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Redefining *Dulce et utile*: Boccaccio's Organization of Literature on Economic Terms

> "Perhaps, as usual with kings, you are too busy with more important matters to find leisure for this work."
>
> *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, XV.14

I. Introduction

Early in the *Decameron*, in his Proem, the author establishes the twin goals of pleasure ("*diletto*") and utility ("*utile consiglio*") as the book's *raison d'être.* Although the Horatian ideal calls for a balance between these two impulses, Boccaccio's text returns to the Proem's initial mention of the pair so often, and in such a way as to create a tension between the two, to make them compete for primacy, to nudge (and even force) the reader into a choice of which to favor in his reading. This reading circumstance on a private, individual level has been mirrored in the *Decameron*'s critical treatment. Thus, the debate surrounding this work's moral value versus its role as an entertaining distraction has distinctly polarized the pleasure/utility pair into mutually exclusive binary opposites. Using a socio-economic approach that combines Barthesian notions of the "value" of literature and Marxist tenets of commodity interrelationships, this article explores the tension between pleasure and utility in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Furthermore, a reading of Boccaccio's defense of poetry in the last two books of the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* will shed light on this same relationship and establish certain patterns in the realization of Boccaccio's overall literary program. Ultimately, this approach will reconcile the pair and overcome its components' mutual exclusivity by showing that Boccaccio turns the classical notion of *utilitas* on its head, first to critique a mercantile society that is quickly loosing any traces of "le belle e laudevoli usanze,"[1] and then to recuperate that very society's economic system in the service of his own particular "commodity": poetry, to be more generally understood as creative literary production. In this way, we shall see that Boccaccio's treatment of utility and pleasure does not polarize the two terms; rather, they become meshed and interwoven as the author skillfully shifts the role of utility from end to means. Consequently, utility becomes the structural model for pleasure in a mercantile world increasingly unwilling to accord it its necessary space.

A reading of the *Decameron* that places it in dialogue with Boccaccio's other comments on the nature and roles of literature — specifically books XIV and XV of the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* — illustrates the author's often difficult engagement with a changing world to which he and his terminology must adjust.[2] As Robert Hollander has aptly shown in his article "*Utilità* in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," the concept of *utilità* as it is developed in the course

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of the *Decameron* is far from that commonly accepted in medieval philosophy: "within the tales the concept of utility has been bared of its classical and wholesome connotations and seen for what it is: gaining advantage for oneself."[3] Thus, for Boccaccio, utility acquires a more properly economic sense, a desire to benefit in the interest of the self. Hollander concludes that

> Boccaccio, claiming that he writes for otiose women in love, actually describes us all, with few exceptions, exercising our wills in the pursuit of the goods of the world as we perceive them good. In that pursuit it is *utilità* which we seek — that alone is *dolce* to us, whether it be money, power over others, sexual pleasure.[4]

In other words, Hollander sees Boccaccio's development of the concept of *dolce* as only that which is *utile*; for him the "*piacere e utilità*" of the Proem become merely "*utilità* in the service of pleasure."[5] Vittore Branca's essay "Epopea dei mercatanti" takes another approach to the matter. By looking closely at the tales' strongly mercantile diegetic content, Branca proposes a "nuova lettura, in chiave mercantile," a new mercantile reading of the text. This view implies that Boccaccio "avverta anche i limiti o meglio gli aspetti disumani di questa potente e prepotente civiltà"[6] [also recognizes the limits, or better the inhumane aspects, of this powerful and arrogant society[7]]. Using the story of Lisabetta da Messina (*Decameron* IV.5), Branca demonstrates that Boccaccio's most notable contribution to the representation of this new class was in showing

> una società in cui i sentimenti, le passioni e le stesse leggi morali, civili, politiche rischiano di essere subordinate e dominate da questa "ragion di mercatura," ferrea e inesorabile come due secoli dopo sarà la "ragion di stato."[8]
>
> [a society in which feelings, passions, and its very moral, civil and political laws risk being subordinated and dominated by this mercantile reason, as unbending and inexorable as the "raison d'état" that would come two centuries later.]

Hollander's more specific focus echoes Vittore Branca's thesis in that both propose a reading that — to some extent — attributes deleterious connotations to Boccaccio's representation of the new mercantile class and its implications for the greater human good. This interpretation of Boccaccio's point of view vis à vis his socio-economic milieu aids in reconciling the discrepancies that would seem to arise between the apparently laudatory view of the mercantile class put forth in the *Decameron* and the explicitly critical one present in the *Genealogy*. Furthermore, it begins to resolve the conflict between Boccaccio's innovatory representation of the mercantile class' issues, concerns, and preoccupations, and his unwavering critique of its role in society.

Such a reading will show that Boccaccio — even while he depicts this rising class and makes it the ostensible hero of his human comedy — has at best an ambivalent attitude toward his new protagonist. This is the very ambivalence that manifests itself in the explicit combinations, both in the *Decameron* and in the *Genealogy*, of competing ideals and systems that parallel the pleasure versus utility pair, the binary that principally informs our discussion: idleness versus work; "production" of literature versus "production" of services or commodities; *novellare* versus gaming; mercantilism versus feudalism; bourgeois versus noble ideals. A socio-economic approach to reading the *Decameron*, one that is able to sort out the relationships between the components of these various pairs, will reveal that the author has explicitly placed his *Decameron* in the context of — or perhaps in contrast to — a self-interested mercantile economy in a particularly complex way.

This complexity is not unmotivated. As Luigi Surdich has shown in his "Il *Decameron*: La Cornice e altri luoghi dell'ideologia del Boccaccio,"[9] Boccaccio found himself at the center of economic and social crises of which the 1348 plague was the actual and metaphorical culmination (the banking failures of 1343 and 1346; class conflict that was manifested in working-class demonstrations against bourgeois labor exploitation; the 1347 famine). Moreover, both the author and this critical period can be viewed as watersheds that mark the passage from one civilization to another. As Cesare de Michelis has written, the radically new sensibility that emerged from the crisis of the plague was no mere benchmark for Boccaccio, who took up the mission of defending that earlier civilization against all that was to follow.[10]

These socio-economic changes in Boccaccio's world constituted nothing less than a full-fledged paradigm shift in which every aspect of society (ideals, morality, customs, to name but a few of the most important in the context of the *Decameron*) was challenged by a new order. Fittingly, then, given the nature of the emerging social and economic structure, the classical ideals of *dulce et utile* are called into question — as are the various parallel binary pairs that emerge from them — in conspicuous fashion, with particular emphasis on the tension between the noble contours of the first component and the self-interested nature of the second. This working out of the relationships among these seemingly competing elements results in a strategy of appropriation in which Boccaccio collapses binary pairs, structuring and redefining one component according to the ideals of the other. Boccaccio, compelled by the shifting role of the burgeoning mercantile economy, has attempted to organize the work and products of literature according to economic principles of commodities, value and labor. As we have mentioned, Boccaccio himself seems to polarize the binomial of pleasure and utility by championing the mercantile ideal and its manifestations (characters, concerns, customs) in the *Decameron*, and then criticizing them in the *Genealogy*. A reading of both works in tandem, however, illuminates Boccaccio's representation of the mercantile economy and its implications for the production of literature.

II. Shifting values

In order to explore the ways in which Boccaccio achieves this new organization of poetic capital, we should return to Robert Hollander's contention that Boccaccio, in the course of his *Decameron*, enacts a program of shifting the semantics of *utilitas* from classical morality to material self-benefit. His conclusions bring to light an aspect of Boccaccio's poetics that is emblematic of a larger project in his *oeuvre*, the movement from noble, even chivalric, ideals to economic ones. Such a progression, however, is not unique to Boccaccio's work; indeed, the author's stance vis à vis the nature of utility only mirrors real changes in medieval society: the seepage of economic practices into daily life has become so great, the era's definition of utility so conditioned by principles of benefit, labor and trade that Boccaccio has no choice but to place his literary "work" in precisely these contexts. A traditional adherence to the dichotomies outlined above seems to be in line with the author's defense of literature in the *Genealogy*, where he appears to place his literature in contrast to the instability and baseness of the emerging economic order. In reality, however, this opposition is blurred if we consider the language with which it is expressed, a language clearly influenced by the jargon and constructs of a mercantile economy: benefit, work, contractual agreements and the conditions that allow for commodity exchange. This same predisposition to mercantile terms, expressions and ideas also informs the *Decameron*, as Branca has shown,[11] making the distinction between contrast and contextualization harder and harder to make. In other words, what of-

ten pretends to be a sharp distinction — both among and within individual texts — between the noble ideals of literature and the economic exigencies of mercantilism is problematized by a rhetorical strategy that couches the former in the language of the latter.

One telling example of this practice can be found in the portrayal of the *brigata* itself. Though the *brigata*'s composition and their flight represent a privileged aristocracy[12] (they possess the means to flee the city; their destination figures an ostensibly idyllic, pastoral space; food and shelter are not treated as commodities that need to be arranged for and purchased, but merely appear for the *brigata* when they arrive), their behavior (that is, the structured nature of their stay; the narrative contracts that condition their storytelling; much of the metadiegetic content of their stories) point to another facet of Boccaccio's work. This side seeks to absorb elements of the new mercantile system, even within the context of an aristocratic premise and the author's clear favoring of the attributes of that class' members. In this key, we should pause to consider Surdich's assertion that Boccaccio's only (and rare) acceptance of mercantile characters on the metadiegetic level occurs when they are shown to adapt to the ideals of nobility. Using the examples of Zima (III.5) and Messer Torello (X.9), Surdich demonstrates "come l'accettazione di norme appartenenti a un sistema cortese consenta il riconoscimento sociale di chi abbia un'origine borghese"[13] [how the acceptance of norms that make up a courtly system may allow for the social recognition of members of the bourgeois class]. The critic argues that when Boccaccio's bourgeois characters are depicted in a favorable or successful way, it is only to the extent that they are able to successfully appropriate courtly or aristocratic codes to their own ends. [14]

Thus Zima "si comporta al pari di un perfetto cavaliere,"[15] behaves just like a perfect cavalier, by winning the lady with "affettuose parole" [affectionate words] (*Decameron* III.5.17) and both the Saladin and Messer Torello prove that "il comportamento è rivelatore della qualità umana degli individui e la più alta qualità umana appartiene a chi impronta il proprio comportamento sulle virtù cortesi"[16] [behavior reveals the human quality of individuals and the highest human quality belongs to him who impresses his own behavior on courtly virtues]. In the former *novella*, Zima's success in his plan (a decidedly noble one, whose aim is to win the love of a woman of higher social station) is due to his ability to adopt noble language and customs. Similarly, the latter *novella* portrays two men who find true friendship because of their noble appearance, even though they represent different social classes. As Surdich says,

> Il nobile Saladino, "valentissimo signore e allora soldano di Babilonia" … e il "cittadino" Torello stanno dunque alla pari. Appartengono entrambi al territorio della cortesia e dei valori cavallereschi; si riconoscono in una serie di virtù e forme comportamentali che hanno maggior peso di quanto può dividerli: la differenza di ceto sociale, la patria, la religione, ecc.[17]
>
> [The noble Saladin, "an outstandingly able ruler who was Sultan of Babylon at that period"[18] and the "citizen" Torello are therefore on equal footing. They both belong to the territory of courtesy and chivalrous values; they recognize each other in a series of virtues and behaviors that carry more weight than any that might divide them: differences of social standing, country, religion, etc.]

The importance of these examples of metadiegetic content in the *Decameron* lies in their implications for more reaching interpretations than we can make of Boccaccio's work as a whole. First, it is a significant example of the manner in which Boccaccio is able to collapse one of the above-mentioned binary pairs, specifically that of noble versus bourgeois ideals.

No longer mutually exclusive, friendship and love, on one hand, and the mercantile class, on the other, are able to coexist happily and with success. Moreover, Boccaccio portrays individual characters as able to overcome the limitations of their class by adapting to the particularities of a specific social situation, whether a noble who can adjust to the codes of the new mercantile class or a bourgeois who appropriates the values of nobility. Surdich represents the Italian Middle Ages as a time in which socio-economic flux was forcing members of these competing socio-economic groups to adapt in precisely this same way in order to preserve or gain hegemonic status. Of the social situation of the time, Surdich says,

> L'irrigidimento su posizioni di rigorosa osservanza delle regole e dei metodi della civiltà feudale, nel momento in cui mutavano le forze di produzione e la struttura sociale, rischiava di cacciare l'aristocrazia fuori dalla storia o quanto meno di provocare una spaccatura al suo interno. Ciò non avviene per la disponibilità dell'aristocrazia ad alleanza e compromessi col mondo borghese… […] Si sfumano, diventano imprecisabili, nel sec. XIV, i contorni netti che consentono una categorica distinzione: questo è feudale, questo è borghese. I rimescolamenti e gli assestamenti, su nuove posizioni, della struttura sociale, concretamente operanti nel sec. XIV, possono suggerire l'ibrida definizione di "aristocratico-borghese" per qualificare la classe assunta a protagonista del *Decameron*.[19]
>
> [The crystallization into positions of strict observation of the rules and methods of feudal society, in that moment of flux for the forces of production and the social structure, carried the risk of pushing the aristocracy outside of history, or at least causing an internal split. This was avoided because of the aristocracy's openness to alliances and compromises with the bourgeois world […] In the fourteenth century, the contours that allow for a categorical distinction between feudal and bourgeois are softened, become indistinguishable. The mixing and ordering — on new terms — can suggest the hybrid definition of 'aristocratic-bourgeois' for describing the class that the *Decameron* takes as its protagonist.]

Surdich shows that just as some meta-diegetic characters appropriate the ideals of a competing socio-economic class, medieval Florentine nobility was skilled in adapting to the new bourgeois system in order to ensure their own self-preservation. It is exactly this form of adaptation that Boccaccio engages in, both in his *Decameron* and in works in which his explicit goal is to defend his own poetics. In effect, his, too, is a project of self-preservation for the noble endeavor of literature, carried out by adapting its own nature to the parameters of an emerging and threatening bourgeois economic power. Because of the specific character of this adaptation project, Boccaccio's overtures to the rival class are of a particularly economic nature. When the critics that Boccaccio sets up as his straw men specifically take aim at the lack of material benefit involved in poetic production, Boccaccio is placed squarely in the position having to demonstrate not only the potential for self-interested gain in the poetic enterprise, but — according to the rules of competition — its even greater value with respect to the economically "beneficial" endeavors of those same critics. In this light, the lexical traces of Boccaccio's compromise — the recurrent use of economic jargon, for example — merely emblematize a program in which the relationship between pleasure and productivity is programmatically called into question in order to furnish the author with an economically sound basis for his defense of literature.

The sites of Boccaccio's adaptation of noble literary ideals to bourgeois structures are varied and numerous, but this examination will limit itself to three main points in illustrating this thesis. First, we will examine the *Decameron*, specifically the innovation represented by

that text's capacity for circulation within a system of stable, reproducible commodity exchange in terms of Marxist concepts of labor, commodities and exchange. This will lead us to a consideration of the structural aspects of the *Decameron* — particularly the organization of the frame tale — in the context of Roland Barthes' ideas about the contractual and economic nature of literature in *S/Z*. Lastly, our focus will turn to Boccaccio's strategy of turning mercantile economics on its head in the *Genealogy*.

III. Gaining currency

Karl Marx states in the first chapter of *Das Capital* that economically developing societies will eventually progress to a certain stage in which the common denominator of their economy can be defined as the commodity of labor. For this to take place, a number of conditions must be present. First, the relationship between commodities must be such that they become abstracted from their "natural and particular form" and "assume a fantastic form different from their reality"[20] that arises only in the fetishistic, social commodity transactions typical of capitalistic economies. Second, the commodity of labor must be freely produced and traded, that is, slavery and other forms of constrained labor must not be a factor in a given society's labor system. The progression from feudalism to a mercantile economy that was occurring in Boccaccio's Italy could be called precisely such a stage. Marx explains:

> Let us now transport ourselves ... to the European middle ages shrouded in darkness. Here, instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterizes the social relations of productions just as much as it does the other spheres of life organized on the basis of that production. But for the very reason that personal dependence forms the groundwork of society, there is no necessity for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality. [...] No matter, then, what we may think of the parts played by the different classes of people themselves in this society, the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour, appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour.[21]

As we have mentioned, the paradigm shift that brought Boccaccio and his generation from this feudalistic state to an increasingly capital-based, mercantile one had not only economic but also social implications. Most important for our study of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in Marx's thought, is the concept of free socially-based exchange of a constellation of commodities, of which the commodity of labor is the universal exchange factor. Though this is not the place for a detailed exploration of the Marxist theory of commodity exchange, some brief comments on the nature of commodities and labor in Marx may be useful in understanding Boccaccio's appropriation of mercantile systems, both economic and social. In short, we should keep in mind the following central aspect of Marxist thought: the true value of a commodity lies in its exchange value, deriving from a social circumstance that abstracts the commodity (whatever it may be) from its specificity, from its human relations. It achieves this in two ways. On a theoretical level, by taking part in an economy in which all commodities are exchangeable with all others, this sort of economy allows habitual exchange across many different commodities to create an aggregate, total system of exchange, or "direct and universal exchangeability."[22] Any one commodity can thus serve to identify the "exchange value" of any other, the development of a currency being simply an abstracted institutionalization of these systems of exchange where instead of 20 yards of linen = 1 coat = 10 lb of tea = 40 lb of coffee = 1 qr. of corn = 1/2 ton of iron = x of commodity A = 2 oz. of

gold, the 2 oz. of gold is exchanged with each of the preceding commodities individually. This sort of exchange system would not be possible were it not for the qualitative and quantitative stability of each of the commodities exchanged within it, as values commonly and socially defined by particular units of measure.

This first point bears strongly on our consideration of the *Decameron*, whose radically new status as a stable, exchangeable commodity is inscribed both textually and structurally, as material artefact and as the self-conscious creation of a system of (textual and narrative) circulation and exchange. The *Decameron*'s *incipit* wastes no time in calling attention to its own materiality: "Comincia il libro chiamato DECAMERON, cognominato PRENCIPE GALEOTTO, nel quale si contengono cento novelle in diece dì dette da sette donne e da tre giovani uomini" (*Decameron*, Proem 1). [Here begins the book called *Decameron*, otherwise known as Prince Galahalt, wherein are contained a hundred stories, told in ten days by seven ladies and three young men.] The introduction to Boccaccio's Proem is in fact an overdetermined self-reflective textual space, where the *Decameron* implicitly establishes its textuality in opposition to the strong orality of the *novella* and its most direct sources (even as the text itself presents, *en abyme*, the competing impulse to oral narration), by explicitly referring — twice — to its status *as book*.[23] The *Decameron*'s very status as a collection of *novelle* links it to its most obvious precursor, the *Novellino*, whose balance between orality and textuality is tipped in favor of the former by its own first title: *Libro di novelle et di bel parlar gentile*, the *Book of tales and of lovely gentile speech*.[24] The strong intertextuality that exists between the two collections — Boccaccio used many of the *Novellino*'s stories as sources for his own tales — places them in dialogue and allows Boccaccio himself to define his hundred new tales in relation to the old tales of the earlier work.

Though the exact number and nature of the *novelle* contained in the original *Novellino* is uncertain, it is precisely in response to this potential for corruption, this textual and thus economic uncertainty that we may propose Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The absence of an autograph, original manuscript or even an exact copy of the *Novellino* and the great variety of *novelle* (in both number and content) contained within each of the extant manuscripts results in a highly unstable product, a text that, unnamed and authorless, historically has been open to endless interpretation and reconfiguration, and whose universal exchange value as commodity — not to mention currency — is practically non-existent.

By contrast, the *Decameron*'s structural make-up allows for the emergence of the collection of *novelle as commodity* in an innovative way with respect to its best-known and clearest predecessor, the *Novellino*. The *Decameron*'s association with an historical author (a kind of literary brand value that lends its own kind of authorial stability to the text, guaranteeing its contents and their relationship to other manuscripts appearing under the same sign) and the finite and unchangeable number of tales (fixed both within the very title of the work, which is moreover inscribed textually within the first few words of the Proem; and within its rigid narratological system) solidify the *Decameron*'s status as a stable commodity. Even though the most popular individual tales began to circulate in the early Renaissance,[25] the integrity of the whole never suffers from this free circulation of constituent parts, which, far from deriving their value at the expense of the whole, take on an independent afterlife without diminishing the collection's value. As a result, the *Decameron* can be assumed to have certain textual properties that allow for its exchange on the commodities market, as it were, both in relation to all "products" bearing the *Decameron* name, and to other commodities, even to the extent that, as Francesca Pennisi tells us, the *Decameron*'s very materiality paved the way for the

written collection of *novelle* to circulate in a way that had not been part of the oral *novella*'s tradition. The text came to acquire "a value unto itself [...] Borrowed, copied, passed on, inherited — there is a manifold agglomeration of associations and relationships around the physical text."[26] Pennisi goes on to cite Vittore Branca's essay on "The Medieval Tradition":

> Anzi il *Decameron* partecipava a quel complesso intrecciarsi di vicende finanziarie che costituiva la vita avventurosa di quella società: se ripetutamente possiamo sorprendere sui margini di quei codici non solo tracce di conti, di fitti, di prestiti, *ma anche qualche volta la documentazione che quei manoscritti stessi furono oggetto di transazioni commerciali, di pegni, di contese ereditario-finanziarie...*[27]
>
> [Indeed the *Decameron* participated in that complex tapestry of finances that constituted the adventurous life of that society: if we repeatedly find not only traces of accounting, rents, loans, on the margins of those codices, *but also in some cases the documentation that those very manuscripts were the object of commercial transactions, pawn operations, inheritance disputes*…[28]]

To return to our examination of Boccaccio's implicit comparison between his own work and his collection's main precursor, the two collections can be seen to have emblematic value — in their composition as texts — for the ways in which their respective societies conceptualize and circulate products of literary "labor," and thus point to Boccaccio's innovatory status as a producer of literary commodities: universally exchangeable not only among other units of the same commodity (abstraction can only happen under the assumption of qualitative and quantitative equality), but with other commodities, goods and services in larger systems of circulation and exchange.

The second condition for the existence of the commodity economy centers on the interaction between commodities once this abstraction has taken place in the decidedly social sphere of labor. Since the individual values of these commodities are realized only in their social interactions, their identity *as socially defined relationships* overcomes any specific value that the commodities may have *per se*.[29]

If the *Decameron* represents the beginnings of the commodification of artistic production, it stands to reason that Boccaccio's explicit references to his own part in that production would be couched in terms of labor, work and the contractual relationships between various parties in the exchange of products or services in kind. It is in precisely this context that Boccaccio speaks of his "lunga fatica" (*Decameron*, Concl. 1.29) [protracted labor] at the end of his *Decameron* and in this spirit that he offers the rationale of a sort of third-party repayment for the *Decameron*'s existence, offering up his stories as compensation for stories kindly told to him in times of need, not to those who helped him (their "senno" [good sense] or "buona ventura" [good fortune] rendering such a direct repayment unnecessary), but to those who still may be in need of it:

> …per non parere ingrato ho meco stesso proposto di volere, in quel poco che per me si può, *in cambio di ciò che io ricevetti*, ora che libero dir mi posso, e se non a coloro che me atarono, alli quali per avventura per lo lor senno o per la loro buona ventura non abisogna, a quegli almeno a' quali fa luogo, alcuno alleggiamento *prestare* (*Decameron*, Proem 7; emphasis mine).
>
> […I have resolved, in order not to appear ungrateful, to employ what modest talents I possess *in making restitution for what I have received*. Thus, now that I can claim to have achieved my freedom, I intend *to lend* some solace, if not to those who assisted me (since their good sense or good fortune will perhaps render such a gift superfluous), at least to those who stand in need of it.[30]]

Boccaccio thus sketches out a new kind of narrative economics wherein payment does not have to be made directly to the person from whom the service was received, but rather to one who is most in need of it. As we shall soon see, for Roland Barthes, narration is both product and the symbolic representation of that same production; in similar fashion, for Boccaccio, narration is also the payment of a debt that itself represents the very fulfilling of a promise, the impulse to narration that must be satisfied, not by returning the narration to its source in a closed, circular economy, but by propagating and disseminating it in entirely new directions.

Metadiegetically, the frame tale also reflects Marxist notions of commodification by portraying the various members of the *brigata* as they symbolically and concretely figure the work of narration done by Boccaccio himself.[31] One of the first — and most striking — examples of this representation comes in Pampinea's comments of the first day. Though the author overtly strives to maintain a careful symmetry between *diletto* and *utilità* throughout his Proem and Introduction, the character-narrator Pampinea finally tilts the balance by stating that

> Qui è bello e fresco stare, et hacci, come voi vedete, e tavolieri e schacchieri, e può ciascuno, secondo che all'animo gli è più di piacere, *diletto pigliare*. Ma se in questo il mio parer si seguitasse, *non giucando*, nel quale l'animo dell'una delle parti convien che si turbi *senza troppo piacere* dell'altra o di chi sta a vedere, *ma novellando* (il che può porgere, dicendo uno a tutta la compagnia che ascolta, diletto) questa calda parte del giorno trapasseremo. Voi non avrete compiuta ciascuno di dire una sua novelletta, che il sole fia declinato e il caldo mancato, *e potremo* dove più a grado vi fia *andare prendendo diletto*… (*Decameron* I, intr. 110-12; emphasis mine).
>
> […This is a cool and pleasant spot in which to linger. Besides, as you will observe, there are chessboards and other games here, and so we are free *to amuse ourselves* in whatever way we please. But if you were to follow my advice, this hotter part of the day would be spent, *not in playing games* (which inevitably bring anxiety to one of the players, *without offering very much pleasure* either to his opponent or to the spectators), *but in telling stories* — an activity that may afford some amusement both to the narrator and to the company at large. By the time each one of you has narrated a little tale of his own or her own, the sun will be setting, the heat will have abated, and *we shall be able to go and amuse ourselves* wherever you choose.[32]]

By setting up a mutually exclusive dichotomy between *novellare* and *giucare* (and also implicitly between the *novellare* that they will engage in first and *diletto* that they may enjoy later), Pampinea defines storytelling in opposition to play, therefore, a kind of work or production. Here we have the first indication of literature as the result of the "labors" of the *brigata*. Each member of the *brigata*, then, is identified as the producer of a commodity that, as we shall find, meets all of the criteria established by Marx. Furthermore, the "queen's" rationale for such a suggestion is motivated by a desire for the maximum benefit of a self-interested, aggregate whole ("tutta la compagnia"). In this way, the *brigata* is represented as a society that is, in light of our first point regarding systems of exchange, also an autonomous economic unit. Perhaps more significant, however, is the nature of this self-interest, *diletto* and *piacere*. In a twist typical of Boccaccio's rhetorical strategy, play is rejected precisely because it does not offer the pleasure it promises, in favor of a literary production that offers both *utilità* (the passing of the day in relative shade, without the anxiety of gaming) and *diletto* (amusement). Almost immediately, Boccaccio collapses the very dichotomy that he has just set up by making pleasure the ultimate goal of gaming's (*guicare*) opposite term (*novellare*).

Once defined, the young Florentines' commodity of choice (the *novella*) is treated in accordance with the Marxist principles outlined above. They proceed to formalize their storytelling ("Voi non avrete compiuta ciascuno di dire una sua novelletta, che...") in such a way as to establish an exchange value for their "*novellette*": each tale will be worth exactly the equivalent of each other tale, no more, no less. This "rate of exchange" is guaranteed by the author in his Proem when he subsumes all of the various sub-genres, source genres and types of *novelle* under that larger, more generic umbrella category: "Intendo di raccontare cento novelle, o fabole o parabole o istorie che dire le vogliamo…" (*Decameron*, Proem 13) [I shall narrate a hundred stories or fables or parables or histories or whatever you choose to call them…[33]], in effect equating all of the possible permutations of the genre that may occur during the *brigata*'s storytelling. Indeed, we see that this universal exchange value is respected throughout the *brigata*'s tenure in the countryside; no one is ever asked to tell more than one story per day, to compensate for an off-color or unsuccessful tale, or to tell another kind of *novella*, for example. By the same token, no narrator is permitted to skip his or her turn. Indeed, the only indication that any tale is "worth" more or less than the others comes from the author himself who prefaces his own incomplete story in this way:

> Ma avanti che io venga a far la risposta a alcuno, mi piace in favor di me raccontare, non una novella intera, *acciò che non paia che io voglia le mie novelle con quelle di così laudevole compagnia*, quale fu quella che dimostrata v'ho, *mescolare*, ma parte d'una, acciò che il suo difetto stesso sé mostri non esser di quelle... (*Decameron* IV, intr. 11)
>
> [But before replying to any of my critics, I should like to strengthen my case by recounting, not a complete story (*for otherwise it might appear that I was attempting to mix my own tales with those of that select company* I have been telling you about), but a part of one, so that its very incompleteness will set it apart from the others.[34]]

This passage reveals that Boccaccio's only criterion for the relative "worth" of a story is narratological; the only thing that matters is the story itself, that it have a proper beginning, middle and end. Its content, moral import, sense of good taste and its relative "success" with the audience are all extraneous to its exchange value. Thus, Boccaccio's "parte d'una [*novella*]" does not take part in this system in that it does not circulate among the members of his utopian economic unit (the *brigata* does not consume his half-story at all, and the reader does not consume it in the same way that he or she does the others), but also because it is not "worth" the same as the other stories. Additionally, also present in this introduction to the "one-hundred and first tale" is the implication that all of the *brigata*'s tales *are* equal to each other on those same terms.

The particular social circumstance that includes the *brigata*'s stories and excludes Boccaccio's is a significant aspect of the *Decameron*'s affinities with the structures of mercantile economics. As we have already mentioned, the social exchange nature of a commodity-based economic system is of central importance to Marxist thought:

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because *the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour*.[35]

This projection (or "abstraction") of human, interpersonal relationships onto the commodities that humans have produced can be applied to the narrators of the *Decameron* and to their own literary production. Although the frame tale does introduce the members of the *brigata*

and outline their general relationships so as to remove any hint of impropriety during their time in the countryside, the ties that bind their stories are usually much stronger than those that bind the characters themselves. As such, the author never explicitly reveals the specific nature of the relationships that he alludes to in the Introduction to the first day; rather, the reader is left to extrapolate this information from the stories and songs that the *brigata* narrate and sing and from the themes that they propose during their reigns as king or queen. Moreover, the narrator chooses his or her tales in response to the stories already told on that day or on others in order not to repeat another's story, for the sake of variety, in accordance with the contractual obligations of the day or, as we shall see, in direct competition with the other tales. Most often, the tales are not presented as a dialogue between the teller and a member of his or her audience and their personal reactions are usually not considered in the next narrator's decisions as to his or her next tale. Even though many critics have noted that the members of the *brigata* are simultaneously the tales' producers and first consumers,[36] this relationship is seldom focused on the narrators themselves and, in its interplay directly between tales and topics, tends toward just the commodity abstraction that Marx describes of capitalist societies.[37]

IV. Contractual relationships

As is true for the mercantile class that Boccaccio depicts, it is the contract that is the *Decameron*'s ultimate "king," the organizing principle that issues the logic of the text's composition and internal workings. It is not by chance that Boccaccio frames much of his thought on literary production in terms of contractual agreement, from the promissory note that explains the existence of the *Decameron* to the last pages of his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* where the author pledges to offer consolation to his critics if only they concede the error of their self-interested economic theories (*Genealogy* XIV). Barthes, recognizing the affinities between literature and economic principles, made the contractual nature of literature one of the primary foci of his landmark work *S/Z*. His assertion that all literature can be evaluated in terms of "worth" is part of a larger agenda that seeks to demonstrate the very real political power of the literary word. In many ways, it is an agenda that echoes Boccaccio's own: to situate literature and its merits and roles within the context of the hegemonic order of the time. Barthes defines narrative in the following manner:

> Narrative: legal tender, subject to contract, economic stakes, in short, merchandise, barter which ... can turn into haggling, no longer restricted to the publisher's office but represented, *en abyme*, in the narrative... This is the question raised, perhaps, by every narrative. *What should the narrative be exchanged for? What is the narrative "worth"?*[38]

What is the narrative "worth" in the *Decameron*? As we have already discussed, the one-to-one trade of the young Florentines' stories constitutes the first level of exchange of the commodity of narrative. However, much like the extradiegetic narrator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the Boccaccian storytellers' primary explicit motivation is the promise of prolonged life, in their case, from the plague.[39] By telling their tales, they purchase two weeks of life as well as two weeks of moral order, thus obtaining temporary salvation of two different kinds. But both Barthes' and Boccaccio's application of this theme is more complex than it would at first seem. Barthes continues,

> Here [in "Sarrazine"], the narrative is exchanged for a body (a contract of prostitution); elsewhere it can purchase life itself (in *The Thousand and One Nights*, one story

> of Scheherezade equals one day of continued life); ... by a dizzying device, narrative becomes the representation of the contract upon which it is based: in these exemplary fictions, narrating is the (economic) theory of narration: one does not narrate to "amuse," to "instruct," or to satisfy a certain anthropological function of meaning; *one narrates in order to obtain by exchanging*; and it is this exchange that is represented in the narrative itself: narrative is both product and production...[40]

The concept of narrative *en abyme* is realized by Boccaccio insofar as both the diegetic and the metadiegetic levels of the *Decameron* are concerned with the "business" of contracts and exchange. Particularly significant in the latter regard are *novelle* like the very first of the collection (I.1) describing the unlikely sainthood of Ser Ciappelletto. In this particular tale, which sets merchant characters in a clearly mercantile plot, the overdetermined theme of trade is taken to yet another level as Ser Ciappelletto ostensibly exchanges his fictionalized confession for the safety of his hosts, not to mention an earthly — and undeserved — sainthood. In this case, we can easily identify the "worth" of narrative on three distinct diegetic levels: Ser Ciappelletto's, Panfilo's (the narrator of this tale) and that of the author himself. Moreover, I would add, the scope of narration on this last diegetic level is for a better economic order to be established, one that can accommodate the noble commodity of literature and thus better withstand the shocks of fortune than have the weak social ties of mercantile society. Boccaccio thus adds levels to the *abyme* of narrative that result in an even more complex model than that proposed by Barthes; not only do the members of the *brigata* show us how to read (as Millicent Marcus has suggested[41]) and to narrate, but also to exchange narratives for the greatest possible benefit of "tutta la compagnia," of the whole group. In all of these ways, Boccaccio establishes, as would Barthes six centuries after him, the value of literature as such, on its own terms, or rather, in terms of its exchange value in a literary economy, a commodity that contains within it the conditions of its own exchange.

Just as both Barthes and Boccaccio are concerned with the value of literature and narrative, so do they share the conviction that literature can and should be defined in terms of work. For Barthes, literature is the product of work, both of its traditionally conceived producer and of its "consumer," who must actively take part in the production of a text.[42] The latter point is true in the conventional sense of an audience, whose presence is necessary in order for the text to be received, but also true in terms of a process of literary democratization: each "consumer" in Barthes' view must share in the creative process, reinterpreting the text in his own way in order to re-produce it for himself, each time he reads it.

> ...reading is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority. *It is a form of work* (which is why it would be better to speak of a lexeological act — even a leciographical act, since I write my reading)... *To read, in fact, is a labor of language*.[43]

For Barthes, this sort of active and participatory reading is termed "writerly," it is a reading that writes its own interpretation, as the passivity of consumption is canceled by the activity of co-creation and co-production. By contrast, a reading act that is properly "readerly" is passive, purely consumptive and not at all productive in the creative sense of the word. Boccaccio not only echoes this very modern notion of writerly and readerly readers, but uses it to his advantage in the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, his last literary work and the site of his most explicit defense of literature. In an exceptional introductory section entitled "A brief arraignment of the ignorant" (*Genealogy* XIV), Boccaccio identifies the enemies to whom his defense is indirectly addressed and in so doing revisits many of the concerns and themes that

we have discussed thus far. He begins, not coincidentally, with an explicit reference to the materiality of his book and to his enemies' interaction with it:

> *Around my book*, as usual at the sight of a new work, *will gather a crowd of the incompetent*. The learned will also attend, and, after a careful inspection, doubtless some of them who are revered for their righteousness, and possess both fairness of mind and scholarship, will, by your example, praise whatever is commendable and, in all reverence, criticize whatever is not. […] But a far more numerous crowd will gather about in a ring, and pry curiously in to the chinks of a work none too articulate, or into other possible defects. *They hunger more to consume than to approve* (*Genealogy* XIV, pp. 17-8; emphasis mine).

Consumption is thus cast in a decidedly negative light, as is the crowd's "hunger": depicted in terms of a pack of wolves circling its prey, satisfied only by the passive, animalistic ingestion of Boccaccio's book. At stake with this crowd is not any sort of approbative response — that, in theory, would require some degree of intellectual engagement with the material.

Boccaccio goes on to describe the various types of ignorant men present for this hypothetical communal evaluation of his book, putting his own activities in terms of his "honest labors" and "work," and then attributing to the ignorant a critique that is for the most part couched in terms of the "leisure time" that the poet has stupidly lost and of his "disapproval of what is profitable." Finally, Boccaccio engages in nothing less than a diatribe against his critics, calling them "gluttons," "wine-bibbers" and "whoremongers." Most noteworthy in this parade of despicable straw men is their status as excessive consumers of goods and people, figuring their inappropriately passive (and thus incomplete, inadequate) consumption of Boccaccio's poetic work.

If Boccaccio's ideal reader is equal parts consumer and producer of the text,[44] so is his text one that is simultaneously worked on (by author and reader alike) and *working*. To return once more to the *incipit* of the *Decameron*, in which the author names his text both *Decameron* and "Prencipe Galeotto," we should note that both names have strong links to texts that describe or perform acts of creation.[45] Most relevant for our purposes is the "work" carried out by the *Decameron* itself. On one hand, this text describes the creation of a new world, in refuge from the plague, in the shadow of noble ideals and modeled on mercantile practices. On the other hand, Boccaccio's apparently traditional personification of the text represents the author's assignment of a job, a function to carry out. This literary "matchmaking" is the work that the text must perform so that the text's addressee may benefit from its reading in the way the author intends. Boccaccio's conviction that the moral interpretation of a text depends entirely on the person by whom and the manner in which it is read finds ample expression in the *Decameron*. As Boccaccio states in his Conclusion by way of defending the *novelle* he has just reported, "Le quali, chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono, sì come possono tutte l'altre cose, avendo riguardo all'ascoltatore (*Decameron*, Concl. 8)." [Like all other things of this world, stories, whatever their nature, may be harmful or useful, depending on the listener]. The work of the reader can only take place once the work of the text itself has been done.

Nowhere is the "work" of literature so explicitly thematized, however, as in Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*. At the end of his *summa*, the author addresses his critics, much as he does in the Fourth Day and the Conclusion of his earlier *Decameron*. Forced by the "enemies of poetry" to account for his idleness and poverty, Boccaccio responds in books XIV and XV of the *Genealogy* by discussing his own literary production in terms that allow him to

better compete with more self-interested and "productive" sectors of society, such as those who would criticize his own literary endeavors. While the *Decameron*'s strategy of adaptation to bourgeois society can be located on structural and theoretical planes, the *Genealogy* relies much more on the explicit terminology of mercantilism to make its case by consistently appropriating mercantile values for his own literary cause. Here, instead of collapsing classical binary pairs such as work and leisure, Boccaccio reverses them, adapting his own role to the mercantile criteria of his "enemies." In Book XV, for example, Boccaccio turns the tables on traditional definitions of both work and value by first couching his *Genealogy* in economic, mercantile terms, and then by defining their value according to decidedly esthetic criteria[46]:

> Of course anyone would at first glance say that the tales of the poets that make up this whole work are useless and even superfluous. But this, I think, is a mistake. I admit the *work* consists altogether of fables; and if I grant that such material is of little present use, yet will I show that many things of little present use, and among them this *work*, will eventually be of great *worth*. … Much then that we possess is of the very highest *value*, *though not useful in the ordinary sense*. ...We use vases of gold and relief *work*, when cheap Samian ware would serve all needs. So with crowns and gay clothes, and gold armlets, we enjoy wearing them, when a plain woolen cloak is enough for any man. *Thus artistic embellishment acquires value though it is of no practical use whatever*. *... [A] thing precious for no other reason, may become so for ornament's sake. ... And this is enough to prove my work a valuable one merely on the score of ornament* (*Genealogy* XV, pp. 103-4; emphasis mine).

Boccaccio shows that his "work" (as always, the bivalence of this term is significant for our purposes) is valuable because its product is. By proving the intrinsic value of ornamentation, the author can also legitimize the very work that produces it, his own literature. As Francesca Pennisi states, "[poetry] can be considered a 'practical art' insofar as it is produced according to certain techniques and yields a tangible product. The art product itself (for example, in the case of writing, the actual book produced) is in fact what for Boccaccio sets the practice of making art apart from a common profession such as money-changing."[47] She goes on to cite Boccaccio himself: "È intra 'l mestiere e l'arte questa differenza: che il mestiere è uno essercizio, nel quale niuna opera manuale che dallo 'ngegno proceda s'adopera, sì come è il cambiatore, il quale nel suo essercizio non fa altro che dare danari per danari."[48] [Between the trade and the art there lies this difference: that the trade is an exercise, in which no manual work that originates in the intellect is employed, as is the case with the money-changer, who in his exercises does nothing but give money for money.] In other words, it is Boccaccio's labor as poet that not only grants value to his enterprise, but *adds* value to its very product. Implicitly, in collecting and reassuming the intellectual patrimony of pagan mythology under the umbrella of his *arte*, he has rendered a product which is greater than the sum of its parts. In many ways, it is also the "work" of the *Decameron*: to add value to the *traditio* through the art of *dispositio*.

In a related maneuver, Boccaccio seeks to undermine traditional conceptions of value by divorcing it from notions of currency and material utility and linking it to his own literary system. The author's particular "enemy" in the section in question here is the lawyer who is plagued by the "love of money" and who defines utility in strictly economic terms.

> …my opponents, proceeding from their first charge, subjoin that poets have not been very wise to hold a creed whose followers never get rich. To answer this objection

> properly, I think we very much need the help of one who can make a wise choice, and I hope my opponents will agree with me as to whether jurist or poet deserves a reputation of wiser discernment. Without question it is wiser, in my opinion, to select that mind which transports us on high, instead of that which bears us down to earth; a mind firmly established instead of one tottering on the verge of a fall; a mind *which offers lifelong benefit rather than briefest felicity* (*Genealogy* XIV, pp. 24-25; emphasis mine).

Here, the pursuit of money and the pursuit of poetry are placed on equal but opposite terms in response to those who would belittle the latter pursuit on the grounds of its lack of material use and "benefit." In the end, Boccaccio handily redefines the concept of benefit, not only concluding that it is the poet — and not the jurist — who is best positioned to confer it, but simultaneously authorizing his own pronouncement as he elevates his own status — and thus of the "benefit" that his pronouncement provides — above that of his critics.

In the next paragraph, Boccaccio delivers what can be seen as the final blow to his materialistic enemies. The organization of the products of Boccaccio's — and his readers' — labor that we identified on the level of structure and theme in the *Decameron* finds theoretical elaboration in the following extraordinary assertion:

> Furthermore poetry, such as the poor poets have chosen to cultivate, constitutes a stable and fixed science founded upon things eternal, and confirmed by original principles; in all times and places this knowledge is the same, unshaken by any possible change. Not so with the law; the Slav, for example, knows not the same civil laws as the African. In the toil of war men feel less the authority of the law than in the happy tranquility of peace. Then too city ordinances and statues of the realm may greatly increase or diminish the power of a law; and the proclaimed adjournment of court may silence them. Laws even become antiquated and sometimes actually dead; for some were long ago held in very high regard which in our times are either neglected or wholly obsolete; and consequently not invariable like poetry. (*Genealogy* XIV, pp. 25-6)

By establishing mutable and unfixed laws as the commodity in which the lawyer traffics — and defining poetry according to metaphorical, intangible commodities such as knowledge and not the more properly material commodities that circulated in Boccaccio's cultural economy — the author's theory of labor and value succeeds in tapping into a key element of mercantile development. At the same time, however, not yet tied to notions of industrialized reproduction and what Walter Benjamin defined as the decay of the "aura" in modern material culture relationships,[49] Boccaccio is free in the flux of a new economic era to define commodity fixity in the positive light of eternal knowledge and turn contemporary notions of material self-interest — and attendant laws of profit, benefit, regulation and the like — on their collective head. Indeed, without the sort of fixed, stable understanding of value — diachronic and synchronic — that lies at the heart of Boccaccio's defense of poetry, the circulation of "knowledge" would be nothing but a flawed economy.

Boccaccio's organization of the *novelle* of the *Decameron*, as well as many of his arguments in books XIV and XV of the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, can be interpreted as an appropriation of economic systems and concepts just beginning to take root in his mercantile society. Thus, with Hollander, we can say that he uses utility in the service of pleasure, but his own pleasure is not of a purely self-interested nature. Rather, the *Decameron*'s *brigata* emblematizes the attempt to organize the pleasure of poetry in an ordered, economical fashion, just as his defense of poetry in the *Genealogy* can be read as part and parcel of a strategy to

compete with more ostensibly "productive" segments of society on their own terms. Ultimately, however, Boccaccio's appropriation of the accoutrements of mercantile economics to his own standards of intellectual activity reveals a relationship between the competing ideals that resists Marxist notions of cultural materialism insofar as it is an intellectual and social agenda that drives Boccaccio's thinking about economic forces, and not the other way around. Boccaccio's literary program — with its attendant intellectual and social agendas — never relinquishes its position of dominance over the economic structures and terminologies that he appropriates to it, even as his intellectual and social "values" compete on the terms of their economic models and rivals.

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[1] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* VI.9.4, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1992); all subsequent citations of the *Decameron* will be parenthetical.

[2] As Pennisi writes, "As part of a social milieu in which dialectical relationships represented not mere intellectual abstractions, but ethical life choices, the determination of where his life work fell within such categories was a crucial question for a humanist thinker such as Boccaccio." Francesca Pennisi, *Endless Exchange: Money, Women and the Writing of the* Decameron" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1998), p. 79.

[3] Robert Hollander, "*Utilità* in Boccaccio's *Decameron*." *Studi sul Boccaccio* 15 (1985-86): 228.

[4] Hollander 228.

[5] Hollander 223.

[6] Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio Medievale*. 5th edition (Florence: Sansoni, 1981), p. 159.

[7] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

[8] Branca 156.

[9] Luigi Surdich, *La Cornice di Amore* (Pisa: ETS Editrice, 1987), pp. 225-83.

[10] De Michelis, Cesare. *Contraddizioni nel "Decameron"* (Milan: Ugo Guanda Editore, 1983), p. 33.

[11] Vittore Branca 152, n.

[12] In the opinion of Surdich, for example, Boccaccio's *brigata* represents an elite microcosm of Florentine society in whom rests the only hope for communal salvation from plagues of various sorts, "trickle-down" style (Surdich 236). It is the *brigata* that can save Florentine society, and it is primarily this sector of society that Boccaccio seeks to "save" from the ravages of the plague.

[13] Surdich 258.

[14] Surdich 257-8.

[15] Surdich 260.

[16] Surdich 266.

[17] Surdich 269.

[18] Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. Trans. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penquin, 1995), p. 765. All translations of the *Decameron* are McWilliam's, with my modifications as noted.

[19] Surdich 248.

[20] Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p. 89.

[21] Marx 88-9.

[22] Marx 80.

[23] The author's decision to name his book "Prencipe Galeotto" is a reference to Canto V of Dante's *Inferno* and Francesca's recounting of her love affair with Paolo, with whom she is eternally damned. Francesca tells the pilgrim Dante that the catalyst for their fateful first kiss was the story — the text which the lovers physically hold between them as they read — of Lancelot and Guinevere, calling both the author and his book, by metonymy, "Galeotto," or pimp. Boccaccio thus places his own book in a tradition of material artefacts that have inherently social value.

[24] The *Novellino*'s difficult editorial history is reflected in its complex onomastic tradition. Its commonly

accepted title is a modern one, dating to the early 1800's. The collection, thought to have been written and compiled between 1280 and 1300, met with varying degrees of success — largely linked to the content and complexion of its various versions and recompilations — throughout the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, and was eventually rediscovered by Pietro Bembo and Giovanni della Casa in the early 1500's. The title *Libro di novelle e di bel parlar gentile* (*Book of tales and of lovely gentile speech*), appears in the collection's earliest extant manuscript, while the collection's second title, chronologically speaking, *Le ciento novelle antike*, or *Hundred old tales*, was the invention of Pietro Bembo, who used that moniker to distinguish those tales from the hundred new tales (literally, *novelle*, or new, young things; bits of news) contained in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. For a detailed discussion of the *Novellino*'s origins and publication history, see Consoli.

[25] Most notable in this regard is Francis Petrarch's translation into Latin of the tale of Griselda (*Dec*. X.10) in Book XVII of his *Rerum senilium libri*.

[26] Pennisi 97-8.

[27] Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio medievale* (Sansoni: Firenze, 1970), p. 5.

[28] Translation mine; emphasis mine.

[29] Marx 55.

[30] Translation is McWilliam's (46); Rigg's 1903 translation gives *prestare* as "afford" (*Decameron Web*, 19 June 2004, <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecIndex.php>.

[31] Pennisi states that "The actuality of [Boccaccio's] book is what distinguishes his *fatica* from that of the *brigata*, since their brand of *novellare* is a more traditionally oral experience and markedly product-free." Though her interpretation of the author's strategy of accentuating the *brigata*'s orality in order to highlight the innovation of the materiality of his own writerly work is certainly sound, the *brigata*'s status as producers of textual artefacts must also be considered in light of both their symbolic value as narrators, as well as that of the system of exchange in which their tales circulate (94).

[32] Translation is modified from McWilliam's (68).

[33] Translation is McWilliam's (47).

[34] Translation is modified from McWilliam's (326); both his "equate" and the more literal "mix" offer interesting suggestions for an Marxist interpretations of Boccaccio's original.

[35] Marx 83; emphasis mine.

[36] Surdich, *La cornice*, p. 244; Mirko Bevilacqua, *Il giardino del piacere: Saggi sul* Decameron (Rome: Semar, 1995), p. 5; Marcel Janssens, "The Internal Reception of the Stories Within the *Decameron*" (Tournoy, 1977), pp. 136-7; and Pier Massimo Forni, *Adventures in Speech: Rhetoric and Narration in Boccaccio's* Decameron (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), Chapter 1, just to name a few.

[37] For an extended and detailed discussion of the productive relationships between tales in the *Decameron*, see Forni.

[38] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 89; author's emphasis.

[39] For an informative study of why the members of the *brigata* choose to leave the countryside when they do and other contradictions in this work, see Surdich.

[40] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 89.

[41] Millicent Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-consciousness in the "Decameron"* (Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1979).

[42] "De l'oeuvre au texte," *Oeuvres Completes*. Ed. Eric Marty. 3 vols. Paris: Seuil, 1993.

[43] Barthes, "De l'oeuvre au texte," pp. 10-11; emphasis mine.

[44] Boccaccio writes in the *Genealogy* by way of apology, "Besides, that the reader's mind may exert itself, one's

book should not be too full; whatever is got at the cost of a little labor is both more pleasing and more carefully observed than that which gets to the reader's mind of itself" (XV.12).

[45] As Branca tells us, the text's first name is, of course, linked to St. Ambrose's Old Testament gloss, *Hexaëmeron* ("On the Six Days of Creation"). In a more specifically Italian context, we should note Dante's immortalization of the Lancelot du Lac tale in *Inferno* V as a "galeotto" that created the fateful moment of illicit passion between Paolo and Francesca.

[46] The reader cannot fail to recall the Proem to the *Novellino*, in which the author uses the notion of ornamentation to frame his apology for the collection's potential flaws: "E se i fiori che proporremo fossero mischiati intra molte altre parole, non vi dispiaccia: ché 'l nero è ornamento dell'oro, e per un frutto nobile e dilicato piace talora tutto un orto, e per pochi belli fiori tutto un giardino." [If the flowers of speech we offer you be mixed with other words, be not displeased, for black is an ornament to gold, and a fair and delicate fruit may sometimes adorn a whole orchard; a few lovely flowers an entire garden.]

[47] Pennisi 79-80.

[48] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la commedia*, ed. Giorgio Padoan, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, vol. 6 (Milano: Classici Mondadori, 1964), p. 368.

[49] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 222.