

Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars

Volume 2 *Volume 2 (2004)*
Issue 1

Article 10

January 2004

Editor's Notes

Michael Papio

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia>

Recommended Citation

Papio, Michael (2004) "Editor's Notes," *Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia/vol2/iss1/10>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Editor's Notes

Bill Clinton's autobiography is due to appear in stores in the US at the end of June. If there's a headline that comes from the book, says presidential scholar Alan Lichtman (history professor at American University and author of *Keys to the White House*), "it would have to be 'Clinton Explains Monica.' ... How in the world did he get embroiled in that?" What perhaps makes this an interesting event for medievalists, and especially for those who have spent a great deal of time reading Boccaccio, is that its accompanying media frenzy provides ample space for reflection on certain themes that the Certaldese would no doubt have considered intriguing. This is not, as the casual reader of the *Decameron* might like to infer, a simple reference to Monica Lewinsky; rather, it is an invitation to consider the multifaceted perceptions of an intellectual who, like all mortals, was tempted by the pleasures of the flesh. A somewhat more pertinent, and for our purposes functional, point of departure may be offered in the recent comments of David Herbert Donald (professor emeritus of American history at Harvard and author of several books on Abraham Lincoln): "I'd like to see him do two things. First of all, I'd like to see him write a personal story on how he grew up and how he became who he was. Second, I'd like to see him write about how he shaped the politics of the White House, how a man of such great accomplishments also hurt himself by his foolishness." If reporters and gazetteers find it challenging to fathom Clinton's actions (and notably to derive from them anything other than disdainful astonishment), medievalists may take a bit of comfort in remembering that there are numerous precedents from which something substantially more enlightening can be gleaned. This is not to say, of course, that a Clinton of the Italian Trecento could have been immediately excused. It is fair to say, however, that his transgressions would have certainly been understood in a very different light and, unlike the modern witness to the Lewinsky affair, the medieval thinker would have been far more likely to derive from all this a deeper, more enduring lesson. Instead of seeing an incomprehensible faux pas in the ex-president's major mishap, Boccaccio's contemporaries — long acutely aware of the disharmony between prescriptive and descriptive perceptions of sexual behavior — already possessed certain epistemological categories into which Clinton's story could easily have been placed.

Let us take a couple analogous examples from late medieval popular culture and see where they lead us. The most immediately relevant, if not most obvious, example is Dante. Perhaps on account of the continuing, sometimes even scarcely detectable, influence of critics such as De Sanctis and of commentators like Tommaseo (you may add Busnelli, Gilson and whom-ever else you like), there is a willful tendency to discount what many of Dante's fourteenth-century readers took for granted: he was very fond of women. For the modern reader, this notion adds ripples to the still pond of interpretive analysis precisely because *luxuria* has come to be an all-permeating sin. (The contrary has occurred in the common perception of *acedia*, one might note, which has benefited greatly from the passage of several centuries. No

longer indissolubly linked to wrath, despair and self-indulgent gloom, *acedia* now extends “shamelessly” from agnostics and couch potatoes to those who take trips on luxury liners to third world countries looking to buy that straw hat at a steal.) Boccaccio, one of Dante’s brightest and most sincerely adoring fans, was rather less perplexed by the sexual indiscretions of the *sommo poeta* than most modern readers or CNN anchors would have been (e.g., *Trattatello*, first redaction, §172):

Tra cotanta virtù, tra cotanta scienza, quanta dimostrato è di sopra essere stata in questo mirifico poeta, trovò ampissimo luogo la lussuria, e non solamente ne’ giovani anni, ma ancora ne’ maturi. Il quale vizio, come che naturale e comune e quasi necessario sia, nel vero non che commendare, ma scusare non si può degnamente. Ma chi sarà tra’ mortali giusto giudice a condannarlo? Non io.

Whether Boccaccio came up with this idea while reading the love lyrics of Dante’s *Rime* (as some critics like to suggest) or some other way, it makes very little difference. No Trecento reader seems to have lost nearly as much sleep, for example, over the cruces of the Donna Gentile, the Petrosa and the Pargoletta as have our own contemporaries (see Barbi, Nardi, Pietrobono, Marti, De Robertis...). While one could cite a number of reasons for the relative lack of critical concentration focused by the *antichi commentatori* on Dante’s straying (from Beatrice, *s’intende*, not Gemma), the fact that his erotic tendencies are considered so lightly is inascribable to anything like the “tasteful” decision of pre-1970s journalists not to show FDR in a wheelchair or not to mention seeing Marilyn go through the back gates of Camelot. It was, instead, simply because *luxuria* was held to be less consequential than other vices, as is “geographically” demonstrated in the position of the lustful in both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. In his comments to *Inferno* V, Benvenuto explains (but the real gist is between the lines): “Est etiam notandum quid ista est minor pena respectu inferiorum. ... Ad propositum ergo autor primo tractat de minori peccato inter capitalia, scilicet de luxuria, quia istud vicium, licet sit majoris infamiae, tamen est minoris culpa, quia est naturale, comune, et quodammodo necessarium” (Firenze: Barbèra, 1887, vol. 1, pp. 185–86). The phrase “sit majoris infamiae...” is a reference to a maxim attributed to Gregory but made famous by Alain de Lille in his *Liber poenitentialis* (PL vol. 210, col. 288B). The whole of the ditty runs like this: “Peccatum carnale est majoris infamiae, et minoris culpa; peccatum Spirituale majoris est culpa, et minoris infamiae.” One begins to see here the pragmatic applications of the proverb “peccato celato è mezzo perdonato” (*Dec.* I.4.16). Benvenuto surely got the phrase “natural, common and in a way necessary” from Boccaccio who explains himself more fully in the *Esposizioni*: “è da sapere che la lussuria è vizio naturale, al quale la natura incita ciascuno animale, il quale di maschio e femina si procrea” (V all., 24; cf. also *Dec.* IV.1.35). The natural desire to “love,” one of the columns upon which all of the *Decameron* is constructed, is the Achilles’ heel of humanity. Time and again, Boccaccio asks us to be lenient towards those who give in to the natural sin of lust. Even the members of the *brigata* (built-in contemporary readers par excellence) take libidinous transgressions relatively lightly: “chi per amore, conoscendo le sue forze grandissime, perviene, da giudice non troppo rigido merita perdonò” (*Dec.* VIII.1.4). In short, Boccaccio’s works are full of examples of the pains of love or lust (it’s not always easy to tell them apart) and we should certainly not be surprised that he comes to a tentatively indulgent conclusion. He was, after all, both dantista and petrarchista.

Despite Boccaccio’s typically lenient attitude towards erotic allurements, however, he was also well read in theology and doctrine. No one should suggest that *fornicazione* or *adulterio*

(two of the categories comprised by *luxuria*; cf. *Esp.* V, all., 64–68 and *Summa Theologiae* IIa. IIae. q. 151) were victimless crimes. The question that now emerges is: just how bad is it? One potentially enlightening passage can be found in the *Genealogia*:

Illi [scil. Venero] rosas in tutelam datas aiunt, eo quod rubeant atque pungant, quod quidem libidinis proprium esse videtur. Nam turpitudine sceleris erubescimus et conscientia peccati vexamur aculeo; et sicut per tempusculum rosa delectat, parvoque lapsu temporis marcet, sic et libido parve brevisque delectationis et longe penitentie causa est, cum in brevi decidat quod delectat, et quod officit vexet in longum. (III.24.11)

Although the emotion here examined is not exactly love (note his use of “libido” and “delectatio” rather than “amor”), we may fairly say that Boccaccio is considering the juxtaposition of sexual attraction and moral hesitation in his not uncommon fusion of the classical and the medieval. Here we have Venus’ sacred flower (cf. Ausonius’ *Idyllia* 14) linked with a Christian commonplace: “in momento transit carnis delectatio, et omnis peccatorum commissio, et brevis quidem est hora transgressionis, non tamen brevis poena flagitii” (Gregory’s *Commentarii in librum I Regum* V.3.15). What made *luxuria* perilous to many medieval thinkers was essentially divisible into two categories of ramifications: the sociological (for wives [and their angry husbands], daughters, illegitimate children and so on) and the spiritual (“et ideo consequens est quod per luxuriam maxime superiores vires deordinentur”). This last type is of particular importance since even baby steps toward lust could send one down the slippery slope. A few Trecento commentators of the Paolo and Francesca episode, including Lana and Pietro, refer to the *Decretum Gratiani* to explain this phenomenon: “luxuria tota nostra ratio absorbetur”). Most entertaining, however, is Guido da Pisa who goes into delightful detail. Lust, he writes, diminishes work, fame and intellect. He concludes:

luxuria enim, ut dicit beatus Ysidorus, carnem frangit, et fractam ducit celerius ad senectam. Dicunt enim medici quod id in quo maxima est delectatio est maxima nature consumptio. Et ratio huius est: in genitura enim, secundum Philosophum, fit decisio ex omnibus iuncturis et venis et musculis. Unde dicit quidam philosophus quod plus debilitat corpus unus coitus quam due minutiones; et ratio huius est quia cerebrum perturbat et minuit. Nam secundum naturales, semen est sanguis purissimus descendens a cerebro, qui per colationem venarum albescit. Unde illi qui immoderate luxurie deserviunt fatui fiunt, ut patet in Salomone, qui cum esset senex, stultus factus est, et depravatum est cor eius per mulieres ut sequeretur deos alienos. (p. 104 in Cioffari’s ed.)

Now, to be fair, it could indeed be that the Starr Probe (ABC News, uninterested in the pun, regularly referred to the Commission with this label) exchanged immunity for the blue dress out of fear that the President had been unduly accelerating his ... senility. To a fourteenth-century mind, sexual excess was, beyond its own transgressive qualities, a warning sign that other immoral or imprudent actions could be just over the horizon. Starr and his over \$40 million dollar investigation were vociferously cognizant of this idea but neglected its “natural” quality.

In addition to Dante, other figures were frequently cited in Trecento treatments of the sin as well. Particularly remark-



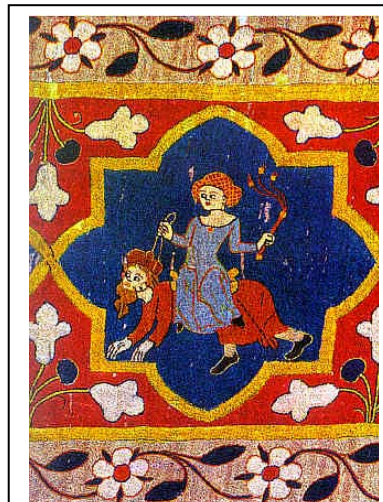
Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, from the Petrus Comestor *Bible Historiale*, ms 10 B 23, Museum Meermanno-Westree-nianum, The Hague

able in this light is Solomon whom Boccaccio brings up in the final book of the *Genealogia* as “testis certissimus imbecillitatis humane” (XV.9.14). Whereas Guido implies that Solomon wandered into idolatry on account of sex-inspired senility (we can only imagine how much energy must be dedicated to 700 wives and 300 concubines), Boccaccio lays the blame upon one woman, the Queen of Sheba:

Salomon[...] fuerit cum egyptiaca coniuge, que, astu femineo advertens, quoniam infelicis viri animam formositate sua laqueasset, et suos deos extollere avida, nunc amplexu venereo, nunc mellitis saviis, nunc blandiciis muliebribus, nunc petulca lasciviis, nunc precibus, nunc lacrimis, quas obsequiosissimas habent femine, nunc indignatione composita absque intermissione non diebus omnibus tantum, sed noctibus amantis viri animum impugnabat. O quam gravia et intolerabilia sunt dilectarum mulierum, et potissime nocturna certamina! Hic tandem, dum timeret mulieris gratiam, quam summe diligebat, amictere, terga dedit, et viribus armate femine inermis succubuit. (XV.9.15–16)

In this account Solomon, blessed with wisdom and special grace, is duped by his *temptatrix*. Boccaccio was probably thinking here of (Pseudo?) Augustine who was familiar with this carnal struggle (“inter omnia Christianorum certamina sola duriora sunt prælia castitatis, ubi quotidiana est pugna, et rara victoria,” *Sermones suppositi* 293), but what comes across most clearly in the passage’s wider context is not only the danger of women’s snares, but also the fact that even the wisest of men are susceptible to intellectual hiccoughs. That concupiscence is antithetical to wisdom was (and still is) a common notion. What makes Solomon so fascinating is the fact that even his boundless knowledge was no defense for the innate weakness of the flesh. No small amount of head-scratching was done in the Middle Ages in an attempt to get a cognitive grasp on Solomon’s lesson. (Philip of Harveng, one of Bernard of Clairvaux’s antagonists, even composed a treatise entitled *Responsio de damnatione Salomonis*.) Consequently, then, his grave failing lends itself effortlessly to the exemplum.

The numerous instances, both in literature and in art, of a respected man who loses all — or loses out — thanks to his inability to resist a woman’s charms is a motif from which more can be gleaned by looking at the figures involved than at the polygenetic plot itself. Among these, we may count not only Dante and Solomon but Adam, Samson, Hercules, Hippocrates and many others as well. Some of the most widely known and most appreciated versions dealt with wise or culturally weighty men precisely because of the apparent incompatibility of reason and lust. Jacques de Vitry is one of the first named compilers of one particular legend that was subsequently disseminated even more widely in the *Lai d’Aristote* of Henri d’Andeli. According to the tradition, Alexander the Great, having grown weary of his teacher’s moralizing on the evils of temptation, arranged to have him cede to the enticement of his mistress (Phyllis, Campaspe [better known in literature for her role as the irresistible model of Apelles; cf. Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, 35.79–97] or Pankaste depending on the version). She promised him her sexual attention provided that he allow her to ride him like a horse. Once the Philosopher had assumed this rather undignified equine position, however,



Aristotle and Phyllis (detail), Malterer Tapestry, 14th century, Augustiner Museum, Freiburg im Breisgau

Alexander popped out of hiding to expose the hypocrisy of his master. If Solomon is the chief example of the amusing tale of the *lapsus sapientis* in the Judeo-Christian line and Aristotle in the Greek, it should not be surprising that we find Vergil in the Roman. According to his legend (meticulously traced by Compagnone in the well-known study *Virgilio nel Medioevo*), Vergil is delighted when the daughter of the Emperor of Rome agrees to meet with him. She convinces the poet, however, that their amorous rendezvous is possible only if he gets inside a box, sometimes a basket, that will be hauled up to her window. To Vergil's great



The Triumph of Love (including Aristotle in the foreground and Vergil suspended in the background), salver, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

dismay (but to the enjoyment of the reader), he is left suspended in the air to be derided by the citizens of Rome. Although Boccaccio does not elaborate expressly on the anecdotes related to Aristotle and Vergil, there can be little doubt that he, like most of his contemporaries, was familiar with them.

In any event, what concerns us here is not an adaptation of a particular tale or even the smoking gun that is always affectionately polished and prominently displayed by source seekers; we are reconstructing an unabashedly anachronistic “Boccaccian” reading of the lessons to be learned by America’s fascination with Clinton’s folly. It seems worthwhile at this point to open a volume of Boccaccio’s letters, specifically to the one sent to the “Mavortis milex extrenue,” in order to see *luxuria* at work firsthand:

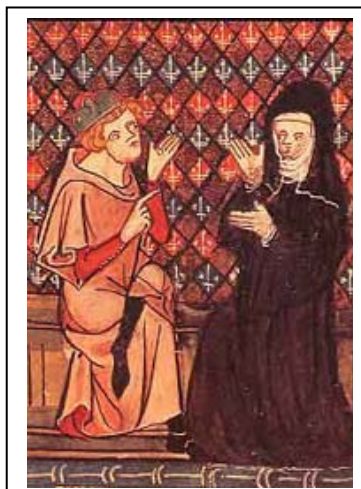
Sed cum iam nox iret in diem, et ego penes busta Maronis securus et incautus ambularem, subito suda mulier, ceu fulgur descendens, apparuit nescio quomodo, meis auspitiis undique moribus et forma conformis. O! quam in eius apparitione obstupui! Certe tantum quod magis aliud videbar esse quam ego, ymmo quod admodum larvale simulacrum me sciebam; et sic exterminatus animi actonitus in amentia vigilans sonniabar, dstrictis adeo diu pupulis an vigilarem scire querebam. Tandem stupor subsequentis thonitruu terrore cessavit. Nam sicut divinis corruscationibus illico subcedunt tonitrua, sic inspecta flamma pulcritudinis huius, amor terribilis et imperiosus me tenuit atque ferox, tanquam dominus pulsus a patria post longum exilium sola in sua repatrians, quidquid eius contrarium fuerat in me vel occidit vel expulit vel ligavit. ... Sed quid? Post diutinam lassitudinem gratiam merui dominantis,

quam ego alacris, inargutulus tamen, per tempusculum conservavi. (p. 1066 in the P. G. Ricci, Ricciardi ed.)

While it is true that this passage comes in large part from Dante's epistle to Moroello Malaspina (and that some critics, though less convincingly, encourage us to believe the *mulier* there is Lady Philosophy), one would do well to follow Ricci's notes down to the references to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* III.22, a passage of foggy-headed forehead-rubbing on the morning that follows Lucius' Bacchic lovemaking with Photis. If Boccaccio's correspondent (Petrarch?) were up on his reading, the overturning (or elaboration) of Dante's encounter would seem quite entertainingly racy indeed. It takes little imagination to conjure up a wild love scene in Vergil's Naples although the fling lasted only *per tempusculum*, precisely the phrase Boccaccio used in his discussion of the fleeting duration of lust's pleasures. Anyone who spends too much time reading Dante (as in Sermini's thirteenth novella) and not enough with Apuleius may miss here the intensity of our author's passions. The "trouble with women," we may conclude, is not just that they lead men into temptation and anguish. We know that much from innumerable Scripture passages, sermons and lived experience (not to mention this year's obligatory re-reading of the *Canzoniere*). The greatest danger lies in the fact that men cannot resist them (*W le papere!*) and that the intellectual must face the inevitable distractions they present.

Among the innumerable examples of the perplexities faced by scholars in love, perhaps the most distressing (especially for those with castration anxiety) is that of Abelard and Heloise. In this passage from the *Historia calamitatum* Abelard paints a clear picture of the struggle between the intellectual and the emotional:

Quid plura? Primum domo una coniungimur, postmodum animo. Sub occasione itaque discipline, amori penitus vaccabamus, et secretos recessus, quos amor optabat, studium lectionis offerebat. Apertis itaque libris, plura de amore quam de lectione



Abelard and Heloise, ms. of the *Roman de la Rose*, 14th c., Musée du Condé, Chantilly

verba se ingerebant, plura erant oscula quam sententiae; sepius ad sinus quam ad libros reducebantur manus, crebrius oculos amor in se reflectebat quam lectio in scripturam dirigebat. ... Et quo me amplius hec voluptas occupaverat, minus philosophiae vaccare poteram et scolis operam dare. Tediosum mihi vehementer erat ad scholas procedere vel in eis morari; pariter et laboriosum, cum nocturnas amori vigilias et diurnas studio conservarem. Quem etiam ita negligentem et tepidum lectio tunc habebat, ut iam nichil ex ingenio sed ex usu cuncta proferrem, nec iam nisi recitator pristinorum essem inventorum, et si qua invenire liceret, carmina essent amatoria, non philosophiae secreta; quorum etiam carminum pleraque adhuc in multis, sicut et ipse nosti, frequentantur et decantantur regionibus, ab his maxime quos vita similis oblectat. Quantam autem mestitiam, quos gemitus, que lamenta nostri super hoc scolares assumerent, ubi videlicet hanc animi mei occupationem immo perturbationem presenserunt, non est facile vel cogitare.

This description (if you can get over the temptation to see in it the amicably despicable Humbert Humbert after a morning lecture at Bard College) sums up the real mental turmoil that lies at the root of the problem. This inescapable conflict, whose waters are only muddied

by ubiquitous misogynistic motifs in so many other writers, is doubtlessly the aspect that troubled Boccaccio most.

How can one reconcile the very human desire to love with the grand pursuit of knowledge? There are two sides to this debate and Boccaccio weighs in on both. Before letting ourselves be compassionately convinced by the despondency of an Abelard or a Fiammetta (and before putting down the *Corbaccio* to ponder the *Decameron's* suggestion that *Amor vincit omnia*), we should take another look at Boccaccio's translation of Jerome's *Adversus Iovinianum* (Esp. XVI.28–44). At its beginning he writes:

Recita santo Ieronimo in un libro, il quale egli compose *Contro a Gioviniano eretico*, che Teofrasto, il quale fu solenne filosofo e uditore d'Aristotile, compose un libro il quale si chiama *De nuptiis*, e in parte di quello domanda se il savio uomo debba prender moglie; e avvegna che egli, a se medesimo rispondendo, dicesse, dove ella sia bella, ben costumata e nata d'onesti parenti, e se esso fosse sano e ricco, il savio alcuna volta poterla prendere, incontanente aggiunse che queste cose rade volte intervengono tutte nelle noze, e però il savio non dover prender moglie, per ciò che essa, inanzi all'altre cose, impedisce lo studio della filosofia, né è alcun che possa a' libri e alla moglie servire.

These ideas are completely harmonious with the sympathetic biographer's style of the *Treatatello*, the text to which we shall now return simply because it is the one that comes closest to giving us insights on Clinton. Just about all of Jerome's letter comes through here as well (cf. esp. 2nd redaction, §§ 36 and 39–46), but it is in the first redaction that Boccaccio reaches a more practical, evenhanded conclusion: “Adunque tra tanti e tali (scil. other victims of love) non iscusato, ma, accusato con assai meno curva fronte che solo, può passare il nostro poeta” (§ 174). The ex-president, then, when all is said and done, is no different from countless others who have gone before him. We should be no more inclined to see an unforgivable scandal in the Lewinsky affair than a tear-jerking love story, even though it may occasionally be entertaining to comment vigorously on one side or the other. It is, at the end of the day, true that Clinton “hurt himself by his foolishness.” Whereas the vast majority of pundits cast this situation as an imponderable puzzle, however, common experience should prove far more useful to anyone who sincerely wants to come to grips with it. Perhaps a helpful parallelism can be drawn between the sermons of the *predicatori* and the press of the mass media: what Clinton did was inappropriate and his actions condemnable. Handier still is a comparison at the level of the individual: only the arrogant or the obtuse would fail to see that the intellectual who falls to temptation despite its risks — whether Solomon, Vergil or even Clinton — embodies a moral lesson for whomever wishes to learn from it. In short, more can be derived by approaching the *lapsus sapientis* from the earthier perspective of the literary anecdote; we may learn more about ourselves from the image of Clinton in a wicker basket than Clinton in a witness box.

In conclusion, especially for those who were hoping in these pages to see some political mud slinging, we should bring up one other little fact that has frequently gone unnoticed, if only for the benefit of those Republicans who would prefer to judge the “natural vice” from the saddle of a white steed (or very large ermine). This past spring, Lynne Cheney, wife of vice-president Dick Cheney and mother of the gay activist Mary Cheney, successfully stopped Penguin USA's attempt to reprint her 1981 bodice-ripper entitled *Sisters*, a historical romance set in the Wild West that includes brothels, attempted rapes and a lesbian love af-

fair. The protagonist of the book is Sophie, a condom-carrying Wyoming woman (condoms in the Wild West?) who runs away from convent school to join the theater. There she comes under the influence of a music-hall celebrity who teaches her how to “enjoy” men, but not get “trapped.” Yes, it is fiction; but the ideas here are all the same. A sample paragraph for the curious:

“Let us go away together, away from the anger and imperatives of men. There will be only the two of us, and we shall linger through long afternoons of sweet retirement. In the evenings I shall read to you while you work your cross-stitch in the firelight. And then we shall go to bed, our bed, my dearest girl.”

Admittedly not the type of prose that would really keep one burning the midnight candle, it is nevertheless informed by the same base — but so human — fascination with lust (celebrated serial sexual gratification fairly described under the rubric *De luxuria*) that may now cause one to stifle a snicker at the water cooler upon hearing about the efficiency of an intern.

But wait. What about Paula Jones, Gennifer Flowers? Linda Tripp’s button-hole microphone? ... *No; guarda e passa, ché voler ciò udire è bassa voglia.*

MICHAEL PAPIO

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST