholasticism and presents the art of dialectic as able to reduce man to ass,[52] and finally to nothing; the Italian *Geta e Birria* repeats this parody of sophistic logic.[53] Brunelleschi's *beffa*, on the other hand, is less interested in the destruction of meaning, in being becoming nothing, than in the limits to which older meanings can give way to new ones.

In the opening scene of the *beffa* at Il Grasso's house, Brunelleschi plays the role of Mercury, intertextually apotheosizing himself as the trickster god. He is, however, not entirely the Mercury (Arcas, Arcade) of *Amphitryon*, *Geta*, and *Geta e Birria*, interested primarily in displaying his power over humans by negating their identity, without concern for what the dupe then does with this negation. He is instead, in a manner familiar to Florentine poets since Dante, a syncretic combination of the Greco-Roman and the Christian: a trickster god who is interested in creation rather than destruction.

As noted, the means by which Brunelleschi becomes a creative human Mercury are taken in part from *Decameron* 9.3: the series of encounters on the street. In both *beffe*, the tricksters signal to the dupe that something has changed in him while nonetheless assigning to the dupe the task of ascertaining the full nature and extent of this change and thus realizing this change. Part of the genius of the *Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* resides in its demonstration that plot of *Decameron* 9.3 and that of the *Geta* tales are compatible. As in the *Geta*, the *beffa* targets a dupe's identity; as in *Decameron* 9.3, it aims to produce (rather than merely negate) a belief that seems as if it should not depend upon others' words.[54]

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[49] Citations from Blois 1840.

[50] See also §124. Citations from *Geta e Birria* 1879.

[51] See also §§125, 134, 136, 144, 158, 161.

[52] "Sed pretium poenae miranda sophismata porto, / Iamque probare scio, quod sit asellus homo" (ll. 163–64).

[53] See Rochon 1975, 332, and Bisanti 2019–20, 5–7. On Boccaccio's relation to scholastic philosophy, see Andrei 2017 and Kablitz 2018.

[54] On the way "language and discourse alter Calandrino's perception of reality," see Kircher 2019–20, 93.

The *Novella del Grasso* nonetheless shows that an inner sensation is not fully interchangeable with identity. As Brunelleschi adopts and adapts the strategy of Bruno from *Decameron* 9.3, certain changes become necessary that complicate the results for the *beffatori*. In both *beffe*, the tricksters, through verbal means, bring about a transformation that does not, or did not yet, exist in reality: Calandrino has not (yet) become ill, and Il Grasso has not (yet) become Matteo. In *Decameron* 9.3, the tricksters describe this transformation in order to lead Calandrino to internalize it. In *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, on the other hand, the tricksters are unable to describe the change of affairs to Il Grasso. The tricksters cannot say, as did Bruno to Calandrino, "Il Grasso, che viso è quello? E' par che tu sie Matteo" (cf. 9.3.13). From the outset, the tricksters must address, not Il Grasso, but Matteo. Thus it only seems at first that Nello's hints at Calandrino's sickly appearance might equally serve as descriptions of Il Grasso's change in identity: "tu non mi par desso [...] ma tu mi pari tutto cambiato" (9.3.8, 10). While both Calandrino and Nello understand the reference of "tu" to be stable, in *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* the "tu" with which Donatello addresses Il Grasso is a wayward pronoun. The person it references is understood by both interlocutors — there is no indication that Il Grasso believes Donatello is speaking to someone behind him — yet the person it is meant to address is thrown into doubt, given that it follows the vocative "Matteo." Il Grasso receives opposing references of the second person pronoun, and thus must attempt to make sense of the very act of reference and of interpersonal speech, not only, like Calandrino, of the reality to which his interlocutor's words refer.

As a result of the change in aim as compared to *Decameron* 9.3, Brunelleschi's orchestrated prank includes certain ambiguities that are absent from Bruno's *beffa*. In *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, it is never clear, for either Il Grasso or the reader, whether Il Grasso's mind has occupied Matteo's body, or whether he has kept his body, but that body now universally signifies Matteo instead of Il Grasso for his fellow Florentines.[55] Part of the irony, and comicality, of the *beffa* is of course that Il Grasso's name refers to his own physical appearance.[56] Though he may still be *grasso*, he is no longer "Il Grasso." It is unclear whether the transformation of the *Novella del Grasso* is an occurrence of metempsychosis — Il Grasso's soul entering Matteo's body — or is instead a radical switching of signifiers, whereby that which once signified Il Grasso now signifies Matteo.

[55] Critics, including Rochon, seem not to have noticed this ambiguity. Savelli 1994, for example, explicitly rules out the possibility of the transformation being a double bodily metamorphosis (26) — of Il Grasso into Matteo and Matteo into Il Grasso — even though, in Manetti's version, the judge voices this possibility.

[56] "The material solidity of the world and its exact identities is the locus of the play of appearances and of steady imaginative displacements" (Mazzotta 1986, 7). Mazzotta's analysis of play in the *Decameron* describes equally well the play within *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*. Cf. Mazzotta 1986, 192–98 on play and the Calandrino *novelle*.

Within the *beffa*, the only mind that can distinguish between these two options is Il Grasso's. Yet without any chance to look at himself in a mirror,[57] Il Grasso cannot be sure what it means for himself to have become Matteo.[58] Il Grasso searches to understand the nature of his transformation throughout the *beffa*. First, while in prison, he asks Giovanni di Francesco Rucellai to find Il Grasso and to tell him to come to the prison window.[59] In Ricc. 2825 and Magliab. II.IV.128, Rucellai agrees to do so and never comes back. In Pal. 51, Rucellai sends a servant named Anichino to tell Il Grasso that he saw Rucellai and Il Grasso talking together.[60] Il Grasso uses this opportunity to try to obtain more information: "Vedesti voi colui a chi Giovanni parlò? [...] E com'er'egli fatto? Era egli fatto come me?" The narrator represents Anichino as not knowing how to respond, as Anichino attempts to downplay his knowledge: "io non puosi mente le fattezze sue; a me pare che sia fatto come voi." When Il Grasso asks, "e come parlava egli? Parlava e' come me?" Anichino blusters, "Che so io? [...] Voi mi domandate di tante cose che in uno anno non verrebbono a fine" (365). In this version, it is clear that Anichino also is not sure of what the nature of Il Grasso's transformation is supposed to be. Anichino hedges, opting for the vocabulary of appearance and the subjunctive — "a me pare che sia fatto come voi" — then avoids giving an answer through feigned impatience. Yet Il Grasso does not abandon his search to understand his own transformation. Near the end of the *beffa*, he accepts the priest's demands that he give up pretending to be Il Grasso: "da quel punto innanzi non si darebbe più a credere d'essere il Grasso." But he still asks for one small favor: "questo era che vorrebbe un poco parlare con quel Grasso legnaiuolo e discredersi" (Ricc. 2825, 346).[61] Of all the characters, it is only Il Grasso who tries to understand the exact nature of his transformation, and he does so persistently. He does not only seek to understand *whether* he has become Matteo,[62] but also *in what* this transformation consists. His attempt to understand is a response to the ambiguity of Brunelleschi's *beffa* that itself results from adopting and adapting Bruno's means to the aim of the *Amphitryon* model. Il Grasso seeks, as it were, to understand the imperfect

[57] Groebner 2007, 35 notes the conspicuous absence of mirrors in the novella and also relates it to Brunelleschi's experiments with perspective, as does Ascoli 2016, 211, n. 2.

[58] In Pal. 200, Brunelleschi works with a partner to feign the conversation between Il Grasso and his mother inside Il Grasso's house; this partner eventually exits the house to vituperate Il Grasso, thus eliminating Il Grasso's uncertainty as to what the man who everyone now considers to be Il Grasso looks like (see note 44 above). This situation more closely imitates that of Plautus' *Amphitryon* (rather than *Geta* and *Geta e Birria*), while eliminating the fascination of the open-ended question in the Vulgate and Manetti's versions.

[59] In all three versions: 342, 353, 364. On the historical identity of Rucellai, see Rochon 1975, 262–63.

[60] On this scene, see Rochon 1975, 216–17.

[61] This passage is also in Magliab. II.IV.128 (357) and Pal. 51 (369).

[62] See, for example, Rochon 1975, 309, 315, 329–30.

contaminatio of his own intertexts. In this way the readers, too, may find themselves unexpectedly on the side of Il Grasso. Not only do they, like Il Grasso, not know what will happen next in the *beffa*, but they too cannot be sure of the exact nature of the prank.

The writers of the Vulgate do not make it clear whether Brunelleschi the character intends, merely accepts, or is unaware of the ambiguity in his joke. The ambiguity allows Il Grasso to take a more active role in the interpretation of the *beffa* played on him than does Calandrino. Even at the moment when the *beffa* seems to have succeeded, when Il Grasso agrees no longer to believe that he is Il Grasso, he continues to search to understand what it means for him no longer to be himself. His continuous effort to understand the meaning of his new identity shows that he does not accept this identity in the same way that Calandrino accepts and indeed feels his sickness. In many ways Brunelleschi succeeds in surpassing Bruno's *beffe* but falls short insofar as the *beffato* does not internalize the constructed reality imposed on him and only accepts that this constructed reality has social currency.

The *Novella del Grasso legnaiuolo* is thus an example of the complexities and dangers of literary influence and imitation. Brunelleschi's *beffa* functions by adapting the method of Bruno's *beffa* in *Decameron* 9.3 to the aim present in the *Amphitryon* and *Geta* model. Yet the pieces do not fit precisely. As the form receives new content, a space is opened up within the text that did not exist in either of the two literary models. This space is one of ambiguity and indeterminacy: of what precisely it means for Il Grasso to become Matteo. The repetition of form leads to possibilities to create both new meanings but also new types of irresolution of meaning. *Il Grasso legnaiuolo* shows that the act of repetition present in literary imitation leads this act's outcome and meaning to escape the control of the one who repeats and adapts. The consequences of a form entering a new situation to serve different purposes can be difficult to predict and to control. Yet this failure to repeat perfectly the original, which is in some way necessary in all literary imitation, is also the source of the imitation's productivity. In the case of *Decameron* 9.3 and *Il Grasso legnaiuolo*, the disjuncture between the *novelle* is that which leads Il Grasso to try to understand the nature of the *beffa* to which he has been subjected. The imperfection of the imitation makes possible Il Grasso's inner monologue and thus opens a new inner psychological space.

In the *beffa* played on Il Grasso, the ambiguity is in one way simply a matter of fact: has Il Grasso's mind entered Matteo's body or does Il Grasso's body now signify Matteo? In both cases, the problem is the relation of appearance and embodiment to one's place and role in society. Yet it is this ambiguity that leads to Il Grasso's perplexity, to his search for an answer, and thus to the formation of a third type of self, that of the thinking *I*. The irresolution allows Il Grasso's self to become a potential object of his own knowledge and leads to the persistence of a self, founded upon the attempt to understand. Despite what may be the Buddhist origin

of this story type (Larzul 1995, 31), the being that remains in Il Grasso is not an experience of the non-self or nirvana. It is instead the enduring presence of thought, of attempting to understand the world, linked to the ability to use the first-person pronoun to enunciate a search for knowledge that is untied from any particular social identity. In this way it is not only Brunelleschi's *ingegno*, but also Il Grasso's perplexity that might be seen as announcing a historical shift to the inquisitive scientific mind that seeks to make sense of the world through observation.[63]

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[63] Ascoli notes Il Grasso's "proto-empiricist process of weighing evidentiary proof" (2016, 222). On Brunelleschi's *beffa* as a proto-scientific experiment, see Gioseffi 1967, 17–18, as well as Rochon 1975, 329–30.

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