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Clergy in the *Decameron*: Another Look?

It is commonly acknowledged that misbehaving clergy and misbehaving women are two of the major themes in the tales of the *Decameron*. Yet despite the clergy's obvious presence, remarkably little critical attention has been paid to them as a whole. The most thorough and systematic study was Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin's *Religion and the Clergy in Boccaccio's Decameron* (1984), a study which perhaps discouraged further analyses.¹ Women have fared vastly better in recent decades, thanks to feminism. Ó Cuilleanáin's book was an intelligent survey not just of ecclesiastical characters but also of other aspects of religion (sermons, sacraments, confession, etc.), drawing the conclusion that while Boccaccio seemed relatively unconcerned about church history and politics (relative especially to Dante), religion provided him with much of his narrative material. He argues reasonably that Boccaccio was not a proto-reformer nor even particularly ideological at all in matters of religion, but turned to the social practices of religion solely as grist for his narrative mill.² In the chapter on clergy, which comes the closest to my own interests here, Ó Cuilleanáin observed that they, like secular persons, are distinguished by social status: country priests get the most vulgar situations, while high-ranking abbots and popes are treated basically as feudal lords. "Indeed, we may draw a broad distinction between the Upper Church (respectable, immobile, not acting but reacting) and the Lower Church (usually disreputable, taking risks, exploiting the resources of religion)."³

¹ Since his book, the only general treatment of this topic is Georgianna 2000. Other relevant studies with a more specific focus include Havelly 1983, Vacca 1995, Ferreri 1996 and Urganani 1996.

² He acknowledges the influence on his general approach of Getto (1986). Cf., e.g.: "La religione nel *Decameron* interviene, in coerenza alla visione della vita del Boccaccio, come un fatto essenzialmente sociale. È la religione colta nei suoi riflessi sociali, non la religione vista nel suo contenuto intimo e trascendente [...]" (Getto 1986, 28).

³ Ó Cuilleanáin 1984, 95. Georgianna suggests that the *Decameron* offers no unified concept of "clergy," and that distinctions of class and of wit, cutting across both secular and ecclesiastical characters, might even render such a distinction irrelevant (2000, 157).

While agreeing with many of his findings, I want to take a somewhat different tack by attending not so much to social status as to moral status. My claim, to put it plainly up front, is that, although the bulk of narrative attention goes to clergy who are behaving badly (because indeed that is what creates a story), we nonetheless find both erring members and also dutiful members at almost every ecclesiastical level who remind us that the church was not totally and ubiquitously dysfunctional, and that lustful and avaricious ecclesiastics are making a choice framed by the better behavior of some of their colleagues — that it is, in short, a choice.

I realize that the very framing of this question — how well or badly are characters behaving? — is rejected by some readers of the *Decameron* who argue that the book is not primarily about moral judgments but rather about aesthetic withdrawal from the world of moral judgments or even that it is, as Ó Cuilleánáin himself says (claiming to follow Boccaccio's own dictum) primarily an entertainment for the ladies.⁴ But why not just as well follow Boccaccio's other dictum, that he aims to show us “quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare” (Proemio 14)?⁵ Granted, as Millicent Marcus and others have indicated, he troubles our judgments from the start.⁶ And, granted, the explicit moral tags may be ironic rather than straightforward. But given the emphasis in the introduction on the choice between living as rational human beings or as beasts that merely follow their appetites, some moral assessment does not seem totally uncalled for.

I began, probably much the way Ó Cuilleánáin did, by making a chart of what sort of ecclesiastic shows up where. It is probably not merely an accident that the highest ranking clergy — the pope and the abbot of Cluny — show up on the first and last day, and that the pope is the first ecclesiastic mentioned in tale number one, following Panfilo's introductory comments about God. Right from the start, our judgment of ecclesiastics is problematized, for this pope is named, and he is the same Boniface so hated by Dante for his political ambitions; yet Boccaccio, completely uninterested in such issues, presents him in a neutral manner: his summons of the French king's brother leads through a chain of consequences to the merchant Musciatto Franzesi's placing his Burgundian business dealings in the hands of ser Cepparello. Given all the Dantesque elements at the start of this work (from the subtitle to the introductory ascent from a

⁴ Ó Cuilleánáin admits that his work “largely accepts Boccaccio's prefatory assurance that his aim is simply to entertain the ladies” (1984, 273).

⁵ All quotations of the *Decameron* are taken from Boccaccio 1992.

⁶ See, for example, Marcus 1979 (11–26) and Bruno Pagnamenta 1999.

plague-stricken city resembling the bottom of *Inferno* to a lovely hilltop resembling the earthly paradise), a reader might find this swerve from Dante's presentation of Boniface striking. The same pope appears in 10.2, the last tale to reference the clergy. There he is even more positively portrayed: "di grande animo fu e vago de' valenti uomini" (10.2.30). Persuaded to a reconciliation with Ghino di Tacco, a gentleman turned highway robber out of necessity and by "maggior peccato della fortuna che suo" (10.2.21 and 28), Pope Boniface lives up to his name by doing good⁷ and giving Ghino a respectable source of income, at which Ghino ceases his robberies and becomes "amico e servidore di santa Chiesa" (10.2.31).

The neutral to positive representation of this framing ecclesiastic is all the more noteworthy given the vituperation of the clergy by the narrators of tales 1.2 and 10.2. In Neifile's story about the Jew who visits Rome to observe the behavior of the papal curia, Abraam reports that he finds it "più tosto [...] una fucina di diaboliche operazioni che di divine" (1.2.24), with the clergy from the pope on down indulging in a list of sins equivalent to Cepparello's and covering all the categories of Dante's hell. Elissa's introduction to 10.2 blasts the clergy for more specific sins: avarice and a thirst for vengeance, plus the hypocrisy of practicing the opposite of what they preach (patience and forgiveness), so that the magnanimous behavior of a cleric appears as a "miracolo" (10.2.4).⁸ The "cleric" of these prefatory remarks is not so much the pope as the abbot of Cluny, about whom I will say more in a moment. Nonetheless, we are clearly presented with a contrast between our expectations of malicious ecclesiastical behavior and the actual benevolence that concludes the tale, a reversal of the experience of Abraam. Thus we go from the neutral pope of 1.1 to the infernal pope of 1.2 and finally –on the day that offers corrective examples – to the appropriately named beneficent pope of 10.2. This is a full range of moral possibilities and includes a reversal of expectations in both directions.⁹

One other pope appears, in the story of Alessandro and the English princess (2.3). Branca surmises that the civil war between the English king and his son most likely refers to Henry II, and therefore that the unnamed

⁷ Grossvogel comments on Boccaccio's early use of *bona faciens* as the etymon of the name Boniface (2013, 64).

⁸ It is Elissa who delivers, in 7.3, another of the major anticlerical diatribes.

⁹ Padoan observes that the reversal of expectations is a recurring technique in the *Decameron* (1964, 164–65).

pope is Alexander III, who helped effect their reconciliation.¹⁰ In that case the tale has two Alexanders, the pope and the merchant. This pope, faced on the one hand with the anger of the knights who have accompanied the princess and the indubitable anger of her father the king, and on the other hand with the *fait accompli* of her marriage, as inappropriate as her choice seems to him, opts to do the spiritually right thing: to reconcile the princess with her knights, to double their private marriage with a splendid public ceremony, and to give the couple his blessing. The knights then reconcile the princess and Alessandro with the king, and Alessandro reconciles the king with his son. Thus, the pope's choice of action leads to a cascade of further reconciliations. While the emphasis of the tale is a celebration of the qualities of the merchant, the right action of the pope (that other unnamed Alessandro) is equally important to the happy outcome of a risky venture, not only for the young lovers but for the whole of England.

Clerical appearances within the tales are framed by the higher ranks. Giuseppe Billanovich has pointed out that the abbot of Cluny appears, like the popes, on the first and last days.¹¹ In this case, instead of a positive and a negative example, we get two incidents in which the abbot exhibits both bad and good behaviors. In 1.7 the usually generous abbot is struck with a sudden resentment against those who come to dine free at his table, but then relents, exclaiming to himself, "Deh questa che novità è oggi che nella anima m'è venuta, che avarizia..?" (1.7.23). His extra generous hospitality to Primas, compensating for that unusual moment of impulsive avarice, becomes in turn an example promoting the parallel generosity of Can Grande della Scala. Similarly in the already mentioned tale of Ghino di Tacco, the abbot, on his way to medicinal baths for a stomach ailment, falls into the hands of the highwayman, who cures his stomach problems with a diet of toast and red wine. The abbot, at first fuming at his capture and treatment, comes to realize that he has in fact been cured (there is perhaps a religious irony as well as medicinal efficacy to the diet). When Ghino offers to let him resume his freedom, requesting that the abbot him-

¹⁰ Branca ed., *Decameron*, 1059, n.1 to page 111, and 1061, n.4 to page 115; see also 1062–63, n.2 to page 118 for further attempts to connect the tale to historical facts and persons.

¹¹ See Billanovich (1947, 150) who further observes that these framing days, ruled by the brigata's oldest female and oldest male, concentrate tales about high-ranking figures, secular as well as ecclesiastical: kings, popes, abbots, and Saladin. "Avarizia e viltà di principi, sporco attaccarsi di ecclesiastici alla borsa alle donne o alla tavola nella prima [giornata]; nella decima cavalleria e cuore liberale di signori, e lodevole gara dell'abate di Clignì col gentiluomo" (1947, 150).

self choose how much of his goods to leave in payment, the abbot suddenly loses all his anger and becomes Ghino's admiring friend. As Ghino had restored his health and goods, so the abbot restores Ghino to a respectable social position that enables him to quit his life of robbery. In both tales, we see that avarice, pride and wrath can afflict a high ecclesiastic, but also that he can overcome those attitudes — either on his own or through acknowledgment of the noble behavior of another — and can choose freely to become (or resume being) a better person. As at the end of 2.3, one generous act leads to another and then another.¹²

Two other abbots appear in the *Decameron*: the first (1.4) shares a peasant girl with one of his monks, his initial determination to punish the monk yielding to sexual temptation; the other (3.8) makes Ferondo believe that he has died and gone to Purgatory while the abbot enjoys Ferondo's wife. These abbots come from nearby abbeys, one identified as being in "Toscana" (3.8.4) and the other "in Lunigiana, paese non molto da questo lontano" (1.4.4). The sexual misbehaviors of these local abbots can be viewed against the self-correcting behavior of the French abbot. Some might argue that wrath and avarice are more easily overcome than lust, and indeed the Tuscan abbot is "santissimo" in every respect except his weakness for women. Yet both tales show us abbots acting deliberately. The first one rationalizes by stages from the still guilty ("Egli nol saprà persona mai, e peccato celato è mezzo perdonato") to the positive spin of "io estimo ch'egli sia gran senno a pigliarsi del bene, quando Domenedio ne manda altrui" (1.4.16). The other abbot manages his dealings with women "sì cautamente" that no one ever suspects him (3.8.4). This is not merely impulsive behavior; the rationalizations — to himself or to the reluctant wife — are important to the humor.

Remaining for a moment with the higher ranking clergy, we find two bishops, one (6.3) whose scurrilous joking is reprimanded by a woman's response; the other (8.4) who punishes the local rector that had been pursuing a virtuous widow. She herself has cleverly arranged for the rector's humiliation, but the bishop does his duty in punishing the rector while praising the bloodlessness of the widow's revenge. Thus, as with popes and abbots, we have both negative and positive examples of bishops, in relation to women and to their professional duty.

Monks and friars are of course the most prevalent and merry sinners in these tales, and nuns can be added in to this category, making the total

¹² As Luigi Russo comments, "La novella [...] si conclude con una gara di atti magnifici. [...] È proprio una scena da paradiso mondano, in cui l'un beato espande all'altro la sua affezione" (1967, 290).

roughly one-sixth of all tales. Their sins range from avarice and arrogance to lust and fraud. Except for frate Alberto in Venice, the Sienese friar Rinaldo who pretends to be curing a child and the abbess in Lombardy, all are from or near Florence. Indeed, so common is the figure of the misbehaving friar in medieval European literature that Filostrato comments explicitly (1.7.3–4) that the vices of the clergy are so fixedly established as to make an easy target. While the public presence of friars made them especially suspect, Nicholas Havely suggests that writers had also a personal motive involved in their satires, whether complicit or critical: “This evident fascination with the friar as word-spinner and tale-teller might imply that both writers [Chaucer and Boccaccio] regarded them as in some respects rivals for the ear of the educated laity.”¹³ He points out that Boccaccio’s conclusion (22–23) excuses his own “ciance” by indicating the “ciance” in friars’ sermons. I add the observation that Boccaccio’s joking response in this same passage to critics who say such jokes do not befit “un uomo pesato e grave” — that he has been frequently weighed and that “a quelle che pesato non m’hanno, affermo che io non son grave” — associates him with the weighty abbot of 1.4. Furthermore, as has been frequently noted, the most famous word-spinning friar, Cipolla, shares Boccaccio’s hometown.

Even this category, however, far as it is from any even balance, begins in the very first tale of the *Decameron* with a friar who is truly “santissimo.” Cepparello asks specifically for the holiest friar his hosts can find, one whose innocence will not suspect Cepparello’s fraud. “E fu lor dato un frate antico di santa e di buona vita e gran maestro in Iscrittura e molto venerabile uomo, nel quale tutti i cittadini grandissima e speciale divozione aveano” (1.1.30). We may be tempted to see that his holiness makes him naïve, but Panfilo comments with regard to the friar’s belief in this confession, “e chi sarebbe colui che nol credesse, veggendo uno uomo in caso di morte dir così?” (1.1.74). Even the cynical hosts marvel: “che uomo è costui, il quale né vecchiezza né infermità né paura di morte, alla qual si vede vicino, né ancora di Dio, dinanzi al giudizio del quale di qui a picciola ora s’aspetta di dovere essere, dalla sua malvagità l’hanno potuto rimuovere...?” (1.1.79). The friar uses Cepparello’s example, false as it is, to arouse the devotion of his parishioners, and Panfilo concludes with a remark about “la benignità di Dio [...] la quale non al nostro errore ma alla purità della fé riguardando, così facendo noi nostro mezzano un suo ne-

¹³ Havely 1983, 264.

mico, amico credendolo, ci essaudisce” (1.1.90).¹⁴ Thus the very first tale of all offers a friar regarding whose purity of faith we can have no doubt, and who is able as a result to turn even the wickedness of Cepparello — “il peggiore uomo forse che mai nascesse” (1.1.15) — to good effect.

The most vehement tirade against friars, as scholars have already noticed,¹⁵ comes from the mouth of a frustrated lover, secretly fuming against the actions of a holy friar who properly dissuaded the beloved woman from yielding to an adulterous seduction. The fact that she is later persuaded by Tedaldo’s twisted theology — a model for the persuasive argument of Machiavelli’s Timoteo to Lucrezia — merely separates us as a more perceptive audience from her confusion; we find the illogical obvious and amusing. Thus the *Decameron* offers more than one worthy friar along with all the rascallions.¹⁶

Oddly, another vituperative attack on the clergy — as seeking an easy living without having to work, as thinking they are worthier (“più...valere”) and wiser than secular folk, and as men one cannot trust — introduces a tale (3.3) by Filomena, in which the friar is actually “di santissima vita” (3.3.8). It is precisely because of his reputation as a serious man of religion (“solenne” and “valentissimo,” 3.3.3 and 3.3.8) that — like Cepparello — the lustful lady finds him useful as a go between; she knows that he will fulfill his proper duty to admonish the young man to whom she wants to communicate her interest. The narrator repeatedly refers to the friar as “il santo frate” (3.3.14, 17, 22 and 39) although the lovers, finally in bed together, laugh at “la semplicità di frate bestia” (3.3.54) along with their laughter at the wool-carding and combing tools of the lady’s husband — a mockery of work which seems to contradict the initial mockery of friars for not working to earn a living. Here then is a second good, holy and dutiful friar, reliable enough to be manipulated by an aristocratic wife who scorns

¹⁴ Panfilo immediately connects this to “la sua grazia nelle presenti avversità...” (1.1.91), suggesting that the plague, like the sins of Cepparello, is an evil of which good use can be made by the grace of God. His concluding sentiments echo his introduction of the tale re God “più alla purità del pregator riguardando che alla sua ignoranza” (1.1.5).

¹⁵ For example, Havely (1983, 251) and Ó Cuilleanáin (1984, 249–50).

¹⁶ McWilliam, in item 5 of the “appended correspondence,” queries whether it is significant “that the two long diatribes against priests and monks are placed in III.7 and VII.3, or roughly one-third and two-thirds of the way through the book?” (1979, 51). He does not comment on the pair of numbers involved here in a neat reversal; perhaps Boccaccio meant by this means to link the two? Rinaldo persuades his beloved married woman with the same kind of humorously twisted theological argumentation that Tedaldo uses. If the first attack (by Tedaldo) is false and self-serving, the second, being Elissa’s, is more forthright.

her working husband: “Nella nostra città, più d’inganni piena che d’amore o di fede” (3.3.5). And here too we find the wrenching combination of an attack on friars in general with the example of a friar who is in fact good and holy. Nor could we reasonably expect him to suspect that the lady’s performance is other than sincere.

Nuns not only star in two tales (3.1, the tale of Masetto in the convent, and 9.2, a gender reversal of the monk and abbot story of 1.4), but are also given an extra dig in tale 7.3, where, while frate Rinaldo claims to have been curing the child, his sidekick has been “teaching paternosters” to the maid and “donatale una borsetta di refe bianco la quale a lui aveva donata una monaca” (7.3.39), presumably in similar circumstances. Nonetheless, even nuns — that convergence of two prime targets of satire: fraudulent clergy and deceitful women¹⁷ — do not go without a positive example. At the end of 4.6 Andreuola, having lost her beloved to a sudden death, and resisting both the attempted rape and proffered marriage of the local *podestà*, enters a convent: “in un monistero, assai famoso di santità essa e la sua fante monache si renderono e onestamente poi in quello per molto tempo vissero” (4.6.43). Nothing undermines our assumption that, disillusioned by the world, she lived a holy life in a convent whose reputation was sincerely earned.

The famous tale of Rustico prepares for his “devil in hell” lesson by presenting us with several other hermits who, fearing the devil’s temptation, give Alibech some food and water, praise her intentions, and send her away. Why mention these holier hermits if not to provide a wiser counter-example to Rustico’s folly? Without them, one might be tempted to claim that the forces of Nature are impossible to overcome, and that holy vows are therefore foolish. But in their presence, we see that holy men who are humbly aware of Nature’s power can take preventive precautions, and that it is the foolishness of Rustico’s vanity with regard to Nature’s power that earns him his double humiliation: unable to satisfy either his spiritual vows or Alibech’s fleshly desires.

The one category of clergy for which we are offered no redeeming models is the rural priest; their prey is a peasantry with whom Boccaccio has scant sympathies. But even at this lowly level, we find in the description of the plague that the dead are accompanied to their graves by “due preti con una croce” (1.Intro.40), parish priests who continue to carry out their duties even in the midst of terror and chaos and at risk to their own lives.

¹⁷ Filostrato tells the first of these anti-nun tales. Are the nine nuns in the all-too-earthly paradise of this convent a parody of the nine women mentioned by Dante in the rose of the heavenly Paradise?

I do not wish to deny the emphasis on misbehaviors, which obviously make amusing stories, nor to deny that sometimes we are complicit with them, especially when they involve verbal virtuosity (e.g., frate Cipolla). Havelly points out that the sins of friars reap widely diverging consequences: from dire punishment, as in the case of frate Alberto, to getting away scot free, as in the case of frate Rinaldo (cf. 1983, 262). I merely wish to indicate that Boccaccio has accompanied these examples with counterexamples at almost every level and to suggest that those counterexamples have a significant function. They show, first of all, that the problems lie with individuals rather than with the institutions of the church, and that — despite the pervasive sinfulness of Rome in 1.2 — there are also good, holy and dutiful members of the clergy. Misbehaviors are not inevitable. They thus fulfill Boccaccio's promise to show us examples of what to imitate as well as what to avoid, and undermine the notion that "Nature" makes a truly spiritual vocation impossible. In so doing, they corroborate both Panfilo's sentiment in presenting the topic of the final day, that the imitation of good examples is desirable to anyone who wishes to live "nella laudevole fama" rather than serving "al ventre solamente, a guisa che le bestie fanno" (9.Concl.5), and the author's claims in the conclusion that it is up to us to choose how we wish to make use of any- and everything.

I want to end with a last observation regarding the distribution of tales involving ecclesiastical characters. Although they tend to bunch up on days one and three, and although they are clearly more likely under some narrative topics than others, there is at least one such tale on every day, except the fifth. Similarly, every member of the brigata tells such stories except Fiammetta, who, we note, is queen of the Fifth Day.¹⁸ The one tale she tells that comes close to this topic is the story of the jealous husband who disguises himself as a confessor; but the point is precisely that he is not really a priest, and the emphasis falls on the theme of jealousy, which Fiammetta returns to in her song at the end of the final day. Is it her previous association with the Virgin Mary and with the family of Thomas Aquinas or simply one last trace of Boccaccio's idealization of his lady that exempts her from touching the clergy, even to offer a positive example? I honestly do not know. But I suggest that this is one more pair of examples of a 9+1 pattern at work in many ways throughout the volume.

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¹⁸ Dioneo and Panfilo each tell four; Emilia and Elissa three; the others one or two.

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