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Women Make All Things Lose Their Power:
Women's Knowledge, Men's Fear in the
Decameron and the *Corbaccio*

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“Women Make All Things Lose Their Power”: Women’s Knowledge, Men’s
Fear in the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*

Boccaccio’s literary corpus offers a broad spectrum of ideological positions on how the nature and worth of women are understood in institutional contexts which typically privilege maleness, whether these contexts be social, intellectual, theological, legal, or literary. I have written about the complexity and contingency of Boccaccio’s range of stances on the ontological status of women (Psaki 1997 and 2000), and will not aim here to identify a single, “authentic” authorial opinion on this matter. Instead, this essay will explore how Boccaccio plays with one convention of medieval misogyny — the motif of women’s secret knowledge, often posited as a corrosive counteragent to the normative knowledge and power of men — to highlight the masculine fear which underlies and generates misogyny as a cultural discourse.

Because the misogynous strain in medieval writing is overwhelmingly considered in modern scholarship to represent a broad cultural consensus, a critic must marshal overwhelming evidence to claim that a text containing or comprising misogynous topoi is parodic or even ambiguous. A thread of dissent has emerged in recent years, of which Robert Hollander’s *Boccaccio’s Last Fiction* (1988) is representative. Hollander argues that Boccaccio’s *Corbaccio* is

not a “serious” satire, but one which turns back on itself, revealing its major misogynous characters to be male hysterics, latter-day haters of womankind because of their own weaknesses and failings. (42)

Jean-Pierre Barricelli (1975), Per Nykrog (1984), and Anthony Cassell (1993) all reach similar conclusions, as have I (Psaki 1993 and 1997) — but these readings are far from commanding consensus.¹ Similarly, Talya Fishman has interpreted Judah ben Shabbetai’s *The Misogynist*, a 12th–13th-c. rhymed Hebrew narrative from Castile, as patently parodic of misogyny, but her reading is a departure from the received one. My reading of both the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio* rests on Hollander’s founding premises that the presence of misogynous conventions in medieval writing does not mean that medieval intellectuals shared a solid consensus on female nature, and that some authors turned to caricature and parody to expose the mechanisms of misogyny. I believe it possible to identify the text-specific markers which position a medieval secular text as deliberately and demonstrably wry. To do this I explore how Boccaccio deploys and voices various examples of misogynous utterance to put them in precarious positions, in dialogue with opposing claims, and ultimately, in question.

¹ In two new articles Guyda Armstrong explores the *Corbaccio*’s Dantean and other intertexts in meticulous detail, arguing an analogous interpretation.

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The repeated reference in medieval writing to a body of arcane knowledge marked by male authors as feminine, is a promising avenue of approach to the many writers who utilize, rather than endorse, misogynist topoi. The *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio* clearly engage issues of women's knowledge and power in relation to a collective male knowledge and power, as I will explore below. Since the *Corbaccio* has until recently been read exclusively as reversing the *Decameron's* "overall philogynous stance" (Marcus 1984, 23), it is useful to examine how the two texts in fact instrumentalize, rather than subscribe to, the hypothesis of "women's secrets."²

Women's secrets in these two texts arise in various contexts: the conspiracy theory of female secrets geared toward luring, controlling, and deceiving men; the belief that women are involved in an alternative science, such as the concoction and use of foul cosmetics; the conviction that women desire only to diminish and dominate men; and the belief that women twist language into sophisms which mean the opposite of what they say. I will briefly survey examples of these (not impermeable) categories of female arcana and sketch how Boccaccio contextualizes each occurrence in such a way as to turn misogynist topoi back upon themselves.

Both the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio* thematize and interrogate, rather than underwrite, the theory of a vast, secret, collective female knowledge.³ While the women of both texts tend to be intelligent, Boccaccio does not present them as actually sharing a communal corpus of arcane knowledge; rather, he presents many male characters — and among these I include the highly characterized Narrator of the *Corbaccio* — as *believing* that women share such knowledge. In the *Corbaccio*, for example, women are believed by their two male "victims" to cultivate an emphatically non-academic, but rather pragmatic and tactical science in the war between the sexes. This science is handed down from mother to daughter, or from old women to younger ones:

“È il vero che da questa loro ... sapienza ... ne nasce una ottima dottrina nelle figliuole: a tutte insegnano rubare i mariti; come si debbano ricevere le lettere degli amanti; come ad esse rispondere; in che guisa metterlisi in casa; che maniera debbano tenere ad infignersi d'essere malate, acciò che libero loro dal marito rimanga il letto; e molti altri mali.” (38)

[“It is true that from this ... knowledge of theirs springs an excellent doctrine for their daughters. They teach them all how to rob their husbands, how to receive love letters and how to answer them, how to

² Recent work by Monica Green and Karma Lochrie on gender and secrecy illuminate the trope and practices of secrecy in the Middle Ages. My study focuses less on the notion of women's bodies as part of the secrets of generation (Green) or on practices of secrecy (Lochrie) than on the motif of a body of secret knowledge circulated only among women.

³ That such a theory is inconsistent with the repeated claim that women are by nature so loquacious that they cannot keep secrets is just one of the many inconsistencies in misogynous discourse.

bring their lovers into the house, how to feign illness so that their husbands will leave the bed free for them, and many other evils. (31))⁴

This is an old claim, of course, familiar to us from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and its offspring, the Jealous Husband's tirade and the Old Woman's lesson, in the *Roman de la Rose*;⁵ it will surface as well in the *Quinze Joies de Mariage*.⁶ The scope of transmitted female knowledge is vast and malevolent: cosmetics to disguise vile female physicality or aging; stratagems for entrapping a man into marriage, and for concealing pregnancy or sexual experience before marriage; strategies for putting men at a disadvantage in marital skirmishes and thus controlling them; tactics for emotional and erotic manipulation; and ways to so control men's perceptions that they are quite unaware of being in any way controlled. What makes this conglomerate a category apart is the element of conspiracy, the social-plot theory of female knowledge which circulates among gossips whose greatest care is to keep it from men.

The most pointed irony here is not simply male societal privilege (including the freedom of movement noted in the Proem), but the fact that it is men who conspire to exclude women from entire realms of knowledge, study, or inquiry which are inimical to them. The Spirit-Guide of the *Corbaccio*, the dead husband of the woman the Narrator loves, reproaches the Narrator with having closely studied the institutionalized body of philosophy and poetry which purports to reveal the true nature of women, and still not understanding it: "Dovevanti, oltre a questo, li tuoi studi mostrare, e mostrarono, se tu l'avessi voluto vedere, che cosa le femine sono" (29–31) [Moreover, your studies should have shown you (and did show you, had you wished to see it) what women are; 24]. The author is careful to admit, through the Spirit, that it is men who hoard and transmit a secret cache of knowledge to use against women, against the desire for women, and to reinforce male privilege: "Questa [poesia], non menoma tra l'altre scienze, ti dovea parimente mostrare che cosa è amore e che cosa le femine sono, e chi tu medesimo sii e quel che a te s'appartiene" ["This, not least among the disciplines, {should} also have shown you what love is, what women are, what who you are yourself and what {is proper to you};" 23]. It is masculine learning which exposes and conspires against women and love, not the reverse.

Howard Bloch calls misogyny a "citational mode" (1991, 7), and its practitioners are aware, even proud, of this dynamic. The *Proverbia ... super natura feminarum* invokes this prior body of learning to disprove accusations of personal malice and malfeasance:

Asai son qe reprendeme / e dis c'ai vilanato
perqu'eu quisti proverbii / de femen 'ai trovato.
S'eu a lo d'istudisio / st'ea dal destro lato,
çascun d'isti proverbii / en libri ai trovato.

⁴ I quote Pier Giorgio Ricci's edition of the *Corbaccio*, and Anthony Cassell's English translation (I indicate modifications to Cassell in brackets).

⁵ Ami imitates the Jaloux accusing mothers as co-conspirators of their adulterous daughters in ll. 9283–330; La Vieille's entire speech to Bel Accueil (ll.12710–14516 in Lecoy edition) is characterized as her "lesson" which is taught in schools (see esp. 12848–9; 13466–86; 13891–2; 14578–80).

⁶ See, for example, the *Joies* numbered 10, 11, and 15.

En libri ancïani, / qe li poeti fese,
stratute 'ste paravole / ò trovate et entese:
cui à empreso en scola, / se ad altri mostra e dise,
non li pò dar reproço / vilano ni cortese. [269–76]

[There are many who reprove me, and say I have acted basely because I have composed these proverbs about women. So may I stand on the right side on judgment day, every single one of these proverbs I found in books. In ancient books, which the poets wrote, I found and learned every one of these parables: if a man learns something in school, and he teaches and tells it to others, neither a churl nor a noble man can reproach him for it.]⁷

The *Proverbia* Narrator deflects criticism of his exposé by reminding his audience which authors transmit this knowledge about women from men to men:

Segnori, s'entendeteme, / diraive un sermone:
se lo volé emprendre / e entender la rasone,
molti ne trovarete / de li 'sempli Catone,
d'Ovidio e de Panfilo, / de Tulio Cicerone. (69–72)

Lords, if you will hear me, I will tell you a sermon: if you want to learn it and hear my reasoning, you will find in it many arguments from Cato, from Ovid and from Panfilo, and from Tullius Cicero.

The *Corbaccio* Narrator has likewise devoted himself to a life of study, all of which has revealed the inferiority, hideousness, and malice of women. In response — the author implies pointedly — the Narrator projects onto women a body of unwritten knowledge regarding the gullibility, tediousness, infinite exploitability, and sexual inadequacy of men.

An additional paradox arises in the *Corbaccio* and *Decameron* 8.7, a close parallel to the *Corbaccio*. In both texts the widow is not only excluded from (indeed, called indifferent to) the formal education which is the scholar's defining characteristic, but is ridiculed for her resulting ignorance:

De' quali modi ... che laudevolei raccontar si potrebbero, non vorrei che in alcuno tu intendessi lei esser savia; per ciò ch'ella non cura di divina scrittura né di filosofia né di legge né di statuto o di reggimento pubblico o privato... (*Corb.* 58)

I do not mean you to understand that she is wise in any of the ... praiseworthy ways that one could enumerate, because she does not care about Holy Scripture, philosophy, laws and statutes, public or private management.... (48)

⁷ I quote Contini's edition of the *Proverbia*; the English translation is mine.

Rinieri boasts that his life “ancora potrà piú in un dí essere utile al mondo che centomila tue pari non potranno mentre il mondo durar dee” (511) [is of more value to the world in a single day than one hundred thousand women like you could be for as long as the world lasts; 516].⁸ Even more ironic is the fact that Elena’s attempt to access some deeper wisdom than her own — that is, Rinieri’s “magic” — only renders her the more ridiculous in his eyes. He revels in her credulity, lying elaborately and gleefully about his expertise in magic, his scruples about its practice, and his devotion to her which overrides those scruples. He sends her “una imagine con sue cateratte e ... una sua favola per orazione” (507) [an image with some cryptic lettering upon it and ... some nonsensical lines as an incantation; 507].

Both the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*, in fact, set up for ridicule a troop of men who implicitly believe that women share a dangerous and esoteric knowledge which works to undermine the public, intellectual science of men. Despite Rinieri’s speech, the relevant distinction is not between science and magic. Rather it is between male science, understood as a well-guarded knowledge which confers a power endorsed as legitimate, and the base, intuitive, sly female arts of allurement and deception, which confer a power marked as illegitimate because aimed at subverting “natural” male supremacy, “a combattere la sua signoria e vincerla” (*Corb.*, 31) [to combat his mastery and vanquish it, 25]. Boccaccio makes it clear that whether the actual dupes in the *Decameron* tales are women or men, the characters’ attribution to women of a secret body of knowledge is a projection of the male monopoly on university study, magic, and experimental science. Silly Maestro Simone (*Decameron* 8.9) wants to join the “brigata” of the disciples of Michele Scotto, a “gran maestro in nigromantia” (525) [a renowned expert in necromancy; 531], to enjoy the pleasures which magic can procure him, including the desirable attentions of the Countess of Latrine. It is the male figures who manage the magical garden in *Dec.* 10.5 and the travelling cinema in *Dec.* 5.8, who purport to turn women into mares by day and back into women by night in *Dec.* 9.10. Calandrino in *Dec.* 8.3 is easily duped into believing that his wife has ruined the spell of the heliotrope, which he believed had made him invisible and would have made his fortune. While the superstition which misogynous discourse typically attributes to women surfaces in Gemmata and Elena’s belief that magic can materially change their condition,⁹ Boccaccio makes the *Decameron*’s guardians or practitioners of such false magic male.

It is Boccaccio’s play with perspectives which allows this internal critique of the clichés of misogynous discourse, and which in my understanding precludes our reading the repetition of these clichés as serious. When an author carefully contextualizes certain utterances to rob them of all validity, but an audience persists in reading them straight, we have the literalist habit of misreading which makes of *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, a racist book.¹⁰ Its gener-

⁸ I quote Segre’s edition of the *Decameron*, and the Musa/Bondanella translation, indicating modifications in {brackets}.

⁹ The *Corbaccio* Spirit-Guide also notes that women visit, invoke, and dote on “gli strolagi, li negromanti, le femmine maliose, le ’ndovine” (35).

¹⁰ Millicent Marcus’s article identified “misogyny as misreading” in the *Decameron*, but pointedly not in the *Corbaccio*: “...within the context of the *Decameron* (the *Corbaccio* is a separate case, whose overt moral-didactic structure requires a radically different critical approach) Boccaccio does not condone the misogyny of his protagonist, as critics imply, but ... he stands back and judges his vindictive scholar and through him exposes the inadequacy of the antifeminist mode as a basis for literary creation” (Marcus 1984, 27).

alized use of the word “nigger,” and its characters’ frequent claims that Blacks are stupid and inferior, in a literalist reading stand out divorced from the caveats that undercut them, caveats which take the form of fallible narrators and the revelations of the plot. Jonathan Arac’s book on *Huckleberry Finn* endorses neither the attack on nor the defense of the book, noting instead that both imply too simplistic an agenda for a complex work of literature. Similarly, I am not arguing that Boccaccio is *simply* pro- or anti-feminist, but rather that he is setting the rhetorical moves of each stance in dynamic opposition with the other, to destabilize and problematize familiar claims.

I noted earlier that Boccaccio, who begins the *Decameron* with a thoughtful evocation of the “cabin’d, cribbed, confined” women of his society, was plainly aware that it is men who are advantaged by the laws, customs and social roles which limit and subordinate women. The claim common in misogynous discourse that women have an insatiable “desiderio alla signoria” (31) [appetite for mastery, 25] reflects nothing, of course, so much as masculine mastery *de facto* and *de jure*, and the fear that this mastery will be eroded. The *Corbaccio* reflects this habit of projection deftly, though in inverted form, when the Spirit-Guide attributes to women the appetite for mastery which motivates their every move:

Tutti i pensieri delle femmine, tutto lo studio, tutte l’opere a niuna altra cosa tirano, se non a rubare, a signoreggiare e ad ingannare gli uomini; perché leggiermente credono sopra loro d’ogni cosa, che non fanno, simili trattati tenersi. (35)

“Women’s every thought, design, and action aim at nothing else but to rob, lord over, and deceive men, {because they immediately believe} that everything *they do not know about* contains similar plots against them.” (28–29; emphasis mine)

Moreover, the Spirit-Guide emphasizes the suspicion of “simili trattati” precisely as a function of an equal and opposite paranoia on the part of women:

Niuna cosa si potrà con vicino, con parente o con amico trattare, che, se ad esse non è palese, che esse subitamente non suspichino contro a loro adoperarsi e in loro detrimento trattarsi; benché di ciò gli uomini non si debbono molto maravigliare, per ciò che naturale cosa è di quelle cose che altri sempre opera in altrui, di quelle da altrui sempre temere... (35)

[Unless they are informed of it, nothing can be discussed with a neighbor, relative, or friend, without women’s immediate suspicion that you are working against them to do them harm — although men ought not to wonder greatly at that, since it is natural always to fear from others the wrong we do to them...] (28)

Just as in the *Roman de la Rose*, then, when the Jealous Husband and the Old Woman both explain the behavior of his/her own sex as a reaction to the conduct of the other, the *Corbaccio* and the *Decameron* posit the actions of both women and men as reactions, and the accusations as projections. The study of men, as the *Corbaccio*’s extended lesson in the form of a parodic dream-vision exemplifies, is aimed solely at the subjugation of women; and any female discourse of which men are ignorant is assumed to aim solely at the subjugation of

men. Naturalized male dominance is a perquisite that the men of these texts cannot allow to be threatened; thus women's attempts to subvert it are punished with brutality and with righteous indignation.

That women are thought to desire mastery at all costs because Boccaccio's male characters will stop at nothing to retain it, is a paradox again reminiscent of the *Roman de la Rose*.¹¹ That Boccaccio is deliberately playing with this paradox is clear from his juxtaposition of the rhetoric of institutionalized male dominance with examples of generous, benign parity and collaboration in several *Decameron* tales. *Dec.* 9.9, the tale of the Goose Bridge, opens with Emilia's repeated litany of the bases of male dominance: "la natura, l'usanza, e le leggi" (584), she says demurely — nature, custom, and law — dictate that men should be the leaders of women. In her tale,

Due giovani domandano consiglio a Salamone, l'uno come possa essere amato, l'altro come gastigar debba la moglie ritrosa: all'un risponde che ami, all'altro che vada al Ponte all'oca. (583)

[Two young men ask Solomon for advice, one on how he may be loved, the other on how he should correct his contrary wife: to the first Solomon answers that he should love, and to the second that he should go to the Goose Bridge.]

Melisso and Giosefo and have asked how to achieve different goals, the first of which tacitly critiques the second. At the Goose Bridge Giosefo sees a mule-driver brutally beating his mule; despite the protests of the two protagonists, the man finally manages to beat the animal across the bridge. Giosefo decides that this must be what Solomon recommends he do to his wife: "assai manifestamente conosco che io non sapeva battere la donna mia" (586) [for now it is very clear to me that I never knew how to beat my wife, 594]; later he beats her brutally and forces her submission. Although the two men share a surfeit of egotism and a shortage of altruism, Giosefo in no way thinks to apply to his own case the insubjectivity and mutuality represented in the advice given to Melisso — that to be loved, one must learn to love. After all, Giosefo does not desire his wife's love, but rather her submission.¹² The disparity between these two models, as well as the troublingly graphic and hyperbolic beating (595), enacts a positional critique of Giosefo's desire for dominance.¹³

Similarly, in *Dec.* 6.7, the male desire for dominance is ridiculed in a series of rhetorical moves on the part of Filippa, of the narrator Filostrato, and of the *Decameron* author.¹⁴

¹¹ The complementary speeches of Ami [Friend] and La Vieille [Old Woman] on freedom and mastery articulate the causal link between prohibition and transgression (Ami: ll. 9331–462; La Vieille: 13845–14008).

¹² Diane Vacca's dissertation, "Boccaccio's Captive Women: Other Voices in the *Decameron*" (1990), discusses this tale very fruitfully, with a somewhat different emphasis.

¹³ *Dec.* 1.10 offers a similar positional critique of 8.7; the infatuated scholar redresses his humiliation and rebuff in a humane and productive way.

¹⁴ Marilyn Migiel's forthcoming *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* focuses on the creation of highly individualized narrators, and her discussion of this tale gives more emphasis to the specificity of the narrator than this reading, in which I track motifs across the text as insertions of a deliberately self-camouflaging principal author.

Caught *in flagrante*, Madonna Filippa will be burned at the stake unless she can sway the judge of her case. Her defenses are plural: her own beauty and nobility, which predispose him to exonerate her if she will only deny the charge; her courage and sense of innocence, which make that denial impossible; her shrewd and eloquent recourse to principles of law; and finally, her appeal to humor which wins over not only the judge but the entire populace. Of all these, the most striking is perhaps her argument that the law which would burn adulterous women at the stake, but not adulterous men, “meritamente malvagia si può chiamare” (399) [may quite rightly be called a bad law, 398] since it was not submitted for their consent to those whom it affects, and since it is not equal for all.¹⁵ The law rests upon a male desire for sovereignty which makes women’s desire for sovereignty intolerable, even ridiculous, and Madonna Filippa’s exposé serves to make this naturalized injustice visible. Moreover, the law ignores the physical reality that a woman’s sexual energy may exceed her husband’s, thus constituting a comically reified surplus which Filippa should surely not, she says, “gittare ai cani” (399) [be thrown to the dogs, 399]. The possibility that a man may exact of his wife all the sexual attention he can “use,” and then allow her to dispose of the surplus¹⁶ as she chooses, is set up as a just alternative to the previous model of absolute male control over the entire “commodity.” The community “modificarono il crudele statuto” (399) [changed the cruel statute, 398], a sign that they accept Filippa’s alternative. While we cannot extrapolate from this inscribed response a serious endorsement on the part of the historical author, it is worth recalling how very frequently the inability of men to fully satisfy women, presented in misogynous writing as evidence of women’s depravity and base carnality, is played in the *Decameron* sheerly for humor and with no opprobrium attached, as I discuss below.

Boccaccio shows his male *Decameron* characters fearing certain phenomena which either do not in fact occur (as when Gualtieri fears that Griselda will become insolent); or are perfectly justified within the economy of the tale; or are projections of actual male behavior; or are only female versions of behavior which would not be blameworthy in men. Thus in some tales we do see actual female collusion, such as the substitution of the hideous Ciutazza for the unwilling lady admired by the Rector of Fiesole in *Dec.* 8.4. The maidservant helps her mistress to expose and ridicule the Rector’s lechery and hypocrisy to his bishop, among others; the bishop “commendò molto la donna” (490) {commended the lady} for her clever solution, and we are not invited to condemn her. In *Dec.* 7.8, a maidservant suffers the brutal beating the husband intended for his unfaithful wife. When he calls the lady’s family in to see his wife beaten and shorn, they find her in perfect health, her long hair intact, and revile him as a drunkard unworthy of his nobler wife. That violence is handed off from a guilty upper-class woman to an innocent lower-class one is problematic in this tale, but what is not problematic in it is any systematic female conspiracy against men. What conspiracy there is is set in motion by the threat of male sexual violence or compulsion, and the audience is clearly invited to sympathize with the women’s response to that threat. The reactive and attenuated nature of female collusion in such tales as *Dec.* 9.1 (Madonna Francesca and her maidservant)

¹⁵ It is clear that I disagree with Pennington’s reading, according to which the mere idea of extending these principles to women is a priori a cause for laughter at their expense.

¹⁶ “Le surplus” in Old French is a euphemism for full sexual consummation, or what follows the stimulation of kissing and embracing (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval*, 548 and 3848).

vant) not only dilutes and ridicules the paradigmatic hypothesis of the female conspiracy; it legitimizes such local responses to a masculine threat.

The *Decameron* also stages intricate examples of a female “secret speech,” in which unexceptionable words are charged with impermissible, and quite unmistakable, meaning. Alatiel’s revirgination tale recounts how “con grande divozione con loro insiema ho poi servito a San Cresci in Valcava, a cui le femine di quel paese voglion molto bene” (144) [with great devotion I joined them in serving {Saint Grow-in-the-Hollow-Valley}, for whom the women of the country had great affection, 124–25] (2.7). Peronella’s directions to her husband on where to clean the barrel simultaneously direct her lover on how to make love to her (7.2). The lady of 3.3, through the most virtuous and honorable protestations, conveys to a stranger her desire to be his lover — through the intermediary of a holy friar, no less. Caterina’s literal, if feigned, desire to “udire cantar l’usignolo” (344) [hear the nightingale sing, 338] gains in the mouth of the tale’s narrator and of her father an incremental and irresistible surplus meaning: “molte volte faccendo cantar l’usignolo” (344) [they made the nightingale sing time and time again, 339]; “vieni a vedere, che tua figliuola è stata sí vaga dell’usignolo, che ella è stata tanto alla posta che ella l’ha preso e tienlosi in mano” (344) [Come see how enchanted your daughter is by the nightingale, which she has caught and is still holding in her hand, 339]. In other words, the accusations of linguistic distortion and excess which Bloch documents in *Medieval Misogyny* have their examples in the *Decameron*, but they are nowhere portrayed as sinister or even gratuitous. Moreover, we are not invited to condemn this double-coding and loquacity as specifically female; indeed, the Author’s Conclusion makes broad and strategic use of sustained sexual doublespeak. The perspectivism, multiplicity, and polysemy of this text, if anything, valorize rather than condemn such double language.

Women’s silence is coded as equally charged, and equally opaque, as their language, and participates in what this text stages as a familiarly male anxiety about interpretation. The *brigata*’s three men show a telling haste to reach the *Valle delle Donne*, to appropriate by their presence whatever unspoken communion occurred there among the women, described by Pampinea as a *deception* of the men: “Oggi vi pure abbiam noi ingannati” (414) {Today we have deceived you as well, 413}.¹⁷ Solomon’s cryptic advice “Va al Ponte all’oca” (586) [go to the Goose Bridge, 593] provokes such anxiety that the husband must replace that seemingly empty signifier with what he sees at the Goose Bridge, and apply it to his wife.¹⁸ The vacuum of meaningless speech is so menacing to an inscribed male audience defined as terrified of such uninterpretability, that any meaning — even cruel, incongruous, or arbitrary — is preferable to it. Again, the Author’s Conclusion with its associative verbal pyrotechnics relegates such craven literalism to the realm of his mean-spirited and impercipient detractors.

Filippa’s “hideous” (to her husband) revelation that women may routinely have more sexual energy than their husbands lies at the heart of the projections onto women of male fear in the form of “women’s secrets,” as Boccaccio has made great efforts to reveal. Filippa, in re-

¹⁷ Thomas C. Stillinger’s 1983 article remains a fundamental interpretation of the complexities of this scene.

¹⁸ Nor does Giosefo consider that he is perhaps intended to notice something else at the Goose Bridge, or to interpret differently the violence he does see.

ifying her sexual desire as something “che gli avanza” (399) [left over, 398] after her husband’s sexual activity is concluded, has spoken the worst fear of the men in these texts — that of a female desire which remains unfulfilled after a man’s best effort to satisfy it. Masetto, who had set out for the convent vowing, “lavorrò sí l’orto, che mai non vi fu così lavorato” (183) [to work [the nuns’] garden as it’s never been worked before, 167] finds himself to be dauntingly overworked instead, and has to confess that “un gallo basta assai bene a dieci galline, ma ... dieci uomini possono male o con fatica una femina sodisfare” (185) [one rooster is quite enough for ten hens, but ... ten men can hardly, or only with great effort, satisfy one woman, 170]. The hermit Rustico confesses that, with his meager diet, it would require a great many devils to satisfy Alibech’s hell (3.10). Ricciardo di Chinzica’s young wife is left unsatisfied by her husband’s assiduous observation of all the Church holidays which exempt him from making love to her (2.10). The young widow Ghismonda still desires sexual satisfaction, and her narrator Fiammetta sympathizes with her rather than with her possessive and elderly father (4.1). These figures, and Pietro di Vinciolo’s wife (5.10), Lisabetta (4.5), and others, are far from terrifying monsters of voracious sexual desire; their youth and vigor are portrayed with sympathy and appreciation. They help to contextualize and to frame (literally and figuratively) the *Corbaccio*’s Spirit-Guide, the elderly man who quails at the insatiable yawning abyss of the female body and of female desire:

La bocca, per la quale nel porto s’entra, è tanta e tale che, quantunque il mio legnetto con assai grande albero navigasse, non fu già mai, qualunque ora l’acque furono minori, che io non avessi, senza sconciarmi di nulla, a un compagno, che con non minore albero di me navigato fosse. Deh, che dich’io? L’armata del re Roberto, qualora egli la fece maggiore, tutta insieme concatenata ... a grandissimo agio vi potrebbe essere entrata. Ed è mirabil cosa che mai legno non v’entrò, che non vi perisse e che, vinto e stracco, fuori non ne fosse gittato, sí come in Cicilia la Silla e la Cariddi si dice che fanno: che l’una tranghiottisce le navi e l’altra le gitta fuori. (68)

[The mouth through which the port is entered is of such size that although my little bark sailed with quite a tall mast, never was there a time ... that I might not have made room for a companion with a mast no less than mine without disturbing myself in the least. Ah, what am I saying? King Robert’s armada all chained together ... could have entered there with the greatest of ease.... A wondrous thing it is that never a boat entered it without perishing and without being hurled forth from there vanquished and exhausted, just as they say occurs with Scylla and Charbydis in Sicily: that the one swallows ships and the other casts them forth!] 55–56

Never was fear of “phallic insignificance” (Marcus 1979, 15) and sexual inadequacy more forcefully, though figuratively, spoken.

The ultimate secret those women share, for the male characters of the *Corbaccio* and the *Decameron*, is the nature and force of female sexuality. Also, perhaps, its hidden quality: female satisfaction is no more visible or obvious than female desire, and female sexuality is thus open to misinterpretation and misrepresentation. Both within the *Decameron*’s frame (the

papere of Day Four) and within the tales themselves, Boccaccio constructs male characters whose fear creates a monster in the form of an insatiable, opaque, and conscienceless sexual desire on the part of women. At the same time, however, the historical author sets up the male characters as no less the agents of such desire, and he locates the conspiracy of knowledge and power which can be said to exist in this textual universe within the realm of masculinity. Examining from an ironic distance the intersection of women's supposed knowledge and men's fear, Boccaccio thus retains his title as, if not proto-feminist, at least skeptical scrutinist of the clichés of misogyny.

It is the kaleidoscopic play of voices in the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio* which enable this complex interrogation of misogynous conventions, and the same technique precludes a confident assignment of opinion to the historical author. My own title phrase, indeed, is not spoken by the *Decameron* author or primary narrator, nor directly by the narrator of the tale; it is the reported speech of Bruno and Buffalmacco, the authors of the *beffa*. And their motivation in speaking it is not to uphold its literal meaning — that *women make all things lose their power* — but rather to exonerate innocent, beaten Tessa from the charge of having dissipated the heliotrope's magical power. Themselves responsible for her beating, because they fooled Calandrino into thinking he could find the heliotrope which would make him invisible, Bruno and Buffalmacco must exculpate Tessa individually by indicting women universally. Thus the accusation is repeated in the *Decameron*, but not upheld transparently; indeed it is destabilized by its function and position within the text. By the same token, we cannot decide how far other texts endorse the conventions of misogyny without weighing the assignment of utterance to a variety of voices, voices which are at least contingent, and often wholly discredited.

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