5
Boccaccio

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Giovanni Boccaccio entertained a lifelong friendship with his contemporary Francesco Petrarca, which became particularly close after their meeting in 1350. His admiration for Dante was sparked very early on and lasted to the end of his life. Unlike his two mentors, however, Boccaccio does not place his *persona* at the centre of his work but rather, somewhat slyly, at the periphery. At times he takes on the role of *voyeur*, as in the *Caccia di Diana*, and above all in the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* in which the author turns up unexpectedly at the very end (XLIX, 1–6), crouching in the thick greenery where, hidden from view, he has watched the beautiful nymphs and listened to the tales of their joyful and charming loves. At other times, poking fun at his envious detractors, apparently all too solicitous of his reputation and well-being, he takes on a tone of amused self-effacement and feigned humility: 'In the course of my lifelong efforts to escape the fierce onslaught of those turbulent winds [of envy], I have always made a point of going quietly and unseen about my affairs, not only keeping to the lowlands but occasionally directing my steps through the deepest of deep valleys' (*Dec.* IV, Intr.). More often Boccaccio's ubiquitous, elusive presence is entrusted to a subtle play of allusions scattered here and there among his fictional characters, notably Idalogo, Caleon, Fileno in *Filocolo*, Ibrida, Caleon in *Comedia delle ninfe*, Dioneo in the *Decameron*, and possibly even Fiammetta (reversing the gender roles) in *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. Among the recurring elements of the suggested self-portrait are birth out of wedlock to a French mother – either a king's daughter (*Filocolo*) or a widowed Parisian noblewoman (*Comedia delle ninfe*) – subsequently abandoned by her lover. Thus came into being the legend of his highborn French mother and the myth of Paris as his birthplace.

Early years

Giovanni Boccaccio was born in Tuscany between June and July of the year 1313, most probably in Florence rather than in nearby Certaldo as sometimes suggested. His father, Boccaccino di Chelino, was a prosperous and respected Florentine merchant, his mother a local woman, probably of humble origins, but about whom nothing is known. Shortly before marrying Margherita de' Mardoli around 1320, Boccaccino legally recognised his illegitimate son ('he

himself who, freely and happily, had so kindly raised me like a son, and I had called him and still call him my parent', *Amorosa visione* XIV, 42–5) and made sure he received a good education. He had him instructed in Latin by Giovanni di Domenico Mazzuoli da Strada (whose son Zanobi was later to be Boccaccio's successful rival for the post of official poet at the Angevin court in Naples), and, with a future business career for his son in mind, saw to it that he acquired the appropriate accounting skills. Boccaccio's education was continued in Naples, where, at about age thirteen, he was apprenticed to the Bardi banking house, a Florentine firm whose Neapolitan branch had a flourishing business lending money to King Robert. Around 1327 his father joined him, having been appointed chamberlain to the king and one of the three financial consultants of the Realm of Naples. The prestige and trust his father enjoyed at court gave Boccaccio access to the charmed company of the rich and the aristocratic.

The port city, besides being a thriving commercial centre at the crossroads of Mediterranean trade, was also culturally important, the university as well as the court attracting scholars, scientists, men of letters and artists from other parts. Over thirty years later Boccaccio was to remember, in the pages of the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* ('Genealogies of the Pagan Gods', XIV, 8 and XV, 6), some of the intellectuals who stimulated his youthful mind: the Venetian scholar Paolino Minorita; the astrologist Andalò del Negro; the scientist Paolo dell'Abaco; the erudite director of the King's Library, Paolo da Perugia (the library, frequented by Boccaccio, was well stocked with French works of poetry and narrative); and the Calabrian monk Barlaam, consultant to the royal librarian in matters pertaining to Greek and Hellenistic texts. (Boccaccio's partiality for Greek-sounding names and titles goes back to his contacts with Barlaam. Later, in 1360, he had Barlaam's disciple, Leonzio Pilato, installed at the University of Florence, in the first Western chair of Greek, and housed him while the unpleasant fellow was translating the *Iliad*.)

The great jurist and poet, Cino da Pistoia, close friend of both Dante and Petrarch, must have held a particular fascination for Boccaccio, who in 1330–1 attended his lectures on the Justinian Code at the University of Naples. Another Tuscan, also a friend of Petrarch's, was to exercise a spiritual influence on him: the Augustinian friar Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, who was present in Naples from the end of the 1330s until his death in 1342, called there by King Robert for his expertise as a theologian and astrologer trained at the Sorbonne. Even Giotto was in Naples around this time (from 1329 to c. 1333), and Boccaccio, a great admirer of his, was probably familiar with the famous Castel Nuovo frescoes (*Amorosa visione* IV, 7–24).

It soon became apparent that Boccaccio was not cut out for a career in banking. His father was persuaded to release him from his commercial pursuits on condition he study canon law – a lawyer after all would be able to earn as good a living as a merchant. But even here Boccaccio fretted at the precious

time irremediably stolen from his true vocation, poetry. His repugnance to moneymaking, and in particular to the idea of reaping profit from learning, is echoed in the description in *Decameron* VIII, 7 of the scholar Rinieri who had gone to study in Paris 'with the purpose, not of selling his knowledge for gain as many people do, but of learning the reasons and causes of things' (VIII, 7, 5). After his father's departure for France in 1332, Boccaccio dedicated himself increasingly to humanistic studies, indulging his eclectic tastes and reading with the consuming enthusiasm of the self-taught.

Caccia di Diana and *Rime*

His first fiction, *Caccia di Diana* (1333–4, Branca's dating), bears the signs of his early interests – classical mythology as well as Christian allegory – and his veneration for Dante. It also reflects his fascination with the elegant society in which he moved at the time. The eighteen-canto poem in *terza rima* takes its lead from Dante's lost catalogue of the sixty most beautiful women in Florence (*Vita Nuova* VI, 2). Combining the *serventese* with the *caccia* genre,[1] it pays homage to fifty-eight young ladies of prominent Neapolitan families and indirectly celebrates their relatives; a fifty-ninth lady, 'whom Love honours more than any other for her lofty virtue' (I, 46–7), remains unnamed and is the one from whom the narrator hopes for salvation (XVIII, 58). The narrator, from his vantage point in the springtime greenery, gives an account of the hunting exploits of the energetic and purposeful young girls directed by the goddess Diana. At the end the virginal Diana gives way to Venus who, alighting from a hovering cloud, transforms the slain quarry (the conquered vices), burning on a huge bonfire, from animals into men; each young man is bathed in the cleansing waters of the stream (the rite of baptism) then clothed in vermilion and assigned to a young lady. Surprisingly, it turns out that the narrator too is an animal, a stag, and he too now undergoes the same transformation as the others and is then offered to his lady: 'and I saw myself offered to the Fair Lady, changed beyond doubt from a stag into a human being and a rational creature' (XVIII, 10–12). The theme of the miraculous power of love and beauty will return again and again in Boccaccio's subsequent works and is central, for instance, to the *Comedia delle ninfe*. But even more significant, in the *Caccia di Diana*, is the first evidence of Boccaccio's flair for mingling various literary genres and cultural traditions – a key factor in his renewal of a whole range of literary forms.

Much of Boccaccio's extant lyric output, his *Rime*, belongs to the Neapolitan period and bears the unmistakable traces of his debt to Dante and the *stilnovisti*. Boccaccio never set about making an ordered collection of his scattered poems. Indeed, in a letter to Pietro Piccolo (1373), he says he had

[1] The *serventese* was a metrical form in which successive stanzas were linked with a single rhyme; the *caccia* was normally a musical composition, in canonic form and of irregular metre.

burned his youthful verses, convinced he could never attain first place in these endeavours, obviously because of the unparallelled perfection of Petrarch's lyric poetry. Whatever we may wish to make of this statement (questions have been raised about the actual extent of the fiery destruction), Boccaccio's vocation is not that of a lyric poet but rather of a narrator, a vocation already very much in evidence in the lively verse account of Diana's hunt and amply confirmed in the prose narrative of his *Filocolo*.

Filocolo

The *Filocolo* (1336–8, Quaglio's dating) retells the love story of Florio and Biancifiore (Floire and Blancheflor), retrieving it from the idle chatter of the ignorant, the 'fabulosi parlari degli ignoranti' (I, 1, 25). The narrator is commanded by his lady, Fiammetta, to record in a little book ('picciolo libretto', I, 1, 26), using the vernacular, 'the birth, the falling in love and the adventures' of this exemplary pair. The work, divided into five books, turns out to be anything but 'little', at least in size, with the account of the pair's trials and tribulations liberally interspersed with digressions (the justification of the takeover by the foreign Angevins of the Realm of Naples, the founding of Certaldo, the history of the Christian church, and so on). The fourth book is the best known. Florio – or Filocolo as he calls himself upon setting out on his wanderings to find Biancifiore, sold by his parents to Eastern merchants – is in Naples where he joins a select group of young people who are entertaining themselves, in a pleasant garden, by telling stories that give rise to spirited debates on Questions of Love: a situation foreshadowing the happy brigade of Florentine storytellers in the frame-tale of the *Decameron*. Indeed, tales X, 4 (Messer Gentile de' Carisendi) and X, 5 (Madonna Dianora) of the *Decameron* are taken, with some changes, from the eleventh and fourth 'questions' respectively (*Filocolo* IV, 67 and 31). However, Boccaccio in the *Decameron* seems implicitly to mark the difference in the purpose of the storytelling by comparison with the earlier work by having Fiammetta, at the beginning of the sixth tale, distance herself from the kind of debates the previous two tales (derived from the *Filocolo*) had provoked: 'I have always been of the opinion that in a gathering such as ours, we should talk in such general terms that the meaning of what we say should never give rise to argument among us' (*Dec.* X, 6, 3).

The attempt, organised by Duke Ferramonte, to distract Florio from his love for Biancifiore (III, 11), is one of the most lively and amusing episodes in the *Filocolo*. The duke enlists the help of two young girls of marvellous beauty, instructing them to wait for Florio in the palace garden dressed as provocatively as possible, and promising that whichever of them succeeds in pleasing him most will be given to him in marriage. Attired in sheer gowns with tight-fitting bodices designed to reveal the shape of their pretty breasts, they wait

expectantly. Florio, attracted by the strains of their angelic singing, is overwhelmed by their beauty. After a certain amount of erotic foreplay, just as the young ladies think they are about to succeed in their intent, they are suddenly repulsed and summarily invited to leave. In tears, one of them even resorts to tearing open her bodice, but to no avail. Humiliated, without saying a word, as the sun is setting, they return to the palace, put back on their usual clothes and report to the duke what had happened. Then, generously rewarded by him with gifts, they take leave and, their hopes dashed, sadly return home. Reminiscences of this episode – almost a self-contained *novella* – are to be found in the tale of King Charles the Old and Messer Neri's two beautiful teenage daughters (*Decameron* x, 6), where the deliberate and unsuccessful attempt to seduce Florio, with its ironic overtones, is replaced by a refined scene of unwitting and more subtle seduction to which the Old King, unlike Florio, falls pathetically victim.

Florio and Biancifiore are finally reunited and married. Through the good offices of the priest Ilario (who is of Greek extraction), Florio is converted to Christianity, the religion of his beloved, along with his friends and family. At the death of his newly converted father, Florio and Biancifiore are crowned king and queen of Spain and live happily ever after. In the Envoy the author addresses his 'libretto'. Assuming a posture of humility (as we have seen, a rhetorical device Boccaccio was to use over and again), he warns against vying with the great epic poets of antiquity – Virgil, Lucan, Statius – and then continues: 'whoever loves with great purpose, let him follow Ovid of Sulmona, of whose works you are a supporter. And do not be concerned to aspire to be where the measured verses of the Florentine Dante are sung, whom you ought to follow very reverently as a minor servant' (v, 97, 5–6). The 'little' book is for his lady's eyes only. Should others see it and voice objections, they are to be referred to the authoritative Ilario (the same Ilario responsible for Florio's conversion), the first to write the story down. Thus, as the work comes to a close, we learn that our narrator's story is only the transcription of another's account: 'in a systematic way he [Ilario] wrote down in the Greek language the story of the young king' (v, 96, 3).

The *Filocolo* is the longest and most ambitious literary project of Boccaccio's years in Naples, and in some respects already announces the *Decameron*. It is a mixture of classical lore, Christian doctrine and history, French romance and medieval knowledge, and precisely because of this daring *contaminatio*, has been regarded as the 'first great example of the modern European novel'.

Filostrato, *Teseida* and other works of the 1340s

The *Filostrato* (c. 1335, Branca's dating), and the *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* (1339–41?, Limentani's dating), are the other main works of the Neapolitan period. Both were composed in octave rhyme (*ottava rima*):

stanzas of eight hendecasyllables (*endecasillabi*) rhyming ABABABCC, the invention of which is attributed to Boccaccio and which was henceforth to become the standard form of Italian narrative poetry. Against the backdrop of the siege of Troy, the *Filostrato*, a nine-book poem, tells the story of the unhappy love of Troilo for Criseida (the title in Boccaccio's shaky Greek etymology is meant to signify 'the man vanquished and struck down by love'). The work shows traces of the oral tradition of the Italian *cantari*, but is mainly indebted to the French romance tradition for its subject-matter, drawn directly or indirectly from Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and also probably from its abbreviated adaptation in the *Historia destructionis Troiae* by Guido delle Colonne. Boccaccio, however, breathes new life into the old romance genre by shaping a narrative which, differently from his sources, focuses on the emotional effect on Troilo of separation from his beloved, and his despair when he discovers Criseida's betrayal.

The *Teseida*, an epic poem in the prescribed twelve books, shows reliance on classical works: Virgil's *Aeneid*, but above all Statius' *Thebaid*. Perhaps spurred on by Dante's declaration in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (II, 2) that Italian literature had as yet no epic, Boccaccio intended with his *Teseida* to fill that gap. But on to the epic theme of arms he grafted a love story. Two Theban warriors, Arcita and Palemone, taken prisoner during the war of Theseus against Thebes, compete for the affections of Emilia, Theseus' sister-in-law. Arcita, although the victor against Palemone in a tournament to decide who should marry Emilia, dies of his wounds, and the poem ends with the wedding of Emilia and Palemone. The close interweaving of the themes of arms and love makes the work an important forerunner of the great narrative poems of the Italian Renaissance. At a later date, Boccaccio added to the text a scholarly commentary. Many of his glosses turn out to be elegant miniature narratives on mythological subjects. Chaucer drew on the plot of the *Teseida* for the 'Knight's Tale', and on the *Filostrato* for *Troilus and Criseyde*, as did Shakespeare for his *Troilus and Cressida*.

The winter of 1340–1 marks the beginning of a new phase in Boccaccio's life. The increasing difficulties experienced by the principal Florentine merchant bankers, whose royal borrowers were defaulting on their loans, had negative repercussions on the general economy of Florence and the personal finances of Boccaccino, to the extent that he was obliged to recall his son from Naples where he could no longer afford to support him. Boccaccio found adjusting to the austere, culturally deprived life of Florence, with its essentially business-oriented society, extremely hard. The depressing pall of financial failure hanging over the paternal household did not of course help. Furthermore, the Florentines struck him as an avaricious and factious lot. In spite of everything, he continued to dedicate himself to his writing, beginning the Latin eclogues he eventually organised into the *Bucolicum carmen* and composing in rapid succession the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* (1341–2); the *Amorosa visione* (1342, second redaction 1355?), a fifty-canto poem in *terza rima*,

largely taken up (IV–XXX) by a guided tour of the frescoed hall of a castle where the triumphs of learning, glory and love are depicted; the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (1343–4), generally considered to be modern literature's first psychological novel; and the *Ninfale fiesolano* (1344–6), a work considerably less trammelled with literary and allegorical baggage than the others, which gives an account in octaves of the love story of the shepherd Africo and the nymph Mensola, and concludes with the founding of Fiesole. The *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* is in some respects the work closest to the *Decameron* – in the sixteenth century it was even tagged the 'little *Decameron*', perhaps a bookseller's publicity ploy – since it has a group of seven nymphs who, in a country setting, tell the story of their lives and loves, each ending with a song. But in another sense it is the most distant from Boccaccio's major work, because of the wealth of erudite references, the curious combination of classical mythology, Christian allegory and religious moralising, and the lengthy descriptions (repetitive in spite of the subtle variations in aspect and meaning) of each nymph, that follow meticulously the prescribed order, from the top of the head right down to the tip of the toes. The *Comedia* is indeed an exercise in sophisticated elegance, an example of the most scrupulous observance of the precepts – usually neglected in the *Decameron* – to be found in twelfth-century treatises on Poetics for the description of feminine beauty.

The *Decameron*

Setting and structure

At the end of the decade, Boccaccio started writing the *Decameron*. The Black Death had for centuries been endemic in Europe. Paul the Deacon, for instance, recorded an eighth-century episode in his *Historia gentis Langobardorum*, well known to Boccaccio. The 1348 outbreak in Florence was particularly severe, decimating the population and causing the death of several of Boccaccio's close friends, as well as of his father and stepmother. Depictions of the devastation remain in many contemporary frescoes in the city's public buildings. A sombre description of its terrible effects on Florentine society provides the setting for the formation of the brigade of ten young people who will tell the *Decameron*'s one hundred tales. The seven noblewomen and their three gentlemen friends, who make up the group, meet in the Church of Santa Maria Novella and decide to retreat to a villa in the nearby hills to escape not only the disease, rampant in the city, but also the moral corruption and civic decay it has engendered. Boccaccio shows himself at pains to protect the good reputation of his young ladies so that they will not 'feel embarrassed, at any time in the future, on account of the ensuing stories, all of which they either listened to or narrated themselves' (I, Intr., 50). He therefore does not reveal their 'true' names, but gives them 'names which are either wholly or partially appropriate

to the qualities of each' (I, Intr., 51). He chooses names he had already used in previous works (Filomena, Fiammetta, Emilia, Pampinea) or names that allude to other literary characters (Elissa – Virgil; Neifile – *dolce stil novo*, Dante; Lauretta – Petrarch). Even the young men's names (Dioneo, Filostrato, Panfilo) hark back to his previous works. Boccaccio's cautious strategy in introducing his fictitious lady narrators has given rise to much speculation on two fronts: on the one hand there have been attempts to link the ladies to real-life contemporaries of the writer; on the other, to see them as a reincarnation of the nymphs in the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, who are explicitly identified at the end with the seven virtues.

On Wednesday, the day after their meeting in the church, the members of the group settle into their country quarters and immediately plan to put their sorrows behind them and to spend their time pleasantly and in an orderly fashion ('"nothing", says Pampinea, "will last very long unless it has a definite form"', I, Intr., 95): they will all gather once a day to participate in a common activity, storytelling. They will elect from among themselves a leader to supervise the activities of the day and to establish the theme for the tales; following each day's ten tales there will be music, dancing and songs. The storytelling will be interrupted on Friday to observe the day of Christ's Passion and on Saturday to carry out the week's ablutions ('it is customary on that day for the ladies to wash their hair and rinse away the dust and grime that may have settled on their persons in the course of their week's endeavours', II, Concl., 6), and will resume on Sunday. After a fortnight in the country, the group returns to Florence. Thus, the one hundred tales are distributed over two symmetrical sets of five days, each set starting on Wednesday and each interrupted on Friday and Saturday.

This structural division in two parts is signalled in the almost verbatim repetition by Filomena, as she introduces the first tale of the Sixth Day, of the beginning of Pampinea's introduction to the last tale of the First Day. The subject is the art of social conversation and well-placed repartee, an art particularly becoming to women but which has recently suffered a decline. Pampinea with her tale (I, 10) illustrates the shaming of the beautiful widow Malgherida dei Ghisolieri, who had thought to make fun of her elderly suitor, the celebrated physician Master Alberto, and was instead elegantly silenced by him. Conversely, Filomena's tale (VI, 1) provides proof that the women of previous generations talked well and to the point. The gentlewoman Madonna Oretta (who actually lived in Florence at the beginning of the fourteenth century) adroitly intervenes to stop a knight, travelling on foot in her company, from continuing a tale he is telling. The unwary fellow had offered to take her (metaphorically) on horseback a good part of the way by telling her 'one of the finest tales in the world' (VI, 1, 9). The inept storyteller commits every possible error in both organisation and delivery, seemingly unable to extricate himself from the mess until Madonna Oretta can stand it no longer and, picking up on the knight's metaphor, says to him: 'Sir, you have taken me

riding on a horse that trots very jerkily. Pray be good enough to set me down' (VI, I, II). Pampinea has capped a day of tales which, although there has been no announced theme, are related in one way or another to verbal dexterity: half-way through the day Fiammetta notes, in preparing to tell of the Marchioness of Monferrato's well-chosen words that put the King of France in his place: 'For this reason and also because of the pleasure I feel at our having, through our stories, begun to demonstrate the power of good repartee, I have been prompted to show you ...' (I, 5, 4). While the clever use of words was the *undeclared* theme of the First Day, it is the *declared* theme of the Sixth. If we then look at the first tale of the First Day and the last tale of the Sixth Day, a chiastic relationship between the four tales becomes evident. The protagonists of I, I and VI, 10, Ciappelletto and Friar Cipolla, present similarities, though Ciappelletto has something sinister about him while Cipolla is a sociable, merry fellow. Both are wizards with words (the friar is said to be so excellent a speaker that he might pass for 'Cicero or perhaps Quintilian', VI, 10, 7) and masters of the art of lying; both tales end with the faithful being gulled.

Thematic patterns

Any attempt, however, at establishing an obvious homogeneity of theme in each of the two halves of the *Decameron* is doomed to failure. Boccaccio's compository scheme is much more subtle and unpredictable, continually eluding the neat patterns critics try to impose. At the most, it can be said that in the first half, Days II, III and V tell of undertakings or adventures (some centred on love, some not) with a happy ending, and Day IV of unhappy love affairs; the second half tells, in Days VII and VIII, of pranks and practical jokes, and in Day X of quite the opposite, namely, acts of great generosity in the 'cause of love or otherwise' (X, I, I). In each of the two parts there can thus be discerned a dominant theme and in each a day dedicated to that theme's opposite. The Third Day takes up the general theme of the Second – the capricious workings of Fortune – restricting it 'to a single aspect of the many facets of Fortune' (II, Concl., 8), while the corresponding Days in the second part, VII and VIII, present a similar restriction of the chosen theme reversing mirrorlike the order. The Seventh Day is dedicated to tricks women play on their menfolk, the Eighth Day to 'the tricks that people in general, men and women alike, are forever playing upon one another' (VIII, I, I).

The best-known butt of practical jokes in the *Decameron* is the stingy, foolish Calandrino. He figures in tales three and five of the Eighth Day, and also in tales three and six of the Ninth Day. To the end he remains totally unaware of providing ever new opportunities for fun to his fellow painters, Bruno and Buffalmacco, both consummate pranksters. They make him believe he has found the famous heliotrope, the stone that renders invisible or, to be more exact, 'has the miraculous power of making people invisible when they

are out of sight, provided they are carrying it on their person' (VIII, 3, 20). They get him drunk, steal his pig, then set up an elaborate lie-detecting test (paid for by the victim) to prove he himself is responsible for the theft (VIII, 6). They convince him he is pregnant and make him spend all of a recent inheritance to procure an abortion (IX, 3); and finally they get him into hot water with his wife, Tessa, by having her find him in a haystack with a young girl (IX, 5). Calandrino and the practical jokes played on him, the *beffe*, inspired many of the comic situations and characters in Italian Renaissance comedy. The most famous of his descendants is Calandro, the foolish protagonist of Bibbiena's *Calandra* (1513).

Changes of location, which add some variety to the brigade's repetitive daily routine, are effected in both the first and second parts of the *Decameron*: the transfer from one villa to another at the end of Day II 'to avoid being joined by others' (II, Concl., 7) and the transfer to the enchantingly beautiful 'Valley of the Ladies' for the whole of Day VII. As we have already seen, Day VI returns to the theme of the clever use of words and witty repartee implicitly present in Day I, but the absence of a set theme in Day I can also link it to Day IX, during which the narrators are freed by the queen from the constraints of a prescribed theme. Boccaccio seems to enjoy playing a tantalising game of hide-and-seek with his readers, since nothing ever really fits pat. The symmetries are never perfect.

The members of the brigade will tell their stories in no special order. In Day I the queen, Pampinea, invites all the others to tell their tales before telling her own. At the end of the Day Dioneo – the non-conformist of the group, always stretching boundaries and debunking polite conventionality – asks the new queen, Filomena, to allow him from then on always to tell the last tale (displacing the group leader to the penultimate position) and to be exempted from having to stick to the stated theme should he so wish:

> The queen, knowing what a jovial and entertaining fellow he was and clearly perceiving that he was only asking this favour so that, if the company should grow weary of hearing people talk, he could enliven the proceedings with some story that would move them to laughter, cheerfully granted his request.
>
> (I, Concl., 14)

The last of the one hundred tales is thus his, while the opening one is Panfilo's.

Decameron I, I concerns Ciappelletto, a thoroughly wicked Tuscan tax-collector operating in France, and his false deathbed confession; *Decameron* X, 10 is about the extraordinarily submissive and patient Griselda. It has been pointed out that Boccaccio's vast 'human comedy' starts out with a Judas figure, 'the worst man ever born' (I, I, 15) and ends with the Virgin-Mary-like Griselda. The opposition of initial vice to final virtue suggests an ascensional progression that is not, however, evident in the intervening ninety-eight stories. Furthermore, if we consider the way the first and last tales are presented by their narrators, we will notice a sharp contrast between presentation and tale.

Panfilo declares his story will illustrate the compassion and generosity of God in answering the prayers of the faithful, even though they unwittingly resort to sinful intercessors. After this pious introduction, we are treated to an exhilarating account of how a holy friar is hoodwinked into taking Ciappelletto's mocking confession seriously, thus preparing the way for the unholy sinner, upon his giving up the ghost, to be declared a saint. Dioneo introduces the tenth tale of the Tenth Day not as an illustration of Griselda's exemplary obedience (the interpretation given by Petrarch in his Latin translation of the tale, shorn of course of the narrator's introduction and concluding remarks), but as a cautionary tale about the 'senseless brutality' of her marquis husband Gualtieri – an exact reversal of the 'liberal and munificent deeds' of the prescribed theme. When he has finished, Dioneo muses on the fact that 'celestial spirits may sometimes descend even into the houses of the poor, whilst there are those in royal palaces who would be better employed as swineherds than as rulers of men' (x, 10, 68). But his final lewd remarks, on how Gualtieri sent the swineherd's daughter Griselda back to her humble home in nothing but a shift, irreverently deflate the tale's atmosphere of exalted virtue: 'For perhaps it would have served him right if he had chanced upon a wife, who, being driven from the house in her shift, had found some other man to shake her skin-coat for her, earning herself a fine new dress in the process' (x, 10, 69).

The storytellers

The comments made by Panfilo and Dioneo raise the general question as to the function of what the storytellers say about their tales. More often than not their comments serve to justify the tale's particular place in the series, to establish a link with previous or subsequent stories, to stress the relationship with the chosen theme of the Day, or to allow for some playful remarks on the part of the storyteller, the other members of the brigade and, on occasion, even the author. Those features of a tale best suited to further one or more of these specific purposes are, therefore, the ones singled out. Filomena, in preparing her listeners for the story of the rich Jew Melchizedek and how he told a parable of three rings to avoid Saladin's trick question, announced that 'since we have heard such fine things said concerning God and the truth of our religion, it will not seem inappropriate to descend at this juncture to the deeds and adventures of men' (I, 3, 3). She intends to show with her tale that wisdom brings great rewards, while folly may lead to great misery, and to make the ladies in the company more wary when answering questions. Her tale, however, does concern religion (four centuries later Lessing used it as the basis for his play *Nathan the Wise*, a kind of manifesto for religious tolerance), since Saladin asks Melchizedek to tell him 'which of the three laws whether the Jewish, the Saracen, or the Christian' he deems 'to be truly authentic' (I, 3.8). Filomena's preamble is clearly intended to build a bridge from the declared religious intent of the previous tales. (I, 1 and I, 2) to the tales that follow,

centred as they are on prompt and apt replies, and to give Dioneo the opportunity of pointing out the parallels between the bawdy tale (I, 4) he is about to tell and the previous two (I, 2, I, 3), thus waggishly exonerating himself from the anticipated disapproval of the ladies.

On the Second Day, the denunciation of female vanity – a recurring topic in Boccaccio, most insistently developed in his later work, the *Corbaccio* – is prominent in Panfilo's lengthy preface (II, 7, 3–7) to his story of the extraordinarily beautiful Saracen princess Alatiel. The tale he proposes to tell is designed to persuade his lady listeners of the dangers and sorrow great beauty can bring. But the fair Alatiel does not appear overly distressed at passing 'through the hands of nine men in various places within the space of four years' (II, 7), and at the end she even manages, 'having been returned to her father as a virgin' (II, 7, 1), to marry the king to whom she had originally been promised. The edifying intent seems contradicted by the tale and by the proverb that brings it to a close: 'A kissed mouth doesn't lose its freshness, for like the moon it always renews itself' (II, 7, 122). As for the ladies in the company, they react to Alatiel's adventures with sighs but, as the author slyly remarks, perhaps not so much from pity for the beautiful princess as from envy, 'because they longed to be married no less often than she was' (II, 8, 2).

The tale of Giletta of Narbonne (III, 9), told by Neifile, satisfies not only one but both the alternative requirements of the theme set by her as queen of the Third Day. The topic concerns 'people who by dint of their own efforts have achieved an object they greatly desired, or recovered a thing previously lost' (III, 1, 1). The perfect fitting of her story to the twofold topic is elegantly implied in Neifile's casual introduction to her tale: 'for what it is worth, I am going to tell you the story that occurs to me as relevant to the topic we proposed' (III, 9, 3). Giletta, a physician's daughter, wins the hand (though not the heart) of a count, Bertrand of Roussillon; he leaves her right after the wedding, but in the end she succeeds in winning him once again and is solemnly received as his beloved wife. Criticism of the tale and the topic it so perfectly exemplifies is ironically implied in the introduction to the next tale, that of Alibech (easily the most risqué of the entire collection), told by Dioneo, who having listened *diligently* to the queen's tale presents his own as not straying from the *true subject* of the Day's storytelling. All the other tales of the Third Day, in fact, emphasise the satisfaction of sexual desire, also the subject of Dioneo's tale. The Giletta story told by Neifile is the only exception. (Shakespeare was to rewrite the story for the stage in *All's Well That Ends Well*; he also derived the plot of his romance *Cymbeline* from another of Boccaccio's tales, the one told by the queen of the Second Day, Filomena, about the courageous and highly accomplished Zinevra who, unjustly accused of infidelity, manages to escape death disguising herself and living undetected as a man until finally able to prove her innocence. Shakespeare probably read both tales in Painter's sixteenth-century English translation in *The Palace of Pleasure*.)

The summary presentation by Fiammetta of the Fourth Day's opening tale –

the woeful account of Prince Tancredi's murder of his daughter Ghismonda's lover – as 'an occurrence that was not only pitiful, but calamitous, and fully worthy of our tears' (IV, 1, 2), is simply a particularly apt reminder of the Day's chosen theme of tragic love affairs, coming as it does after the author's lengthy intervention in defence of his work against real or imagined detractors who had accused him of frivolity. In introducing the tale of Federigo degli Alberighi (V, 9), the narrator, Fiammetta, only refers to the resistance of Monna Giovanna to the amorous attentions of Federigo so as to emphasise the connection with the preceding tale, which tells of the reluctance of the disdainful young lady from Ravenna wooed by Nastagio degli Onesti. The tale of Federigo and Monna Giovanna is best remembered for Federigo's generous gesture in sacrificing his prized hunting falcon to honour his lady at table, only to learn she had come to request of him this very falcon, to satisfy the wish of her ailing son. The list of examples could go on. The point is that the comments of the storytellers are not mainly intended to provide an interpretation – more or less moralising – of the tales, but to contribute to the order and unity of the work and to the playful atmosphere that prevails in it. They could hardly be taken as reflecting Boccaccio's view of the tales and of the lesson to be learned from them.

In any case, whatever paradigmatic significance one might be tempted to attribute to the tales would be undermined by their complexity – the detailed description of the characters and their milieu, the minute analysis of their actions and motivations, the careful justification of each tale's conclusion: in a word, by what constitutes the originality and artistry of the tales. This complexity is mirrored in the prose style of the *Decameron*. The Latinisms, inversions and lengthy sentences that abound in the earlier works are here reserved for occasions when solemnity is appropriate (in the Proem, in certain of the narrators' preambles, in Ghismonda's speech to her father in IV, 1, etc.), leaving ample room for a lively, rapid style. Direct speech occupies a good part of a number of tales and is interspersed with words from different regional dialects, professional or underworld jargons, and popular expressions, which all serve to characterise the speakers and place them in a precise social setting. An amazing display of verbal virtuosity and inventiveness (Branca speaks of 'expressivism') enhances the comic effect of certain of the most memorable tales (e.g. VI, 10, VIII, 2, VIII, 9), and perhaps best exemplifies Boccaccio's sophisticated, daring use of the language. This language, the 'Florentine vernacular', and 'the most homely and unassuming style' (*Decameron* IV, Intr., 3) in which he wrote his masterpiece came to be considered, in the sixteenth century, as the sole model for Italian prose.

The 'author'

Boccaccio, or rather, the fictionalised author of the *Decameron*, speaks at some length of himself and his work: at the outset, in the Proem and in the

initial part of the general introduction; at the very end, in the 'Author's Epilogue'; and a third of the way through, at the beginning of the Fourth Day. In the Proem he presents himself as a man no longer subject to the anguish of an unhappy love, which is now fortunately extinguished, and as eager to be of assistance to those who still suffer. He singles out as the most in need of his help the idle lovelorn ladies – of Ovidian memory – who, 'cooped up within the narrow confines of their rooms', lack the freedom and the many distractions that engage the minds of their male counterparts: 'fowling, hunting, fishing, riding and gambling', or attending to 'their business affairs' (Proemio, 12). The remedy proposed is storytelling: 'I shall narrate a hundred stories [*novelle*] or fables or parables or histories or whatever you choose to call them' (Proemio, 13). Throughout the *Decameron* Boccaccio consistently uses the term 'novella' when referring to his tales (the sole exception is in X, 9, 4, where 'istoria' is used for the tale of Messer Torello, set in the time of the Third Crusade and involving an historical character, Saladin.) It is clear that 'novella' is intended as an inclusive term, covering 'fables', 'parables' and 'histories' and thus indicating the scope of the genre.

Once he has defined his audience, the author sets about his task. He addresses his gentle ladies, warning them that the going will initially be rough (the account of the plague), but then infinitely more pleasant (the merry brigade's storytelling), so they must not despair. To the rapport established here is added a sense of complicity when the author, at the beginning of the Fourth Day before proceeding further on the 'established course', seeks his ladies' sympathy and support in defending himself from his detractors, who have grown 'so numerous and presumptuous' (IV, Intr., 10) that they must be rebutted without further delay. The assumption is that at least some of the tales had circulated in uncollected form and had provoked the reactions Boccaccio records. (No trace whatsoever of these adverse reactions has survived and they are probably simply a pretext to address in advance certain issues the work might raise.) The detractors' criticisms – mostly to do with the author's overweening interest in women and their consolation – are treated with irony and dismissed one by one, their target (Boccaccio) assuming, as we have previously noted, an attitude of playful humility. The mainstay of the defence is the tale of the hermit Filippo Balducci and his adolescent son. After a secluded childhood in their mountain retreat, the boy accompanies his father on an outing to Florence, where he sees a host of things unknown to him and asks his father what they are called. When they come across a party of elegant young ladies the devout Filippo refuses to name them, saying only that they are evil. But his son insists, so 'not wishing to arouse any idle longings in the young man's breast, his father avoided calling them by their real name, and instead of telling him that they were women, he said: "They are called goslings"' (IV, Intr., 23). But the damage has been done. The young man will talk of nothing else and begs his father to get him one of the goslings to take home, promising 'to pop things into its bill'. '"Certainly not", replied his

father. "Their bills are not where you think, and require a special sort of diet." ' Filippo immediately realises that 'his wits are no match for Nature, and regretted having brought the boy to Florence in the first place' (IV, Intr., 28–9). On the pretext of not wishing to enter into competition with the members of the brigade with a full-blown tale of his own, the author insists his tale is incomplete. It has been suggested that in reality the only thing missing is the epilogue, which, with a stroke of mischievous irony, is left to the imagination.

In his conclusion to the whole work the author gives thanks to God for His assistance and to the chosen female audience for their help, proposing to deal briefly with 'certain trifling objections, which, though remaining unspoken' ('Conclusione dell'autore', 2) may possibly have arisen in the minds of his readers. The most substantive of the issues is the obscenity question, the unseemliness of the subject-matter of some of the tales and the use of language considered improper in polite company. A discussion within the brigade had arisen at the end of the Sixth Day about the suitability of telling racy tales. Dioneo had successfully argued that such topics should not be off-limits if the purpose was to amuse and entertain. Furthermore, given the irreproachable behaviour of the group, such pleasurable discourse could not possibly reflect badly on the good reputation of the women. In the 'Author's Epilogue' the matter is similarly disposed of, and in conclusion readers are reminded that among the tales they are 'free to ignore the ones that give offence, and read only those that are pleasing. For in order that none of you may be misled, each of the stories bears on its brow the gist of that which it hides in its bosom' ('Conclusione dell'autore', 19). The reference is to the summary prefaced to each tale. Many of these summaries show consummate narrative skill and form tiny tales in themselves, often giving a different emphasis to the narrative material from that in the tale (see I, 1, II, 5, II, 7, III, 2, III, 3, III, 8, IV, 3, IV, 7, IV, 9, etc.). They brilliantly exemplify the technique of *abbreviatio* as opposed to the technique of *amplificatio* evident in the tales themselves. Thus the summaries, the tales, and the narrators' comments provide slightly different perspectives, all designed to coexist and not to be mutually exclusive.

In deflecting the criticism that he might have done well to skip some of the tales he has included, the author archly replies that he could only write down the stories actually told:

> But even if one could assume that I was the inventor as well as the scribe of these stories (which was not the case), I still insist that I would not feel ashamed if some fell short of perfection, for there is no craftsman other than God whose work is whole and faultless in every respect.
>
> ('Conclusione dell'autore', 16–17)

So once again we have Boccaccio shunning the limelight, slyly hiding behind his fictitious narrators, and demurely taking the role of scribe. The humble role in which he casts himself cannot but remind us of the role he actually played. In writing his masterpieces, he raised storytelling to the dignity of a literary

genre. As we have seen, he defined the scope of the *novella* and firmly established it in European literature. He certainly was not unaware of the importance of the *Decameron*, as is obvious from the time and care he took, towards the end of his life, to revise and copy the text. The manuscript (Berlin codex Hamilton 90), besides being the only extant holograph, has the added interest of containing small portraits of some of the characters and narrators drawn in the margins, probably by Boccaccio himself.

Later life and works

Boccaccio's last work of fiction is his *Corbaccio*, variously dated as early as 1354/55 and as late as 1365/66. In it he returns to the dream-vision formula he had used in the *Amorosa visione*. This time, however, the narrator's guide is not an unidentified lady but a spirit come from Purgatory, at the behest of the Virgin Mary, to persuade him of the error of his carnal love for a cruel widow. The spirit, none other than the shade of the woman's dead husband, is well placed to explode the myth of the lady's beauty, by providing an inside view of the deception that went into improving on God's handiwork when the woman was young and of the measures needed, as she aged, to repair the ravages of time. The spirit marshalls arguments that range over the vast body of misogynist literature from Juvenal and Theophrastus to Jerome, from the *fabliaux* to the anti-feminist digressions in the *Roman de la rose* and to the many rambling treatises on the dangers women pose to the physical and spiritual well-being of men. Boccaccio's interest in anti-feminist writings is documented by the texts and passages he copied, some time before 1350, into one of his notebooks, the *Zibaldone laurenziano*. But the vehement misogyny of the *Corbaccio* may come as a surprise (and indeed has caused much discussion), following as it does the celebration of so many accomplished and intelligent women in the *Decameron*. The truth is that misogynist *topoi* are by no means absent from the *Decameron*, or even from such earlier works as the *Filocolo* and the *Filostrato*. At the beginning of the *Decameron*'s frame story, Filomena unflatteringly characterises her sex as 'fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, cowardly and easily frightened' (I, Intr., 75). According to her, women are not 'the most rational of creatures' (I, Intr., 74) and are quite incapable of getting along without male supervision. A wide selection of anti-feminist argumentation is present in the sadistic and vengeful Rinieri's tirade in VIII, 7 against Elena, a flirtatious but unwary young widow. Tedaldo's somewhat specious reasoning in favour of women yielding to the desires of men in III, 7 rests on man's God-given superiority over women: 'If they would only consider their own natures, and stop to think of how much more nobility God has conceded to man than to any of the other animals, they would undoubtedly be proud of a man's love and hold him in high esteem and do everything in their power to please him' (III, 7, 51). The narrator in the *Corbaccio* is told that 'a

woman is an imperfect creature' and reproached for not remembering what his studies must surely have taught him, namely 'that you are a man made in the image and semblance of God, a perfect creature, born to govern and not to be governed'.

Though at times tiresome, the 'humble treatise' is often funny, lusty and lively, containing some brilliant vignettes on the widow's wiles and exasperating ways: the midnight chase of the entire household for the offending mosquito that had dared to land on madam's make-up; the scene of her veiling, with the help of a much-maligned servant girl, ending with the lady wetting her fingers with her tongue to smooth in place a few last stray hairs, just like a cat at its toilette.

Boccaccio's commitment to his studies and writing did not exclude his involvement in the affairs of Florence. Except during the early 1360s, after the ruling party had savagely crushed an anti-government conspiracy in which some of Boccaccio's close friends were implicated, he filled a number of civic offices and undertook various missions on behalf of the Republic. One such mission took him in 1350 to a convent near Ravenna to deliver ten gold florins to Sister Beatrice, Dante's daughter. In 1362, in search of a post that would afford much-needed financial security to himself and his half-brother Iacopo, he accepted an invitation from his childhood friend Niccolò Acciaiuoli, now grand seneschal to Queen Giovanna, to settle permanently in Naples. The details of Boccaccio's unhappy and humiliating experience at the hands of Acciaiuoli, and the depth of his bitterness and disappointment, are clear from the letter he wrote to Francesco Nelli, the friend who had helped arrange the invitation. Abandoning the hope of a stable position and the dream of recapturing the happy times of his youth, he left the city, returning north to retire to a small family property in Certaldo, which was to be his base for the rest of his life. He refused all subsequent offers of patronage and all invitations to move elsewhere. He died in Certaldo in 1375, one year after Petrarch.

In the years following the composition of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio devoted himself to intense scholarly activities. To this period belong, for the most part, the works inspired by his lifelong veneration for Dante. The biography in praise of Dante (generally known under its short title, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*) has come down to us in an early lengthy redaction (1351, Ricci's dating) and in two later shorter versions (1360, 1365, Ricci's dating). In spite of evident traces of rhetorical schemata appropriate to the laudatory purpose, and in spite of Boccaccio's efforts to fit the life of his subject into the mould of Virgil's life as told by Servius and Donatus, the *Trattatello* remains, together with Leonardo Bruni's, the most important biography of Dante. The *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia* are an expansion, in commentary form, of notes Boccaccio had made in preparation for his public readings of the *Divine Comedy* – the first ever *Lectura Dantis* – commissioned by the Florentine government and held in the church of Santo Stefano di Badia between

23 October 1373 and the beginning of 1374. The commentary breaks off at the beginning of Inferno XVII.

Around 1355 he compiled an encyclopaedia of geographical information (*De montibus, silvis, fontibus, lacubus, fluminibus, stagnis seu paludibus et de nominibus maris*, 'Concerning Mountains, Woods, Springs, Lakes, Rivers, Swamps or Marshes and the Names of the Sea') designed to elucidate references in classical and modern literature. In 1361 he started putting together a collection of biographies of women (*De mulieribus claris*) famous not only for their virtue but also for their intelligence, courage, generosity of spirit and even for their literary and artistic accomplishments. The 104 women treated are taken from ancient myths, fiction and history, and are ordered more or less chronologically, starting with Eve and ending with Queen Giovanna of Naples. The enterprise, as Boccaccio himself points out, was novel and proved to be highly successful. It was widely consulted, drawn upon, translated, and imitated down through the centuries. (Chaucer used the biography of Zenobia in 'The Monk's Tale' and John Parker translated the entire work for Henry VIII.) Another collection of biographies had been started by Boccaccio somewhat earlier (1355) and underwent continuous revisions until shortly before his death. *The Fates of Illustrious Men* (*De casibus virorum illustrium*) furnish proof of the capricious workings of Fortune, who raises men and women high on her wheel only to dash them down. The famous victims of Fortune appear before the author to plead their case for inclusion in his book. At the end there is still a long queue of petitioners, but the author has decided it is time to rest. He begs those wiser than himself to make the necessary corrections and additions to his 'little book', especially calling upon 'one who in these times is the brightest and most vivid beacon of impeccable life and praiseworthy erudition, Francesco Petrarca, poet laureate and my honoured master' ('Conclusio'). This too proved to be an immensely popular reference work throughout Europe for several centuries (it was drawn upon, for instance, by Chaucer in 'The Monk's Tale' and paraphrased by John Lydgate).

The major undertaking of Boccaccio's scholarly career was another work in Latin, the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (started in 1363), widely known for the defence of poetry contained in Book XIV. Boccaccio traces the genealogy of the pagan deities, piecing together in an organic whole (as he says in the Proem) the scattered fragments of the ancient shipwreck of classical mythology, tracing the genealogy of the pagan deities and elucidating their hidden meanings and moral message. He justifies this recovery operation by insisting on the inherent and lasting truth of ancient mythology. The vehicle of truth, then as now, is poetry, and essential to the poet is learning. Thus the *Genealogie*, like the other scholarly works, is conceived as a useful tool for cultivated persons in general and poets in particular.

The influence of Petrarch on Boccaccio's humanistic undertakings is undeniable, and was recognised time and again by Boccaccio himself. But

although he embraced Petrarch's historical perspective – the exaltation of classical antiquity coupled with the condemnation of the centuries that followed – Boccaccio did not subscribe to his friend's pessimistic view of the present and, in particular, did not share his reservations concerning Dante and literature in the vernacular. He strongly believed that a revival was already under way, but not restricted to the field of literature and not necessarily dependent on the use of Latin. In the figurative arts, he says, Giotto 'brought back to light an art which had been buried for centuries beneath the blunders of those who, in their paintings, aimed to bring visual delight to the ignorant rather than intellectual satisfaction to the wise' (*Decameron* IV, 5, 6). As for literature, in a letter written in 1371 to his friend Iacopo Pizzinga, Boccaccio assigns a distinct place to each of the two great men of his time who had revived 'the lost Italian glory': Dante, taking a new route, 'dared to make the Muses sing in his mother tongue, neither vulgar, nor rustic, as some would have it', while Petrarch followed 'the route of the Ancients'. To these two, posterity has added the 'humble psalmist', Giovanni Boccaccio: reformer and innovator of the European literary tradition, classical and modern scholar of encyclopaedic erudition, poet and prose writer always ready to attempt new subjects and new forms, and above all great narrator and author of one of the most enduring masterpieces of world literature.