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SOMNIUM AND *VISIO* IN THE *DECAMERON*

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SUMMARY

The article focuses on dreams and visions in Boccaccio's Decameron. *Starting with medieval dream categorization and interpretation, both classical and popular influences are explored, showing how Boccaccio combines them in an original perspective, in which the truthfulness of dreams relies on the accuracy of their premonitions rather than their factual or historical content.*

A careful assessment of Lisabetta da Messina's novella brings out subtle psychological and moral nuances, through a dark but suggestive symbolism, as the main character defies authority and 'waters' her lover's severed head with her tears, thus generating a figurative offspring in the basilico plant.

A comparative analysis of Boccaccio's novella on Nastagio degli Onesti and Passavanti's text dwells on the importance of supernatural references and highlights a radical subversion of moral values. Boccaccio appears to depart from tradition, as he ascribes worth to love and abandonment instead of restraint, framing the concept of 'superstition' in a new, positive context.

Medieval sensibility drew a line between two experiences today commonly referred to as dreams: *visio* and *somnium*. The origin and nature of dreams and vision-related phenomena in the classical and medieval mindset may be broadly divided in two categories: one endogenous, the other exogenous. Endogenous phenomena depend on a condition of the subject experiencing the dream, while exog-

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enous phenomena are usually transcendent or divine in nature. The significance of this distinction accounts for the prolific, almost obsessive tendency to sort different types of dreams during the Middle Ages. Correct placement of the dream was of paramount importance, preceding and influencing the interpretation of the dream itself.
Dream interpretation starts with narrating or writing the dream, to make it more objective, and with setting some parameters or *exempla*, to guide analysis. However *exempla* are sometimes fictitious and this creates a paradox, as an imaginary dream becomes a model and benchmark for real dreams. Thus the border between reality and fiction is blurred, lending itself to myriad interpretations. This plasticity is especially appealing to the modern reader, but it requires him to part with his definition of objectivity and focus primarily on identifying the nature of a dream (i.e. physical, divine etc.), which is by far more important for Boccaccio and his contemporaries. Delcorno captures the essence of the medieval *exemplum* thus:

> *L'exemplum, pur nella sua stranezza, risulta perfettamente comprensibile e verisimile, dimostrando l'attendibilità di certi sogni [...] Nella mentalità medievale il meraviglioso fa parte integrante dell'universo, si incontra e si confronta con la sfera dell'esperienza quotidiana [...] posto di fronte ad un evento meraviglioso il lettore medievale deve decidere non già se esso sia verisimile, ma se esso ricada nella categoria dei mirabilia naturali, o non sia piuttosto un miracolo, o una diablerie, cioè un finto miracolo, costruito dalla scienza diabolica mediante la manipolazione dei processi naturali*[1].

In addition to these categories, the religious repertoire provides an ample source of inspiration. Medieval Christianity witnesses an explosion not only of New Testament literature but also of countless *exempla, miracula, legendae* which further strengthen the medieval mind's tendency to classify and sort. The medieval audience is therefore exposed to abundant literature on sacred and transcendent subjects (both orthodox and unorthodox), encouraging reflections on

this subject. The 'hybrid' nature of visions and dreams, which often combines opposite elements such as reality and fantasy or night and day, lends itself to mediating the human and transcendent realms, almost acting as a passageway into the other world. From antiquity to the Middle Ages, treaties have attempted to explain phenomena such as dreams and visions which, despite escaping rationalization, are somehow seized by collective imagination and iconography, helping those experiencing mysterious occurrences unravel them.

This article addresses the question if - and to what extent - Boccaccio shared this medieval interpretative system. It would seem that Boccaccio sometimes regarded dreams and visions from a much more personal and subjective perspective, borrowing heavily from popular culture (as opposed to classic sources). While he certainly drew from the erudite ecclesiastic tradition, he also related to the vast illiterate Christian population of his time, imbued with Pagan elements and divinatory practices that created folk "interpretative keys" to dreams. Boccaccio is perhaps halfway between the extremes, swaying in one direction or the other based on the particular "needs" of each *novella*. The fact that there was no absolute canon on dreams certainly allowed him to work with a degree of flexibility if not ambiguity.

Consequently, the *novelle* are free from the need to portray factual reality, and carry symbolic references of another, polysemic reality which, like a dream, reveals and mystifies at the same time. This means that further to a first reading, other interpretations of apparently straightforward excerpts become possible.

Having established this, how should one perform a not-literary interpretation of the *novelle*? The dream is halfway between the present and future from a medieval perspective[2], or between the conscious and subconscious mind in modern terms, or –perhaps simply, between presence and absence, where things (usually) mean something else.

I believe that the logic behind dreams is based on a "replacement" mechanism. This logic is the matrix of symbolic disguise created by Boccaccio in the *novella*. I will refer to this *ars combinatoria* as transitional *lingua* and *linguaggio*[3]. For example if we think about the word *vaso,* in addition to its "denotative" value (that is, the meaning words normally hold for all of us), the word acquire a "connotative" one (in other words an individual meaning) or in our case a "boccaccian" meaning in the context of the *novella*. Hence Boccaccio transforms the literary text into a privileged arena in which to explore the depth human of affections in fantastic combination.

The *novelle* explicitly dedicated to dreams are: IV,5; IV,6; IX,7; in addition, somehow connected to dreams or to the effects induced by dreams and sleep are III,3; III,8,; IV,2; VII,1;VII,9; VII,10 and lastly IX,6. The theme of III,8 Ferondo's *novella* (false dreams) is connected with Homer's ivory gate and the idea of involuntary dreams. In addition to Homer, the theme also appears, among others, in St. Thomas, who believed that the dead could communicate with the living through dreams (such as those entertained by relatives or lovers, as in Elisabetta's case). This helps us understand why Boccaccio attributes the following words to the young lady: *Messere, a queste notti mi sono appariti più miei parenti e parmi, che egli sieno in grandissime pene, e spezialmente la mamma mia.* (III,3,31) Our understanding of this and other *novelle* would certainly benefit from a comprehensive examination of folk beliefs on dreams, and particularly from analyzing the idea of dreams *pro remedio animae*. The practice of narrating dreams, and of sometimes deliberately misleading or manipulating the reader/listener by recounting a false dream, seemed to be widespread, indirectly attesting a strong faith in dreams (and related phenomena, such as sleepwalking) and their ability to convey a message, as in some novelle.

Let us start our analysis with the *novella* on "Lisabetta da Messina", one of the most popular and controversial in the *Decameron*, which

has by and large defied a thoroughly satisfactory interpretation to date. Part of the problem lies in Boccaccio's habit of mixing classical and popular sources throughout his masterpiece; more specifically, dreams in this episode have a picklock function[4]. Failure to understand Boccaccio's use of dreams inevitably hinders our critical judgment of the story, as Getto aptly notes:

> *Nel Boccaccio, più che la fenomenologia del sogno, interessa la fenomenologia dell'azione dal sogno determinata; più che l'arabesco di immagini del sogno, importa il rapporto fra il sogno e l'azione: l'inserirsi del sogno nell'azione, come guida all'azione...*[5].

In other words, dreams serve the purpose of introducing the didactic goals which the author wishes to illustrate.
While the story about Elisabetta and the basilico vase is well-known, some uncertainties remain regarding its interpretation and the song it cites. If we focus on the novella's narrative structure, we realize that its beginning defies exact placement[6]. Does the novella begin at its rubric?

> *I fratelli d'Ellisabetta uccidon l'amante di lei: egli l'apparisce in sogno e mostrale dove sia sotterrato; ella occultamente disotterra la testa e mettela in un testo di bassilico, e quivi sù piagnendo ogni dí per una grande ora, i fratelli gliele tolgono, e ella se ne muore di dolor poco appresso (IV, 5, 1).*

The rubric seems to tell all, yet Boccaccio does not give us any indication of where the story takes place or of the main characters' social status, elements which he conversely provides on the onset (or rather at the 'second' beginning) for Filomena:

> *La mia novella, graziose donne, non sarà di genti di sí alta condizione come costoro furono de' quali Elissa ha raccontato, ma ella*[7] *per avventura non sarà men pietosa: a ricordarmi di quella mi tira Messina poco inanzi ricordata, dove l'accidente avvenne (IV, 5, 3)*

This beginning contains a *captatio benevolentiae,* as Filomena seems apologetic in announcing that the protagonists of her story are of humble social standing. This implies that they cannot possess moral qualities, which is why Filomena focuses on their physical qualities, in stark contrast to IV, 4. Elisabetta is *assai bella e costumata*, while the Tunisian king's daughter *era una delle più belle creature che mai dalla natura fosse stata formata, e la più costumata e con nobile e grande animo* (IV, 4, 5-6); Lorenzo is described as *assai bello della persona e leggiadro molto*, while Gerbino is *bellissimo giovane e famoso in prodezza e in cortesia* (IV,4,4). Thus Filomena rightly points out that the peculiarity of the story does not consist in the protagonists' status but in another element, which emerges as the story unfolds.
The following excerpt may be regarded as a third beginning:

> *Erano adunque in Messina tre giovani fratelli e mercatanti, e assai ricchi rimasi dopo la morte del padre loro, il quale fu di San Giminiano; e avevano una loro sorella chiamata Elisabetta, giovane assai bella e costumata, la quale, che che se ne fosse cagione, ancora maritata non avevano (IV, 5, 4).*

The excerpt may be regarded as a third 'beginning' for at least three reasons: first of all the use of the imperfect tense and of the adverb '*adunque'* introduces the time at which the events take place; secondly, half-way through the *giornata*, a similarity between this novella and that of Tancredi e Ghismonda appears: both women are unmarried, Ghismonda has *di molti anni avanzata l'età del dovere avere avuto marito*, while our heroine *ancora maritata non avevano*. Thirdly, the word *giovani* - instead of brothers - is no accident, as they have been referred to as brothers throughout the episode, only to resume the name of *giovani* after the tragic turn of events in the novella and their flight from Messina (IV, 5, 21). Boccaccio ceases to call them *fratelli* as they leave the foreground, almost to mark their

'unfraternal' conduct. This detail is important if we compare it to IV, 1: here, too, we could read an incestuous passion (in Elisabetta's brothers toward her) into the *novella*, along the lines of Tancredi and Ghismonda. Therefore trigger for their actions lies not only in commercial reasons, as Branca suggested, but maybe also in a mad frenzy or *matta bestialitade* - in our case an uncontrollable passion and jealousy.
In addition to three different beginnings, there also appear to be three endings. The first is in IV, 4, 23:

> *La giovane non restando di piagnere e pure il suo testo adimandando, piagnendo si morì, e così il suo disaventurato amore ebbe termine.*

Here the plot comes to an end, yet Boccaccio's conclusion (introduced by the conjunction 'ma') seems to connect to the previous passage, encompassing the entire story:

> *Ma poi a certo tempo divenuta questa cosa manifesta a molti, fu alcun che compuose quella canzone la quale ancora oggi si canta, cioè:*
> *Qual esso fu lo malo cristiano, che mi furò la grasta, et cetera. (IV, 5, 23-24)*

However, it is not clear if the expression 'divenuta questa cosa manifesta' should be interpreted as Lisabetta's death, as in IV, 5, 23, or as Lorenzo's brutal murder, since Lisabetta's brothers

> *si meravigliarono forte e temettero non questa cosa si risapesse: e sotterrata quella, senza altro dire, cautamente di Messina usciti e ordinato come di quindi si ritraessono, se n'andarono a Napoli (IV, 5, 22).*

In other words, there seems to be an emotional echo of IV 5, 22 rather than of IV, 5, 23. The ending does not exhaust the story's narrative drive; it is only in IV, 6, 2 that an apparently unrelated, preexisting fact is finally clarified to the party:

> *Quella novella che Filomena aveva detta fu alle donne carissima, per ciò che assai volte*[8] *avevano quella canzone udita cantare né mai avevano potuto, per domandarne, sapere qual si fosse la cagione per che fosse stata fatta.(IV, 6, 2)*

In this novella Boccaccio ennobles the dream with many classical references (particularly to Apuleius and Vergil). These coexist with popular or folk references (such as the "canzone del basilico") which in turn dignify the humble characters of the story. Their "nobility" is entrusted to history: not to a "noble" history such as history of aristocratic love affairs but to a popular ballad, which leaves judgment up to the common man and gives the episode its proverbial popularity.

Boccaccio wants his readers to believe the plot is based on a true story, although this cannot be proved. Indeed, while it is true that he merely "copies" a well-known text, to expand on it and offer a historical perspective, the Sicilian origin of the novella and song has never been proven[9].

Branca's exclusively commercial motive for the action fails to convince entirely:

> *Il tema della novella è proprio il pietoso, sconsolato appassire e morire del fiore dell'amore nel terreno indurito dall'assoluto dominio della ragion di mercatura*[10]*,*

as Bailet notes: *Expliquer la nouvelle par l'unique* ragion di mercatura *ne nous sembre pas suffisant*[11].

In approaching this aspect, we must appreciate the importance of the "culture of honor" in medieval society. In fact many actions in the Decameron actions are kept secret in order to avoid dishonor[12]. After Elisabetta's brother discovers her affair with Lorenzo, he keeps it secret to avoid marring her reputation: *acciò che né a loro né alla sirocchia alcuna infamia ne seguisse*.

Additionally, there is another detail that needs to be brought to the foreground: the previous novella may somehow trigger a conscious or subconscious association with Lisabetta's story in that it, too, deals with a severed head: [king Gugliemo]

> *il condannò [Gerbino] nella testa e in sua presenzia gliele fece tagliare, volendo avanti senza nepote rimanere che esser tenuto re senza fede (IV, 4, 26).*

Boccaccio himself seems to suggest an incestuous nuance on linguistic, thematic and psychological levels. Elisabetta's affair is discovered by her eldest brother, who acts as the father figure in this scenario. Boccaccio describes his reaction upon learning about the relationship as follows: "per ciò che savio [here the word 'savio', which literally means wise, stands for acquainted with the ways of the world, and therefore unlikely to be surprised by the discovery of a love affair] giovane era, quantunque molto noioso [the term 'noioso' means painful and suggests insufferable jealousy] gli fosse a ciò sapere". Somewhat similarly to Tancredi's behavior, whose morbid passion lead him to coldly planned revenge, love here turns into hatred and violence.

From a broader perspective, all characters are moved by love, in one way or another: whether it is an impious and incestuous passion as in Elisabetta's brothers, or a legitimate and humane emotion like that of Ghismondo and Elisabetta, nobody can resist the compelling reasons of the heart, even when they turn into 'matta bestialitade'.

However, nobility is at stake. As appropriate for his social standing, Tancredi recognizes his mistake and seeks to make amends by showing respect for the young lovers' affair. In contrast, while the vulgar, matter-of-fact merchants perhaps understand the lovers' reasons, they flee from their responsibilities. In making an extreme decision, King Guglielmo does not falter and keeps his promise, while the brothers' lowly 'merchant' behavior is committed to memory by Boccaccio's testimony.

Interestingly, Elisabetta's dream casts a premonition of the tragic event, while also covering a wider narrative spectrum which will be analyzed shortly. After the murder, Elisabetta desperately seeks Lorenzo, invoking his presence (*il chiamava e pregava che ne venisse*; IV, 5, 11). Of course, she does not know the truth and assumes he is away on business on her brothers' behalf, finding it difficult to probe them further without exposing herself, or worse, thereby risking humiliation and threats:

> *Che vuol dir questo? che hai tu a far di Lorenzo, che tu ne domandi così spesso? Se tu ne domanderai più, noi ti faremo quella risposta che ti si conviene. (IV, 5, 10)*

As Lorenzo's absence grows longer, Elisabetta gives in to despair, and considers the possibility she may have been abandoned.
It is no surprise, therefore, that in the dream Lorenzo almost 'aggressively' justifies his absence:

> *O Lisabetta, tu non fai altro che chiamare e della mia lunga dimora t'atristi e me con le tue lagrime fieramente accusi; per ciò sappi che io non posso più ritornarci... (IV, 5, 13).*

However, given the violent crime which he has suffered, why is Lorenzo's primary concern to avoid blame and prove to Elisabetta that he did not abandon her? Perhaps he needs to reassure her that he is not unfaithful, as Boccaccio previously describes him as a very active lover: *lasciati altri suoi innamoramemti di fuori, incomincio' a porre l'animo a lei* [Elisabetta]. Thus the dream serves to dignify Lorenzo, proving he is not just a lowly factotum for her brothers, and that he has not taken advantage of Elisabetta's weakness or betrayed her trust.
Lorenzo cannot return, if not as a vision (until when he resurfaces as head/vase/lover) as he explains to Elisabetta: *per ciò che l'ultimo di*

che tu mi vedesti i tuoi fratelli m'uccisono. (IV, 5, 13) The description of the crime is brief and once again focuses on Lorenzo's commitment, without indulging on the violence he has suffered, a fact that seems to almost condone Elisabetta's brothers' behavior.
Toward the end of the dream Lorenzo gives Elisabetta clear directions: *designatole il luogo dove sotterrato l'aveano, le disse che più nol chiamasse né l'aspettasse, e disparve* (IV, 5, 13). His active role seems to end here, with a strong indication that Elisabetta should not bestow her love on a dead person, but rather move on and pursue a new life[13].
In addition to subtle psychological menanings, the novella contains supernatural and magic elements, such as the miraculous preservation of Lorenzo's body:

> *ella trovò il corpo del suo misero amante in niuna cosa ancora guasto né corrotto: per che manifestamente conobbe essere stata vera la sua visione. (IV, 5, 15)*

Lorenzo is described as 'misero' because no one - except for Elisabetta - has bothered to look for him: his humble social standing appears to make him useless to the world. Elisabetta's vision is truthful with regard to the burial site but less accurate about his appearance; in the vision he is described *as pallido e tutto rabbuffato e co' panni tutti stracciati e fradici* (IV, 5, 12). However, it may be argued that the adjective 'fradici' is a symbolic reference to Elisabetta's tears, serving to preserve him intact and fresh (as shall happen to the *basilico* later).
Other examples of supernatural elements in the *Decameron* (IV, 5) are the references to herbs and to the number three. Hecates, who was frequently invoked in necromantic and magic spells, is also present in Boccaccio's masterpiece. It was believed that the goddess could cast a love spell, or save a troubled relationship. Typically, the prepa-

ration of a magic potion or filter involved reciting a formula while using highly symbolic ingredients. Tradition portrays Hecates in her underground dwellings, where her priestesses, Circe and Medea, pick plants with miraculous powers. Ovid lists *aconitum* among these plants, which is thereafter referred to as 'Hecates' herb'. According to legend, Cerberus (the mythic three-headed dog, guardian of the other world) created the herb, while Hercules dragged him out of Hades (but another tradition links his ancestry to the eagle-torn Prometheus). One senses there is a connection, worthy of further inquiry, with Elisabetta's *novella* and it is safe to say that Ovid was Boccaccio's main source for the topic.

The number three and Cerberus' three heads resurface throughout the novella: Lorenzo's head is buried three times, first by Elisabetta's evil brothers, then by Elisabetta herself in the vase, and finally by her brothers again. The corpse's head is charged with symbolic meaning, serving as the part which represents the whole (body), as well as the person which once inhabited it. It fuels a new love ritual, on the verge of madness, in place of the original affair. The liaison, however distorted, has a "maternal" nuance: Elisabetta waters Lorenzo's severed head, now buried in the vase, with her tears, giving birth to a symbolic offspring: the *basilico*. And so from death comes life (although eventually this new form of love is cruelly broken off as well). Some readers have emphasized the similarity between this story and some ancient fertility rituals, in which burying the head of a Vegetation god, at the beginning of winter, ensured pollination of the plants in Spring.

In itself an object, the word *vaso* also symbolizes Lisabetta's desire of his lover Lorenzo. The word acts on two levels: as *lingua*, it refers to the physical reality, as *linguaggio*, it evokes an emotional truth through an object. Elisabetta's brothers are long cut out of this second, deeper meaning as they understand only the *lingua*, but fail to grasp the innuendo of *linguaggio*. It is only when the *real/symbolic* presence of the lover is reveled that they undertsand. Through this distinc-

tion, the *novella* imbues a common, "insignificant" with profound meaning. This action requires an unwritten agreement between author and reader, who must share the same interpretative key, forcing us modern readers to familiarize ourselves with medieval symbols, lest we apply contemporary categories to the reading of the *novelle*.

Unlike other novelle, this novella portrays an asymmetric, contrasting and unnatural reconciliation. The two lovers are not buried together - Lorenzo stays in Messina[14] and Elisabetta presumably in Naples - whereas, for instance, Tancredi puts Ghismonda and her lover together: *amenduni in un medesimo sepolcro gli fe' seppellire* (IV, 1, 62).

Boccaccio's theory on dreaming it is largely represented in IV, 6, 3-7. Panfilo seems to build on Lisabetta's *novella*, emphasizing the divinatory power of dreams by announcing that he will recount two dreams (had by Andreuola and Gabriotto), whose premonitions turned immediately true: *appena furon finiti di dire da coloro che veduti gli avevano che 'effetto segui' d'amenduni* (IV, 6, 3). Thus Boccaccio seems to stress -and believe in--the truthfulness of dreams, although he then proceeds to clarify that dreams are caused by a very specific sleep condition:

> *...general passione è di ciascun che vive il vedere varie cose nel sonno, le quali quantunque a colui che dorme, dormendo, tutte paian verissime, e desto lui, alcune vere, alcune verisimili e parte fuori da ogni verità giudichi... (IV, 6, 4)*

So far, his reasoning seems full of common sense. It is only the state of sleep that lends a feeling of truthfulness to dreams; as soon as we wake up we are able to distinguish clearly between dream and reality and thus understand that that which we just experienced was a dream. The ending is somewhat ambiguous in that the dream is not described as real in itself, at least not in the moment in which it is experienced; however it is real to the extent in which it may have a premonitory function.

Thus the distinction between sleep and dream comes to a close, not without reinforcing that "varie cose" perceived in dream have come true: *nondimeno molte esserne avvenute si truovano* (IV, 6, 4).
Hence neither total credulity nor skepticism are entirely justified by Boccaccio. After Andreola tells Gabriotto her dream *questo se ne rise e disse che grande sciocchezza era porre ne' sogni alcuna fede*[15] (IV, 6, 13). However, this dismissal later proves fatal. Panfilo continues: *Per la qual cosa molti a ciascun sogno tanta fede prestano quanta presterieno a quelle cose vegghiando vedessero* (IV, 6, 5). In the fourth paragraph, the truthfulness of dreams is divided into three categories, that is: things believed to be *"vere...verisimili ...e fuori da ogni verità"*(IV, 6, 4), but this truthfulness lies in the dreamer's perception, somewhat along the lines of Winnicott's "inner reality". The new categorization is an outer one and deals with whether the image perceived while dreaming turns into factual, historical reality. While Panfilo's advice is not entirely clear, he seems to steer clear of both credulity and skepticism.
Finally, alongside dreams, superstition and love are key components of the Decameron, which seems to distance itself from tradition. Passavanti's *Il carbonaio di Niversa* is one of Boccaccio's most important sources. It tells the story of a "carbonaio" who hears cries in the middle of the night and leaves his home determined to uncover their origin and cause; he sees a knight pursuing a naked woman, who then stabs her and throws her into a coal mound. This scene repeats itself for many nights thereafter, until the "carbonaio" calls on his friend the Count of Niversa, to witness the fact. Together they await the scene, which once again unfolds around midnight. The count, summoning all his courage, finally decides to confront the knight and asks him why he continuously pursues the woman, eventually throwing her into the mound. The knight explains that she was is his lover in life and that she killed her husband, in order to be with him. As they died, God perceived the lovers' true repentance,

and therefore inflicted temporary punishment upon them instead of eternal damnation. The punishment consists in throwing the woman into the fire as a symbol of the "burning" passion she felt for her lover in life, based on the law of "contrappasso". The *exemplum* will be borrowed by Boccaccio in the *novella* on Nastagio degli Onesti, although from an entirely different perspective: here the tale is not employed to scare devout simpletons, but to exhort them to love, creating a new, positive idea of superstition

Nastagio's unhappy love makes him retire to Chiassi, where a young naked woman flees from chasing dogs and a black knight. Having observed this, Nastagio decides to intervene, but the knight prevents him from doing so, because this is the woman's destiny. The knight tells Nastagio that he loved this woman, just as Nastagio loved the young Traversaro. But his love was unrequited and the knight committed suicide with the same dagger which he wears today. When the young woman died, she was damned to hell, not for 'excess' of love or passion, but rather for the lack of it.

The knight also tells him that this punishment would last for as many years as the months during which she turned the knight away and that the flight would take place every Friday in the same place and time. The rest is famous; among Nastagio's *accidenti* there is space for the supernatural and also for a "hellish pursuit", frequent motive in texts intended for moral enlightenment. The use of this material in Boccaccio is altogether different and original, though.

Hellish pursuits or hunts are very common, from Vincenzo de Beauvais's *Speculum historical* to Passavanti. In these authors, the *topos* of the pursuit and devouring of the sinner is used to uplift and enlighten, serving as an *exemplum* intended to inspire fear and thereby trigger redemption. Boccaccio also uses this typical medieval setting, although changing its spirit or rationale profoundly, in fact subverting it completely. This *novella* is an exemplary text and should be kept in mind when approaching the complex problem of the author's "medi-

eval" character. Typically, medieval authors regarded abandonment to love as sinful, as witnessed by Dante in the famous fifth *canto* of the *Inferno* (in the famous episode on Paolo and Francesca from Rimini); in contrast Boccaccio seems to condemn resistance to love, implicitly encouraging his contemporaries to open up to the feeling. This is an extraordinary subversion of traditional mores and religious norms, in a rather worldly perspective, from which superstition emerges as new, uncharted territory.

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1. DELCORNO C., *Exemplum e letteratura*. Il Mulino, Bologna, 1989, pp.104-105.
2. Whereas in our post-Freudian century we look to dreams to find in our past experiences key-elements to the analysis of our Selves, in antiquity dreams were an anxiety-laden source of information on the future. See, for instance, Genesis 20,3 3; 20,6-7 and particularly books 37, 40; or Numbers, 12. However Deuteronomy (13 and 18, 9-12) condemns the practice of dream divination associating it with Paganism and demonic seduction.
3. In English, the word tongue usually refers to a part of the body. The Italian equivalent "*lingua* " is somewhat more ambiguous in that it is commonly used to refer to both the organ and the phonetic, grammatical, syntactic system that makes up a language. In English, on the other hand, "language" does not allow for the differentiation and nuance made possible in Italian by the use of "lingua", which we may roughly equate with verbal communication, and "linguaggio" which may be equated with "non-verbal" communication, referring, for instance, to any set of not-verbal signs that serve for communication (color language among bees, road signs etc.).
4. The *giornate*, *novelle* and episodes are a merely structural subdivision and sometimes do not start or end a specific story. Here for example the explanation of the basilico song appears in IV, 6, therefore after the end of IV,5.
5. GETTO G., *Vita di forme e forme di vita nel Decameron*. Petrini, Torino, 1958, p.131.
6. Alberto Cirese presents a similar point of view in: *Lettura antropologica*, *Il testo moltiplicato lettura di una novella del Decameron*. Parma, Pratiche editrice, 1982, pp.103-123
7. Does 'ella' refer to Elissa or to the story which Filomena is about to tell? Does she seek empathy for the humble from the very narrator of aristocratic love?
8. Boccaccio emphasizes the story's popularity through the words '*assai volte'*
9. Cfr. COLUCCIA R, *Tradizioni auliche e popolari nella poesia del Regno di Napoli in età angioina*. In: Medioevo romanzo II, 1975;1: 44-153.
10. BRANCA V. B.*, Medievale*. Sansoni, 1964, p.88.

11. BAILET M.H., *L'homme de verre*. Nice, Antenore, 1972, p.111.
12. Cfr. II, 8; II, 9; III, 1; III, 2; III, 7; IV, 5; IV, 6; VII, 4; VIII, 4; VIII, 9; IX, 6; etc
13. USHER J., *Ars moriendi in the Decameron*. The Modern Language Review 1986; 81: 621-632.
14. I refer here to Lorenzo's last burial.
15. Perhaps in the episode there is an echo of Cicero's warning: *"irrideamus haruspices vanos futiles"* (*De Divinatione*, I, 18-19).

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