

Introductory Note¹

A celebration of the seventh centenary of Giovanni Boccaccio's birth, volume 31th of *Annali d'italianistica* has pursued ambitious goals since its announcement in 2011: to offer a comprehensive reading in English of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. While readers will ultimately assess to what extent this volume of *Annali* has achieved these goals, I, as editor, will nevertheless seek to illustrate what these goals were and the extent to which I believe that they have been achieved.

Following a longstanding and hallowed scholarly tradition, this volume, to begin with, provides an essay on each of the ten days of the *Decameron*. Thus ten scholars have written an extensive analysis of each day focusing on the day's tales, evincing their interconnections within the same day's and other days' tales and within the *Decameron* at large. Furthermore and most importantly, all ten essays dealing with each day of storytelling — albeit to varying degrees — deal with every day's additional components, including the *brigata*'s various activities and the ballad at the end of each day. Here, then, lies one of the several and major innovations of this volume: a conscious, concerted, and scholarly attempt to give their due to the group's various activities and the evening ballads; that is, not just to the tales avulsed from their context but also to the *brigata*'s overarching tale, or *novella portante*.

In fact, several components of the *brigata*'s overarching tale have been traditionally neglected: the many activities of the *brigata* from early in the morning until late in the evening and the ballad at the end of each day. Other components, unjustly relegated to insignificance, include the garland woven by Filomena in the morning of the first day spent outside the city and worn by each of the ten young people as well as the circular position taken by the seven young ladies upon deciding to leave the city and by the entire group in several other circumstances: when they narrate the tales and also when they dance in a group at the end of each day while accompanying the evening song of the solo singer.

Concerning the evening ballads, this volume offers two extensive essays: one on the ballad sung by Emilia, who sings her evening song at the end of Day One, and one on the ballad sung by Fiammetta at the end of Day Ten, that is, on the eve of the group's return to Florence. In anticipation of a volume consisting

¹ The illustrations reproduced on the left page of the ten essays devoted to each day's tales are taken from: *Il Decamerone di M. Giovanni Boccaccio*. In Lione. Appresso Gulielmo Rovillio, 1555. This volume is part of the Rare Book Collection of the Wilson Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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of a study dealing entirely with all ten ballads, these two essays seek to demonstrate the fundamental importance of the ballads in the overall development of the *brigata*'s overarching tale and thus of the entire masterpiece. These two essays offer an additional feature, hardly ever pursued by Boccaccio scholars: the analysis of the solo singer's ten tales, to be contextualized within each of the ten days of storytelling as well as in reference to the singer's ballad. Thus, these two essays on the first and last ballad offer also what I have called a transversal reading of the *Decameron*'s tales; namely, the reading of the ten stories narrated by the evening singer, one tale after the other, cutting across the entire ten days of storytelling. Readers of these two essays — and of the forthcoming volume on all ten ballads — will decide the extent to which this transversal reading of the one hundred tales adds to the understanding of each individual character's and the entire group's overarching tale.

An additional major characteristic of this volume is also the emphasis on the presence of the Boccaccio persona within the text and on the overall structure of the life of the ten young people. Thus the volume's first essay — “The *Decameron*'s All-Encompassing Discourse: Topoi of the Poet, Women, and Critics” — seeks to assess the Author's role in the Proem, next at the beginning of Day One, in the Introduction to Day Four, and in the Author's Conclusion at the end of the masterpiece. Ultimately, the Boccaccio persona's fourfold discourse, which encloses structurally the entire masterpiece, becomes itself a story: that of the jilted, comforted, compassionate, generous but also suffering and open-minded Author; a story, in brief, which is fundamental for the proper assessment of the entire masterpiece.

Finally and very importantly, as the volume's second essay and the ten essays on each day illustrate, this study's overall thrust points to the reading of the entire masterpiece — the fourfold discourse of the Boccaccio persona; the *brigata*'s story; the one hundred tales; and the ten ballads — as a rewriting of the Christian Middle Ages. The *Decameron* thus emerges precisely as Francesco De Sanctis outlined it, about a century and a half ago, in a few, very pithy words: to the reader who approaches Boccaccio after reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Decameron* is striking — De Sanctis writes — in that it does not show an evolution but rather a revolution, a catastrophe, or even a mockery: “Non è una evoluzione, ma è una catastrofe, o una rivoluzione, che da un dì all'altro ti presenta il mondo mutato. Qui trovi il medio evo non solo negato, ma canzonato” (*Storia della letteratura italiana* 1.314). And herein lies the justification of this volume's title and overall contribution: The *Decameron* as the rewriting of the Christian Middle Ages. Although none of the nine contributors dealing with Day One through Nine expresses this reading explicitly, their essays corroborate this parodic reading of the *Decameron* which I develop primarily in the second and last essay of this 31st volume of *Annali*.