Maggie Fritz-Morkin
Res humiles: Boccaccio and Biblical Allegory

> *"His spirituality was much too alive and situated in history for him to have been content with anything that was allegorical in a purely abstract way".*
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> E. Auerbach[1]

The confessions of San Ciappelletto, prodigious liar and "il piggiore uomo forse che mai nascesse [perhaps the worst man who was ever born]" (*Decameron* I 1,15), are an early indication that stories about lying will be of primary interest to the *brigata* of narrators and their Author[2]. Given that Dante had dedicated no less than half of his *Inferno* to a meticulous taxonomy of fraud and its eternal consequences, Boccaccio's renewal of deception as a prominent theme in the *Decameron* appears as an

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[2] G. Almansi also reads *Dec.*, I 1 as a forecast for the collection as a whole in *The writer as liar. Narrative technique in the* Decameron, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1975, p. 24. His chapter *Literature and falsehood* (pp. 19-62) explicates the novella at length as symbolic of literature itself, and of the literary process. Cepparello's delight in lying is analogous to a writer or artist giving free rein to their artistic genius; creativity and deception go hand-in-hand. All citations of the *Decameron* are taken from G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, vol. I-II, ed. V. Branca, Einaudi, Torino 1980[3]. The English text is cited from G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. W. A. Rebhorn, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2013.

inheritance passed from the first great Italian poet to the next generation. What he could not inherit, however, was the kind of certainty regarding the divine order of the universe that Dante embedded in the premise of the *Commedia*: the poet was merely an eyewitness to the realms of the afterlife, and not their creator. Impossible, after the epistemological shock of plague. The *Decameron* exists in a new reality in which any sense of order had fallen away, subsumed by the fear and expectation of death. Whether God intended the wave of calamity as a collective punishment against all humanity, or its horrors simply came from terrible luck in the stars, the *Decameron*'s Author cannot say[3]. He gives us a world, as S. Barsella notes, in which signs (especially the pestilence) have become indecipherable, improbable, and ambiguous – and his work must account for such a contingent existence[4]. Boccaccio's fascination with the social and epistemological fallout of misrepresentation is bound up with an earthly purview of truth that is limited by human perception: fallible, contingent, clouded, open-ended. Even the fate of Ciappelletto, the narrator Panfilo insists, cannot be certain[5]. Despite the exuberant false testimony of his deathbed confession, Panfilo declares that "egli poté in su lo stremo aver sí fatta contrizione, che per avventura Idio ebbe misericordia di lui e nel suo regno il ricevette [it is possible that at the very point of death he became so contrite that God took pity on him and accepted him into His kingdom]" (*Dec.*, I 1,89).

In framing the *Decameron* on such shaky epistemological grounds, Boccaccio retraces the central problems of Augustine's two treatises on lying, *De mendacio* (ca. 394-5) and *Contra mendacio* (ca. 420)[6]. Rather than offer-

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[3] See *Dec.*, I Intr., 8-9. For a thoughtful account of Boccaccio's painstaking efforts in the Author's *Introduction* to Day One to avoid a 'medieval' sort of certainty in the plague's divine origin, see K. Flasch, *Poesia dopo la peste. Saggio su Boccaccio*, trans. R. Taliani, Editori Laterza, Roma 1995 (1992), pp. 50-54. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this reading to me.

[4] S. Barsella, *The Merchant and the Sacred: Artefice and Realism in* Decameron *I.1*, in "Quaderni d'italianistica", Vol. 38.2, 2017, p. 16. For the plague's damage to the credibility of academic medicine, see S. Barsella, *Natural Asymmetries: Medicine and Poetry in* Decameron *IV.9 and* Decameron *VIII.9*, in "MLN", Vol. 134.Supp., 2019, pp. 56-63.

[5] The confession scene contributes to what Flasch describes as an "Ockhamist flavor" ("gusto ockhamista", p. 93) of *Dec.*, I 1. It serves as proof that true repentance is not something that one can see or verify – one corollary of Ockhamist epistemology emphasizing the impossibility of true knowledge of the mind of others (or of God), *op. cit.*, pp. 91-101.

[6] Editions and translations cited here are A. Augustini, *De mendacio*, in PL 40.487-518; *Lying* in *Saint Augustine. Treatises on Various Subjects*, ed. R. DeFerrari, trans. M. Muldowney, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 1981[3], pp. 53-110; *Contra mendacio*, in PL 40.518-548; *Against Lying*, in *Saint Augustine. Treatises on Various Subjects*, ed. R. DeFerrari, trans. H. Jaffee, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 1981[3], pp. 125-179. Essential bibliography on Augustine's treatment of lying includes E. Hermanowicz, *Augustine on Lying,* in "Speculum", Vol. 93.3, 2018, pp.

ing methods for uncovering concealed truths, Augustine is concerned with how to live in a world where lies go undetected more often than not, and I argue that Boccaccio drew on these works far more deeply than has previously been noted[7]. Augustine's argumentation in both treatises proceeds via analyses of morally ambiguous historical and hypothetical occasions for falsehood. A side-by-side reading with the *Decameron* would reveal an ungovernable number of points of contact between the deceptions that Augustine contemplates and the schemes, tricks, and stratagems that we encounter in the novellas – at least for the purposes of this essay. The following close reading of the first novella, however, should offer foundational evidence for Boccaccio's structural engagement with the treatises. I further demonstrate that he was particularly attuned to the hermeneutic problems presented in *De mendacio* and revisited in *Contra mendacio*. Augustine puzzles over a group of biblical narratives of people lying with apparent divine approbation: how to reconcile these with the absolute condemnation of lies given by eighth commandment, numerous subsequent scriptural passages, and his own philosophical analysis[8]? In the second section below, I outline how Boccaccio adapted the very same biblical plots for his novellas, perhaps alerted to their literary appeal or their potential to scandalize readers by the treatises themselves. Augustine's solution to the question of deceptive acts in Scripture is to read them figurally, and unique aspects of his excursus on figural representation in *Contra mendacio* may shed light on Boccaccio's biblical reworkings. To show how these two treatises might shape our interpretation of the *Decameron*, I conclude with a reading of the Griselda story (*Dec.*, X 10) in light of Augustine's reflections on figurative language and figural events in the story of Job – a reading that connects the lived experience of history in the time of plague to the temporality of both Griselda's and Job's suffering. Scriptural echoes in the *Decameron*'s

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699-727; D. G. Denery II, *The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2015; Id., *On Lying: Introduction*, in "Speculum", Vol. 93.1, 2018, pp. 72-77; H. G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (1986), Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

[7] Despite the wide circulation of *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio* throughout the Middle Ages, I am aware of only one scholar who has brought these treatises into brief conversation with the *Decameron*. T. Curcio perceives a numerological connection between the Day Eight theme of trickery, the 8th commandment not to bear false witness, and Augustine's eight types of lies outlined in the *De mendacio* – a connection that Curcio sees as reinforced by the common use of *De mendacio* as an interpretive key for the 8th commandment. T. Curcio, *The Decalogue in the* Decameron, Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2020, pp. 80-81.

[8] Augustine interprets the commandment against bearing false witness as a "genere complectitur omne mendacium: quisquis enim aliquid enuntiat, testimonium perhibet animo suo [classification [in which] every lie is embraced, for whoever pronounces any statement gives testimony of his own mind]", *De men.*, V 6. For additional discussion of Augustine's group of biblical liars, see D. G. Denery II, *The Devil Wins*, cit., pp. 116-118.

real-world narratives thus offer a corrective to a Dantean figural-Christian[9] mimesis, whose power has collapsed in a semantically destabilized world.

1. On the Mendacity of Cepparello-Ciappelletto (*Dec.,* I 1)

The *Decameron*'s first tale offers the clearest example of how Boccaccio engaged with Augustine's theory of lying. Panfilo opens the *brigata*'s first day of storytelling with a theological statement of God's benevolence and gracious tolerance of human error. Directed at a *noi* that includes his companions and extends to humanity in general, his message addresses our limited understanding in times of uncertainty, flux, and upheaval[10] (the subtext for the *brigata*, of course, is the destabilizing, destructive force of the plague)[11]. It is also the lesson of his inaugural novella:

> E ancor più in Lui, verso noi di pietosa liberalità pieno, discerniamo, che, non potendo l'acume dell'occhio mortale nel segreto della divina mente trapassare in alcun modo, avvien forse tal volta che, da oppinione ingannati, tale dinanzi alla sua maestà facciamo procuratore che da quella con eterno essilio è iscacciato. E non dimeno Esso, al quale niuna cosa è occultata, più alla purità del pregator rigurardando che alla sua ignoranza o allo essilio del pregato, così come se quegli fosse nel suo cospetto beato, essaudisce coloro che 'l priegano. Il che manifestamente potrà apparire nella novella la quale di raccontare intendo: manifestamente, dico, non il giudicio di Dio ma quel degli uomini seguitando. (*Dec.,* I 1, 5-6)

> And yet in Him, who is generous and filled with pity for us, we perceive something more. Although human sight is not sharp enough to penetrate the secrets of the divine mind in any way, it sometimes happens that we are deceived by popular opinion into making someone our advocate before Him in

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[9] This essay revises Auerbach's assessment that "of the figural-Christian conception which pervaded Dante's imitation of the earthly and human world and which gave it power and depth, *no trace is to be found in Boccaccio's book*" (my emphasis). Yet his declaration that "Boccaccio's characters live on earth and only on earth" holds true just as it does for the biblical characters they sometimes echo. In other words, whatever concrete events may eventually be recognized as prophetic, their hidden spiritual meanings have yet to be revealed. See E. Auerbach, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953), trans. W. R. Trask, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003, p. 224.

[10] Cf. "le cose temporali tutte sono transitorie e mortali […] piene di noia, d'angoscia e di fatica e a infiniti pericolo soggiacere […] viviamo mescolati in esse [the things of this world are all transitory and fading […] filled with suffering, anguish, and toil, as well as being subject to countless dangers […] we live in the midst of these things and are a part of them]", *Dec.,* I 1,3.

[11] S. Barsella similarly frames Panfilo's epistemology in the context of plague in *The Merchant and the Sacred*, cit.; K. Flasch speculates that Boccaccio's post-plague theology and epistemology may have been shaped by Ockham's philosophy, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 91-101.

all His majesty whom He has cast into eternal exile. And yet He, from whom nothing is hidden, pays more attention to the purity of the supplicant than to his ignorance or to the damned state of his intercessor, listening to those who pray as if their advocate were actually blessed in His sight. All of this will appear clearly in the tale I intend to tell – clearly, I say, not in keeping with the judgment of God, but that of men.

Set as a preface to the *Decameron*'s celebration of human *ingegno* and its exploits, this exculpation of false opinions formed in good faith[12] mirrors Augustine's similar distinction at the beginning of *De mendacio*:

> Quapropter videndum est quid sit mendacium. Non enim omnis qui falsum dicit mentitur, si credit aut opinatur verum esse quod dicit. Inter credere autem atque opinari hoc distat […]. Quisquis autem hoc enuntiat quod vel creditum animo, vel opinatum tenet, etiamsi falsum sit, non mentitur. Hoc enim debet enuntiationis suae fidei, ut illud per eam proferat, quod animo tenet, et sic habet ut profert. (*De men.*, III 3)

> The first problem, then, centers upon the question as to what constitutes a lie, for the person who utters a falsehood does not lie if he believes or, at least, assumes that what he says is true. There is a distinction between believing and assuming. […] Whoever gives expression to that which he holds either through belief or assumption does not lie even though the statement be false. For, he owes this expression of his view to his faith, so that through faith he voices that which he holds in his mind and he expresses it just as he understands it.

Only after excluding falsehoods mistaken for truth can Augustine define the lie and illustrate all the forms it might take. He settles on a definition that hinges on the liar's intent: "enuntiationem falsam cum voluntate ad fallendam prolatam, manifestum est esse mendacium [It is clear, then, that a lie is a false statement made with the desire to deceive]" (*De men.*, IV 5). Every subtype of deception he subsequently identifies will have this much in common, while distinguishing itself according to context, content, and the liar's good or bad intentions.

In framing the lie in terms of the intent to deceive, Augustine arrives at a central question of his treatise, and one which also must also appeal to the *brigata*: whether good intentions or some noble goal can justify the intentional deception of others. Dante, in contrast, sidesteps the question by defining fraud both by its goal of injustice and its harmful effect

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[12] Neifile reiterates the principle before beginning the *Decameron*'s second novella: "'Mostrato n'ha Panfilo nel suo novellare la benignità di Dio non guardare a' nostri errori quando da cosa che per noi veder non si possa procedano' ['In his storytelling Panfilo has shown us how the benevolence of God disregards our errors when they result from something we cannot understand']", *Dec.*, I 2,3.

on others[13]. Its divinely ordained place at the bottom of Hell precludes any righteous application of lying, and shades who proclaim good intentions for deception are portrayed as delusional[14]. Dante's taxonomy of fraud leaves no room for the kind of moral deliberations carried out by Augustine – and by the *brigata* as they judge the actions of one another's protagonists.

In *Decameron* I 1, one Ser Ciappelletto (né Cepparello) lies dying in Burgundy, a guest in the home of two Florentine moneylenders. In his exposition, Panfilo flashes Ciappelletto's life before our eyes as a living embodiment of the ten broken commandments or seven deadly sins[15], or, in S. Barsella's words, "a character risen from the Dantean *bolge* to symbolize malice"[16]. While his biography is an artfully narrated compendium of sin, the events that unfold in the narrative time of the novella resonate more clearly with Augustine's eight types of lies, and with his implicit hypothesis of a well-intended and beneficial lie. His classification, summarized in order from the most detestable lies to the least harmful:

1.   Lies told in the teaching of religion [*in doctrina religionis*[17]]
2.   Lies that harm someone unjustly, and help no one
3.   Lies that harm someone without defilement and benefit someone else
4.   Lies told solely for the pleasure of lying [*sola mentiendi fallendique libidine*], or the "real lie"
5.   Lies told out of a desire to please others [*placendi cupiditate de suaviloquio*]
6.   Lies told to someone other than a judge, which harm no one and help someone at risk of harm

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[13] "D'ogne malizia, ch'odio in cielo acquista, / ingiuria è il fine, ed ogne fine cotale / o con forza o con frode altrui contrista [Of every malice gaining the hatred of Heaven, injustice is the goal, and every such goal injures someone either with force or fraud]", *Inf.,* XI, 22-24. All citations from the *Commedia* are taken from D. Alighieri, *Commedia*, 3 vol., ed. A. M. Chiavacci Leonardi, Milan, Mondadori 1991; *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri,* 3 vol., ed. and trans. R. Durling, R. M. Martinez, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997-2013.

[14] See especially the devil's logical proof of Guido da Montefeltro's guilt despite his pre-emptive penitence: "'ch'assolver non si può chi non si pente, / né pentere e volere insieme puossi, / per la contradizion, che nol consente' ['for he cannot be absolved who does not repent, nor can one repent and will together, because of the contradiction, which does not permit it']", *Inf.*, XXVII, 118-120.

[15] S. Marchesi shows that Ciappelletto's confession does not, in fact, proceed according to any penitential manual's standard order of sins (e.g. the seven deadly sins; the Decalogue), but rather follows Dante's idiosyncratic ordering of sins in *Inferno*. S. Marchesi, *Fiction with Fiction: Confessing to Dante in* Decameron *I.1*, in "Quaderni d'Italianistica", Vol. 38.2, 2017 p. 164.

[16] S. Barsella, *The Merchant and the Sacred*, cit., p. 22.

[17] This list synthesizes Augustine's two expanded summaries of the eight types, which occupy *De mendacio*'s chapters XIV and XXI. When included, Latin expressions are cited verbatim from *De men.*, XIV 25.

7. Lies told to someone other than a judge, which harm no one and help someone at risk of death
8. Lies that harm no one and protect someone from physical defilement

If we review the novella's plot through the lens of these categories, we will find overlaps at the center and the extremities of Augustine's list. Ciappelletto's sudden illness and imminent demise set the story in motion. From his sickbed, he overhears his hosts catastrophizing about what awaits them after his death:

> "Che farem noi" diceva l'uno all'altro "di costui? […] il mandarlo fuori di casa nostra così infermo ne sarebbe gran biasimo e segno manifesto di poco senno, veggendo la gente che noi l'avessimo ricevuto prima e poi fatto servire e medicare così sollecitamente […] D'altra parte, egli è stato sí malvagio uomo, che egli non si vorrà confessare né prendere alcuno sagramento della Chiesa; e morendo senza confessione, niuna chiesa vorrà il suo corpo ricevere, anzi sarà gittato a' fossi a guisa d'un cane. E, se egli si pur confessa, i peccati suoi son tanti e sì orribili, che il simigliante n'averrà, per ciò che frate né prete ci sarà che 'l voglia né possa assolvere: per che, non assoluto, anche sarà gittato a' fossi. E se questo avviene, il popolo di questa terra, il quale sí per la volontà che hanno di rubarci, veggendo ciò si leverà a romore e griderà: 'Questi lombardi cani, li quali a chiesa non sono voluti ricevere, non ci si voglion più sostenere'; e correrannoci alle case e per avventura non solamente l'avere ci ruberanno ma forse ci torranno oltre a ciò le persone: di che noi in ogni guisa stiam male se costui muore." (*Dec.*, I 1, 23-26)

> "What are we going to do about this guy?" said one of them to the other "[…] if we kick him out of our house, as sick as he is, people would condemn us for doing it. Plus, they'd really think we're stupid since we didn't just take him in at first, but also went to great lengths to find servants and doctors for him […] On the other hand, he's been such a bad man that he won't want to make his confession or receive any of the sacraments of the Church, and if he dies without confession, no church will want to receive his body, and they'll wind up tossing him into some garbage pit like a dog. But if he goes ahead and makes his confession, the same thing will happen. Since his sins are so many and so horrible, no friar or priest will be willing or able to absolve him, and so, without absolution, he'll be tossed into a garbage pit just the same. And when that happens, the people of this town – both because of our profession, which they think is truly wicked and which they bad-mouth all day long, and because of their desire to rob us – well, they'll rise up and riot when they see it. And as they come running to our house, they'll be screaming, 'These Lombard dogs that the Church refuses to accept, we won't put up with them any longer!' And maybe they won't just steal our stuff, but on top of that, they'll take our lives. So, no matter how things work out, it'll be bad for us if this guy dies."

Especially vulnerable as immigrants working in a stigmatized profession, the Florentine brothers sense that bad publicity will follow Ciappelletto's death. They predict that their guest will be left to rot in unconsecrated ground, which in turn will incite the native Burgundians to mob violence against their own lives and property. The moneylenders' fears thus tee up Ciappelletto's opportunity to tell Augustine's sixth, seventh, and eighth types of lie, protecting the lenders from material harm and murder, and himself from *post mortem* defilement. Naturally, Ciappelletto seizes the opportunity. While his false confession aims to please his audience (type five) and himself (type four) the more spectacular it becomes[18], it is noteworthy that Ciappelletto's original goal is to save his companions' lives. Lying to save someone's life is Augustine's best candidate for justifiable deception in *De mendacio*[19], and he revisits it with conditional tolerance in *Contra mendacio*[20]. Augustine ultimately dismisses lies of the seventh and eighth types, calling it unreasonable to save someone else's mortal life at the expense of one's own immortal soul[21]. Ciappelletto confesses anyway, a mysterious act that whispers, "maiorem hac dilectionem nemo habet, ut animam suam ponat qui pro amicis suis [greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends]" (*John* 15,13)[22].

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[18] Boccaccio's readers are, of course, complicit members of this audience: "our aesthetic palate is greedy for this type of falsehood which we read off against the grid of things as we actually know them to be. The story of Cepparello suggests itself as a model of art's systematic and high-handed deformation of the truth", G. Almansi, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[19] Augustine considers the example of a fugitive, guilty or innocent, sought for capital punishment by an authority empowered by just laws or sheer force. He argues that while it is good not to betray the fugitive's location (as delaying his death increases his chances for salvation), it is a mortal sin to give false testimony to a righteous judge. Rejecting the lie, Augustine suggests a moral workaround: one should tell investigators "'scio ubi sit, sed nunquam mostrabo' ['I know where he is but I will never disclose it']" and brace oneself for painful interrogation. See *De men.*, XIII (24). That Augustine thrice states the impropriety of sacrificing one's eternal life (through the mortal sin of lying) to save another's mortal life should be read as a sign of his struggle to put the question to rest, notes E. Hermanowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 707.

[20] Cf. "mendacia non esse imitanda monstrentur, et si qua nobis ut alia peccata subrepserint, non eis tribuendam justitiam, sed veniam postulandam" [lies ought not be imitated, and […] if any lies, like other sins, steal upon us, they should seek not to be justified but to be pardoned], *Contra men.* XVII (35).

[21] *De men.* VI (9) and VII (10). E. Hermanowicz underlines Augustine's lifelong evolution on the morality of lying to save someone's life, noting that his hardline position against this type of lie in *De mendacio* is softened in *Contra mendacio* and other later texts as Augustine begins to judge lying by its effects as well as intent. Gregory, for example, cited Augustine in support of applying the strictest moral standards only to the *perfecti* (i.e. those who have taken holy orders), allowing that *imperfecti* do not sin in telling "necessary lies" (*Moralia in Job* VIII 3,5-7); cited in E. Hermanowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 706-7, 724.

[22] Jesus imagines a man who lays down "animam suam" – not merely his life, but his soul. All scriptural citations of the Bible and New Testament are taken from the Latin Vulgate

If Ciappelletto exemplifies Augustine's "true lie" and his best case for a beneficial lie, we ought to check as well for Boccaccio's engagement with the worst kind of lie named in *De mendacio*. In fact, there is a clear example of someone spreading falsehoods while teaching religion: the holy friar who confessed Ciappelletto repeats his lies with great passion, seeding a thriving cult of veneration around an extravagantly wicked idol. Not all falsehoods are lies, however: believing what he heard, and with no intent to deceive, the credulous friar is doubly blameless by Augustine's standard, and by Panfilo's moral gloss of his novella. There is little to admire about the dupe, but the friar is nonetheless Panfilo's chosen avatar for *noi* who read his story, for *noi* who receive God's merciful generosity when *noi* are tricked into misdirecting our devotion. The chance to recover from honest mistakes, Boccaccio and Augustine agree, frees us to pursue what's right. It is an essential condition for the project of the *Decameron*: born of good intentions, any errors spoken by the *onesta brigata* or Author can be accommodated through divine grace.

2. Biblical Provocations, or Life Finds a Way

The *Decameron*'s first novella appears to translate the definitions, distinctions, and moral questions of *De mendacio*, bringing Augustine's essential guideline (i.e. the judgment of intent) to bear on the *brigata*'s subsequent actions and moral deliberations. This section offers a different sort of evidence for Boccaccio's engagement with the treatises. I suggest that he paid close attention to Augustine's ongoing struggle with a group of biblical narratives that undermined his treatises' absolute condemnation of lying. In this handful of passages, God's chosen protagonists lie and deceive with no apparent consequences, the absence of which seems to imply divine approval. Since Augustine's most important injunctions against lying also came from Scripture[23], the stories of deception in *Genesis* and elsewhere create incoherence on an issue for which he most needed[24] clarity. Others had not addressed these scriptural

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and Douay-Rheims American Edition. I use 'Bible' instead of 'Old Testament', except when discussing the text as understood from a Christian figural perspective.

[23] In the Decalogue: "non loqueris contra proximum tuum falsum testimonium [Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor]", *Exod.* 20,16; "quod mentitur occidit animam [the mouth that belieth, killeth the soul]", *Wisd.* 1,11.

[24] The historical context for *De mendacio* is Augustine's dispute with Jerome about the presence of defensible falsehoods in New Testament Epistles, which Augustine feared would lead Christians to doubt the truth of the New Testament. *Contra Mendacio* responded to the deceptive inquisitorial strategies and sting operations that fanatical orthodox Catholics were using to uncover the heresies of Priscillianist Christians in Toledo.

inconsistencies in a satisfactory way, or at all: "Nec illis quae de veteribus Libris mendaciorum exempla prolata sunt, terreri se dicunt [they who take their stand against lying do not admit that they are disturbed by examples of lies cited from the Old Testament]" (*De. men.,* V 7). As in his major works[25], Augustine turns to figural or typological hermeneutics, reinterpreting the concrete historical events of the Old Testament as veiled prophecies to be fulfilled by the advent of Christ and revealed in the New Testament. What is unique about his figural hermeneutics in *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio* is that he explains figural signification in the narrow context of potentially scandalizing deception narratives. In the following pages I survey Augustine's group of scriptural puzzles and suggest that Boccaccio adapted several of these same narratives in the *Decameron*[26]. Given the scope of this essay, I aim to sketch just enough of Boccaccio's biblical reworkings to show that he may indeed be reacting to the passages and themes indicated by Augustine. Each example merits deeper consideration amidst growing interest in Boccaccio's biblical exegesis. I suspect that future study will show that he integrated scriptural narratives[27] with more frequency and nuance than has previously been observed[28], often to add moral texture to the unruly sexuality depicted in

Even those who argued against the use of infiltrations and stings were unable to explain why similar actions in Scripture were permissible.

[25] Augustine's figural hermeneutics throughout his corpus reconcile existing modes of interpretation that treat the Old Testament as essentially allegorical or historical; Auerbach gives special attention to *De civitate Dei*, *De trinitate*, *De Genesi ad litteram*, *Sermones*, and *Enarrationes in psalmos*. E. Auerbach, *Figura*, cit. pp. 84-89.

[26] This section builds on my previous study of Boccaccio's adaptation of the Tamar story, in M. Fritz-Morkin, *Obscene Exchanges*, in *The* Decameron *Eight Day in Perspective*, ed. W. Robins, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2020, pp. 55-58. For Tamar's narrative in *Dec.*, III, see W. Doniger, *The Ring of Truth and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 155-59.

[27] To name just a few promising examples that merit closer study: the Abbot-princess who redeems and weds Alessandro (*Dec.*, II 3) restages the unconventional courtship scenes and marriage of Boaz and Ruth (*Ruth* 2-4). Calandrino's bitter pills (*Dec.*, VIII 6) and impossible childbirth (*Dec.*, IX 3) evoke the Ordeal of Bitter Water imposed on suspected adulteresses (*Num.* 5), while his stoning at the Mugnone (*Dec.*, VIII 3) echoes a biblical punishment for adulteresses (*Deut.* 22; *John* 8).

[28] *Dec.*, III, 1 is lexically connected to Eden (*Genesis* 1-3) in V. Kirkham, *Love's Labors Rewarded and Paradise Lost* in "Romanic Review", 72, 1981, p. 91; cf. M. Eisner, *Eroticizing Theology in Day Three and the Poetics of the* Decameron*,* in *Boccaccio's* Decameron*. Re-writing the Christian Middle Ages*, "Annali d'Italianistica", Vol. 31, 2013, pp. 197-215. T. Gittes has made several particularly compelling connections in *"Dal giogo alleviati": Free Servitude and Fixed Stars in* Decameron *9*, in *Boccaccio's* Decameron*. Re-writing the Christian Middle Ages*, "Annali d'Italianistica", Vol. 31, 2013, pp. 381-415. Tame wildlife in the plague-ravaged Tuscan countryside echoes the peaceable kingdom prophesied in *Isaiah* 65, p. 386; Calandrino mooning over Niccolosa at the well in *Dec.*, IX 5 recalls Jacob and Rachel in *Gen.* 29, 10; Calandrino becomes pregnant in a kind of Marian Annunciation in *Dec.*, IX 3, p. 392-5; Cecco Angiulieri in *Dec.*, IX 4 is a Prodigal Son after *Luke*

the *Decameron*. Augustine's treatises may in fact have helped Boccaccio recognize Scripture's potential to scandalize[29], making it a valuable literary source for plots and premises.

Most of the problematic episodes referenced in *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio* are concentrated in the post-diluvian chapters of *Genesis*, before God's commandments were set in stone[30], when people were guided by survival instincts, family relationships, and the divine mandate to "crescite et multiplicamini [increase and multiply]" the human family (*Gen.*, 1.28)[31]. Augustine's examples of deception in *Genesis* reflect ambiguities in these basic moral categories[32]:

> Ch. 18: Sara denies laughing at the idea of sexual pleasure at her age. (*De men.,* V 5)
> Ch. 19: Lot offers his daughters to be sexually violated by Sodomites to spare his male-presenting guests[33] from defilement. (*De men.,* VII 10; *Contra men.*, IX 20, XVII 34)
> Ch. 20: Abraham says Sarah is his sister (rather than wife). (*Contra men.*, X 23)
> Ch. 26: Isaac says Rebecca is his sister (rather than wife). (*Contra men.*, X 23)
> Ch. 27: Jacob impersonates Esau to receive Isaac's blessing. (*De men.*, V 5; *Contra men.*, X 24)

15, p. 396. J. Steinberg perceives echoes of Lot's incest (*Gen.* 19) in *Dec.* III 1; the good of procreation despite taboo sex seems fitting given the plaguetime mortality rate in *Boccaccio and the Daughters of Lot: Plague, Population, and Natural Law*, Lecture presented at the 2024 Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America. An essential bibliography of *Dec.*, X 10's Griselda as a Job- or Christ figure appears in the following section.

[29] "Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son più sante, più degne, più reverende che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sì sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto [What books, what words, what letters are holier, worthier, more to be revered than those of the Holy Scriptures? And yet there have been many who, by interpreting them in a perverse manner, have led themselves and others to perdition]", *Dec.*, Concl. Aut., 12.

[30] Noah disembarks (and God agrees never again to wipe out his creation) in *Genesis* 8; Moses receives the Ten Commandments in *Exodus* 20.

[31] Cf. M. Fritz-Morkin, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

[32] Augustine references four additional events in the Old Testament: the midwives lying to Pharaoh in *Exodus* 1, in *De men.*, V (5); *Contra men.*, XV (32), XVII (34); Jehu's false service to Baal in 4 *Kings* 10, in *Contra men.*, II (3); the Devil's bet that Job will "bless" (i.e. curse) God when tested in *Job* 2, in *Contra men.*, X (24), discussed below; Rahab's lie to protect her guests in Jericho in *Joshua* 2 and 6, in *Contra men.*, XV (32). See below for *Dec.*, X 10's reinterpretation of Job. I have listed Augustine's examples in the order they appear in the Bible, but of course he takes them up as they relate to points in his argument.

[33] Lot's guests are, in fact, angels. This story does not present a lie, but serves as Augustine's vehicle for analyzing whether one should commit a terrible sin in order to prevent an even worse one (the sexual defilement of men, according to Augustine).

Ch. 38: Tamar disguises herself to trick Judah into fornication. (*Contra men.*, XIV 30)
Ch. 42: Joseph sports with his brothers. (*Contra men.*, X 24).

Augustine's first biblical example centers female sexual pleasure, a topic of clear interest in the *Decameron*, and Sara appears in the wrong to suppress it. Several of the subsequent falsehood narratives involve unorthodox and/or problematic sexual relations; fornication of one type or another turns up in two thirds of Boccaccio's novellas. The stories of Jacob and Joseph, on the other hand, recount tricks they play on their fathers and brothers: the first in pursuit of his own advantage, and the second as payback for having sold him to merchants bound for Egypt – plots well-suited to the Day Eight theme of *beffe* [tricks]. Given Boccaccio's willingness to strip his sources for parts – tropes, themes, expressions – and shuffle them by sleight-of-hand into the *Decameron*, as R. Bragantini has recently observed[34], I do not wish to overstate the case for every intertextuality I suggest between Augustine's Scriptural selections and the novellas. Some motifs are common enough to other literary traditions and cultural contexts that further study would be necessary to gauge the depth and significance of Boccaccio's echoes of Scripture. I begin with those parallels that are simply thematic, followed by parallel plots which render the *Decameron*'s biblical adaptations more obvious.

The first (and most tenuous) connection follows the specter of sibling incest that is conjured in the falsehoods told first by Abraham and then by Isaac. Under similar circumstances, each tries to pass his wife off as his sister. Fearing for his life while passing through a foreign city, Abraham says Sarah is his sister. King Abimalech takes her, but stops short of sleeping with her when God warns him in a dream that she is Abraham's wife. Abraham's explanation is overwrought: "alias autem et vere soror mea est, filia patris mei, et non filia matris meae, et duxi eam in uxorem [otherwise also she is truly my sister, the daughter of my father, and not the daughter of my mother, and I took her to wife]" (*Gen.*, 20 12). Later, Isaac makes a similar claim about Rebecca while traveling through Abimalech's land, and subsequently has a lot of explaining to do when Abimalech spies the couple having sex (*Gen.*, 26). Augustine

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[34] A traditional philological approach of identifying sources is limited in its scope given Boccaccio's "strategia della volpe [strategy of outfoxing the reader]" in his liberal adaptation of sources. R. Bragantini, *Il* Decameron *e il Medioevo rivoluzionario di Boccaccio*, Roma, Carocci editore 2022, pp.113, 126-7; cf. Boccaccio's knack for culling "l'elemento grottesco" from *auctoritates* (e.g., Cicero, Virgil, Boethius, Augustine, Isidore, Aquinas) K. Flasch, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

dedicates a long paragraph[35] to parsing what Abraham and Isaac said and didn't say about their wives, and to working out various ways that 'sister' could be extended beyond a sibling with two shared parents. The high-stakes sexual norm encoded in an ambiguous term – some sisters are fine to sleep with, while others set off an instinctual taboo aversion – is a thematic bridge to a few stories in the *Decameron*. Andreuccio is eager for an encounter with sensual, seductive Fiordaliso, at least until she claims to be his long-lost sister (*Dec.*, II 5). Giannole di Severino brawls with Minghino di Mingole while attempting to abduct Giacomino's beautiful ward Agnesa, spends the night in jail, and is bailed out in the morning when relatives figure out that she's actually his long-lost sister; Giannole thus narrowly escapes incest thanks only to his rival's intervention, and not to his own instinct (*Dec.*, V 5)[36]. Finally, Dioneo's tale of Tingoccio and Meuccio (VII 10) is Dioneo's open challenge to the idea that a *comare* (godmother, mother of one's godchild) is just like a sister, and that sex with a *comare* should therefore be considered incest[37]. Initially ashamed of his lust for Monna Mita "per la cattività che a lui medesimo parea fare d'amare la comare [because it seemed wicked for him to be in love with the mother of his godchild]" (VII 10, 12), Tingoccio pursues her anyway and makes love to her so vigorously that he dies. When his spirit returns to tell Meuccio about the afterlife, we learn that there's a punishment for every sin, but only a fool would think it's wrong to love a *comare*: "di qua non si tiene ragione alcuna delle comari! [nobody's really concerned about the mothers of godchildren up here]" (VII 10, 27).

The story of Joseph begins in his youth, when he is the favorite of his father Jacob and increasingly resented by his brothers, who end up selling him to merchants bound for Egypt. The multi-year narrative arc of his life occupies the last quarter of the book of *Genesis*[38], but

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[35] *Contra men.*, X 23.

[36] Nota bene that Neifile's story confers no consequences for either man's attempt to rape Agnesa. The *podestà* grants Giannole leniency precisely because he is her brother by blood [*fratel carnal di costei*] (*Dec.*, V 5, 39), makes peace between the men and their families, and then awards Agnesa's hand to Minghino.

[37] The definition of incest under Canon law expanded significantly beginning with Gregorian reforms in the ninth century. Sex with close kin had long sparked horror, but new official prohibitions on marriage within seven (rather than four) degrees of kinship or spiritual affinity (including godparents) served the purpose of granting greater control over the marriage market, and did not reflect a new sensitivity to the horrors of incest. S. McDougall, *Marriage: Law and Practice*, in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Canon Law*, eds. A. Winroth and J. C. Wei, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022, pp. 456-7.

[38] Joseph's story begins in *Gen.*, 37, when his father's favoritism and his grandiose dreams annoy his brothers so much that they cast him into a pit to die and then, on second

Augustine is interested in the episode where Joseph gets his brothers back (*Gen.*, 42-45). They have come to Egypt in the midst of famine to buy grain, and Joseph, unrecognizable in his Pharaoh-appointed governing role, puts them through a series of tests: deceptive accusations of espionage, an uncannily precise interrogation about their sinful past, one brother detained, the youngest summoned from home on pain of death, precious silver planted as evidence of theft in the grain they buy. Augustine synthesizes these dramatic turns as "illud quod Joseph velut illudendis locutus est fratribus [what Joseph said in sporting with his brothers]" (*Contra men.*, X 24), and declares Joseph's actions to be prophetic or symbolic, rather than a lie, because they lead to truth and prepare a revelation that is sweeter and more joyful because of its challenges.

While Augustine only mentions the story in shorthand as an example, the long novella of Tedaldo (*Dec.*, III 7) mirrors several key narrative aspects of Joseph's carefully-orchestrated and protracted reunion with his family after many years in Egypt. Both episodes build toward an improbable happy ending after an initial rejection by loved ones and subsequent years in exile. Boccaccio divides the role of Joseph's brothers between Tedaldo's brothers and his beloved, Monna Ermellina. She is the one induced to repent by the disguised Tedaldo, who interrogates her in a foreign accent[39] with startling omniscience about her sin "che la divina giustizia […] non ha voluto lasciare impunito [that divine justice […] would not allow to remain unpunished]" (*Dec.*, III 7, 53), just as Joseph's brothers understood his trials as divine retribution for the unpunished sin of their youth[40]. Tedaldo's brothers also have their share of guilt, having mistakenly accused Ermellina's husband Aldobrandino of murdering Tedaldo and nearly bringing about his execution. Where there might have been rancor, Tedaldo facilitates reconciliation and friendship between the two families[41]. He finally casts off his pilgrim's garb and is recognized

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thought, wish to sell him to passing merchants, who in turn sell him in Egypt. *Gen.* 38 is dedicated to Judah and his progeny, and then *Gen.* 39 returns to Joseph and his rise as a prophet in Pharaoh's court.

[39] By appearing to rely on an interpreter (*Gen.*, 42,23-24), Joseph also uses linguistic difference to conceal his identity.

[40] Reuben's 'I told you so' spoken privately to his brothers uses similar terms of sin and repayment: "'numquid non dixi vobis: Nolite peccare in puerum: et non audistis me? en sanguis ejus exquiritur [did I not say to you: Do not sin against the boy: and you would not hear me? Behold his blood is required]'" (*Gen.*, 42,22).

[41] Tedaldo chanced to discover the real killers of the victim, a man who closely resembled him, enabling him to spare Aldobrandino's life and his brothers' responsibility for an unjust execution. Joseph takes an explicitly providential view of his brothers' crime: "pro

in his "giubba di zendado verde [doublet of green taffeta]" (*Dec.*, III 7, 89)[42], leaving "tutti di lagrime d'allegrezza pieni [all of them weeping tears of joy]" (90), just as Joseph wept with his brothers.[43] If Boccaccio saw that Augustine registered Joseph's deception simply in order to justify it, his own interest seems to have been in Joseph's meticulous stagecraft.

A more challenging story for Augustine is Lot's sacrifice of his daughters to the wicked men of Sodom, who were clamoring for sexual access to his male guests (*Gen.*, 19). He revisits the passage at length in both of his treatises not because it portrays unpunished deception, but rather to think through a sort of ancient trolley problem: should one commit the sin of lying in order to prevent an even worse sin from occurring? In his first treatise, Augustine interprets Lot's decision to allow his daughters' sexual violation to mean that one ought to sacrifice the inferior body (even its chastity or life) in order to protect the purity of the superior mind, which would be defiled by lying (*De men.*, VII 10)[44]. Decades later, however, he revisits the story and comes to a nearly opposite conclusion. He cautions against assuming that all Lot's actions are just, simply because God deemed him a just man worthy of saving out Sodom. The principle of committing one sin to prevent another now strikes Augustine as a slippery slope, without any moral boundaries whatsoever: "et si qua impietas visa fuerit etiam pejor incestis, incesta quoque facienda dicentur a nobis [if any impiety is observed even worse than incest, we shall find ourselves obliged to commit incest if it can be done in such a way as to prevent others from committing that impiety which is worse]" (*Contra men.*, IX 20)[45]. Lot's story (*Gen.*, 19) seems to shade the novella of Messer Neri and his guest King Charles (*Dec.*, X 6), although Boccaccio recombines and reverses some key points. Like the just Lot dwelling among the guilty and outrageous citizenry of Sodom, Messer

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salute enim vestra misit me Deus ante vos in Ægyptum […] ut reservemini super terram, et escas ad vivendum habere possitis [God sent me before you into Egypt for your preservation […] that you may be preserved upon the earth, and may have food to live]" (*Gen.*, 45,5-7).

[42] As a youth, Joseph is distinguished by his ornamented tunic [*tunica polymita*], a gift from his father (*Gen.*, 37,3).

[43] *Gen.*, 45,2 and 14-15; at both reunions the long-lost brother recounts his life's adventures leading up to this moment.

[44] *De men.*, VII 10.

[45] Augustine also notes that the principle could easily be weaponized by enemies who could threaten heinous crimes to incite one to very bad crimes. In *Contra men.*, XVII 34, he notes that Lot's guests are ultimately protected not by Lot's offer of his daughters, but by divine intervention; the lesson is that Christians should have faith in God's protection, rather than lie.

Neri is a virtuous man who abides "tra nazion non conosciuta e piena d'inganni e di tradimenti [among alien people who are extremely wily and treacherous]" (*Dec.*, X 6, 28); both protagonists provide refuge to distinguished guests (angels disguised as men, King Charles). If Lot's offer of his virginal daughters to the men of Sodom[46] struck Augustine as unthinkable, Boccaccio creates a situation that is more plausible and morally challenging. Messer Neri's twin daughters seem to be on offer to as they perform an erotic pageant of bathing, fishing, cooking, serving, and angelic singing[47], but they are set out before an honored guest, not enemies. Now we find echoes of the second part of Lot's story, which Augustine does not contemplate. Although King Charles is old enough to be the twins' father, his lust brings him to the brink of an unthinkable seduction. He regains his willpower only after a companion shames him, both for his inappropriate desire and lack of magnanimity toward his faithful subject Messer Neri. The king reverses course and accepts a paternal role, supplying each girl with the dowry her father cannot provide, and fully rejects what now appears to be a quasi-incestuous desire. If Messer Neri is an analogue of Lot dwelling in Sodom, King Charles projects a negative image of Lot after the city's destruction: Lot *did* commit incest with his daughters, but in his drunkenness he did not desire or choose it[48].

The case for Boccaccio's adaptation of Tamar's story (*Gen.*, 38) has already been made in regard to the novellas of Giletta di Nerbona (*Dec.*, III 9) and of Monna Belcolore and the Priest of Varlungo (*Dec.*, VIII 2). It is easy to see the appeal he saw in Tamar's complicated seduction of her father-in-law Judah. Driven by the biblical imperative to procreate, the young widow takes matters into her own hands when Judah neglects to provide her with a new husband from his family line. Tamar disguises herself as a sex worker, accepts Judah's bid for sex, and disappears with his personal items before he can send her a proper payment. She returns nine months later, scandalizing her family with a set of twins before revealing the items that prove Judah's paternity. W. Doniger has recognized the Tamar motif[49] in Giletta di Nerbona's bed

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[46] Lot tries to distract the Sodomites demanding access to his guests: "Habeo duas filias, quae necdum cognoverunt virum: educam eas ad vos, et abutimini eis sicut vobis placuerit [I have two daughters who as yet have not known man: I will bring them out to you, and abuse you them as it shall please you]" (*Gen.*, 19,8).

[47] "Pareva che tutte le gerarcie degli angeli quivi fossero discese a cantare [it seemed as if all the hierarchies of the angels had come down there to sing]" (*Dec.*, X 6,22).

[48] Lot's daughters aim to propagate the family line with their father because he's the only man around. They inebriate him in order to make him an unwitting participant (*Gen.*, 19,31-36).

[49] W. Doniger, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-59.

trick against her husband, twin pregnancy, proof of paternity through her husband's tokens, and happy restoration to family and honor (*Dec.*, III 9). Elsewhere[50], I have detailed the structural pattern of Tamar's shell game in the negotiations of Monna Belcolore and the Priest of Varlungo as they spar over sex, fertility, and friendship (*Dec.*, VIII 2). Considering the Christian typological fulfillment of Tamar's sexual deception – the elder twin seeds the genetic line to King David and to Jesus himself – I have argued that the novella asks readers to withhold judgment against its unorthodox sexual relations and take seriously its rustic representation of human fulfillment.

The parallels detailed above between Boccaccio's novellas and the episodes in *Genesis* noted by Augustine are primarily intended as evidence for Boccaccio's interest in *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio*, and as an invitation for further study. However, the final example of Jacob and Esau bears particular significance for the *Decameron*'s novel temporality, in which unprecedented events have no clear meaning, no place in a Christian providential understanding of history. I suggest that Boccaccio recognized the particular hermeneutic challenge that the story of Jacob and Esau presented to Augustine[51], and used it to develop the epistemological landscape of the *Decameron*. In *De mendacio* it had sufficed to divide all of the unpunished Old Testament lies into two types, "aut indole proficientium et spe approbentur, aut significationis alicujus causa non sint omnino mendacia [either they are approved in consideration of the nature and hope of those who tell them, or they are not lies at all because they bear some other kind of significance]" (*De men.*, V 7)[52]. In *Contra mendacio*, Augustine acquits most of the *Genesis* lies on technicalities: "sister" is not only for full siblings, but also for female kin; omitting truth is not the same as lying (X 23). But Jacob's lie is a clear-cut example of Augustine's own definition of the lie. Jacob *utters numerous falsehoods* to his father[53] with the *intent to deceive* him and claim Esau's blessing. To account for Jacob, Augustine introduces a bold new term: "Jacob autem quod matre fecit auctore, ut patrem fallere

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[50] M. Fritz-Morkin, *op. cit.*, 55-58.

[51] For the story's central importance in *Contra mendacio*, see D. G. Denery II, *The Devil Wins*, cit., p. 118.

[52] Jacob (*De men.,* V 7) and the other examples are treated briefly. I have lightly modified M. S. Muldowney's translation, which renders "significationis alicujus causa" as "some metaphorical significance."

[53] Remarkable narrative tension builds throughout the episode (*Gen.*, 27,1-29) first as Jacob hesitates to attempt his mother's scheme, then as Isaac tests his own suspicions by questioning his son and touching him, and finally as Isaac blesses Jacob just in time for Esau to return.

videretur, si diligenter et fideliter attendatur, non est mendacium, sed *mysterium* [what Jacob did at his mother's bidding, in seeming to deceive his father, is not a lie but a *mystery*]" (my emphasis; *Contra men.*, X 24). Compared to the vague *significationis alicujus causa* in his earlier treatise, *mysterium* in the second is concrete and transparently sublime. It sets Augustine off on a metaliterary excursus passing through figurative language to prophetic signification, which interprets the facts of Jacob's deceit in light of subsequent events in Christian history. Augustine's focus in the passage is on the hermeneutic process itself rather than a thorough interpretation of Jacob's story, for which he offers a single illustrative reading: by donning hairy goat skins to fool his father, Jacob prefigures Christ's donning of all human sins to bear his father's judgment. In *De civitate Dei*, however, Augustine gives space to a fuller figural interpretation of Jacob's lie. As they vie for their father's blessing, Jacob and Esau prefigure the Christian and Jewish peoples, and the younger's superseding claim to the elder's divine inheritance (XVI 42).

Jacob's *mysterium* is thus the subtext of Melchisedech's *novelletta* in *Decameron* I 3, which he recounts to Saladin rather than answer whether Judaism, Islam, or Christianity is the one true religion. Boccaccio updates the biblical allegory of supersession for a world with three Abrahamic religions: now the story has three brothers competing to win honor and their father's unique blessing. Believing that the dying patriarch's bequest of his precious ring reveals himself to be the chosen heir, each son is surprised to discover identical rings bestowed upon his brothers. Melchisedech offers Saladin an inconclusive conclusion: "si rimase la quistione, qual fosse il vero erede del padre, in pendente: e ancor pende. E così vi dico, signor mio, delle tre leggi alli tre popoli date da Dio padre, delle quali la quistion proponeste [The question of who is the father's true heir was left pending, and is still pending. Now, I say the same thing, my lord, about the three laws given by God the Father to the three peoples about whom you questioned me]" (*Dec.*, I 3,16)[54]. The *novelletta* thus swerves into a kind of temporality like the figural present of Jacob, as Augustine imagined it. While this experience of reality does not exclude the possibility of prophetic revelation in the future, it is defined by waiting in uncertainty. A new and unsteadying perspective, perhaps, for adherents to revealed religions, it is nonetheless well-suited to living in a world rendered incomprehensible by plague.

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[54] I have modified Rebhorn's translation to reflect Boccaccio's syntax.

3. Res humiles redux

Before explaining Jacob's *mysterium* as an allegory of things – one concrete event in history through which God had signified another event to come – Augustine reviews the basics of allegorical speech. "Parabolae et figurae [parables and figures]" (*Contra men.*, X 34) are not lies simply because one thing is said and another is signified, he explains, but rather make their true meaning all the sweeter for the mental exercise of unveiling it. Of such rhetorical figures, he points out that Scripture contains even

> Usque ad eam […] quae appellatur antiphrasis, ut dicitur abundare quod non est […] Unde illud est in Scripturis sanctis, *Si non in faciem benedixerit tibi* (*Job* II, 5): quod diabolus ait Domino de sancto Job, et intelligitur, Maledixerit. (*Contra men.*, X 24)

> the extreme called antiphrasis, when what does not exist is said to exist […] Even so it is written in sacred Scripture: 'that he will bless thee to thy face', which the Devil says to the Lord about righteous Job, 'curse' being understood for 'bless'.

Augustine takes his example of the Bible's most extreme figurative speech from the book of Job, noting that the passage can be read two ways that have opposite meanings. The story is also the basis for one of the most prominent and confounding biblical reworkings in the *Decameron*[55]. In her patient suffering at the cruel whims of the Marchese di Saluzzo, Griselda (*Dec.*, X 10) has long been recognized as a figure for Job suffering so many trials at the hands of the Devil[56]. The nar-

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[55] Essential bibliography contributing to my discussion of *Dec.*, X 10 includes T. Barolini, *The Marquis of Saluzzo, or the Griselda Story Before it was Hijacked: Calculating Matrimonial Odds in* Decameron *10.10*, in "Mediaevalia", Vol. 34.3, 2013, pp. 23-55; S. Barsella, *Tyranny and Obedience. A Political Reading of the Tale of Gualtieri* (Dec., X 10), in "Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana", Vol. 42.2, 2013, pp. 67-77; F. Bausi, *Gli spiriti magni. Filigrane aristoteliche e tomistiche nella decima giornata del* Decameron, in "Studi sul Boccaccio", Vol. 27, 1999, 5-53; R. Bessi, *La Griselda del Petrarca*, in "Umanesimo volgare. Studi di letteratura fra Tre e Quattrocento", Olschki, Firenze 2004 (1988), pp. 279-92; D. Cervigni, *Making Amends and Behaving Magnificently:* Decameron *10's Secular Redemption*, in Boccaccio's Decameron. *Re-writing the Christian Middle Ages*, "Annali d'Italianistica", Vol. 31, 2013, pp. 416-458; M. Cottino-Jones, *Fabula vs. Figura: Another Interpretation of the Griselda Story*, in *Italica*, Vol. 50.1, 1973, pp. 38-52; M. Picone, *L'*exemplum *sublime di Griselda* (X.10), in "Boccaccio e la codificazione della novella. Letture del *Decameron*", Longo Editore, Ravenna 2008, pp. 335-360.
[56] Petrarch already made the connection when he translated the novella into Latin, for which he drew on the Vulgate's text of Job where he perceived Boccaccio translating biblical verses into the vernacular. R. Bessi, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-90; cf. G. Mazzotta, *The*

rator Dioneo reproduces the bless/ curse antiphrasis effect noted by Augustine. Griselda humbly accepts the series of "punture [wounds]" (*Dec.*, X 10, 63) dealt by her husband, effectively blessing him with her demure obedience. Any other woman on earth would never have stood for Gualtieri's "matta bestialità [mad bestiality]" (*Dec.*, X 10, 3), cursing him and perhaps leaving for some other fellow who would "scuotere il pilliccione [give her fur a good shaking]" (*Dec.*, X 10, 69) and dress her in proper style[57]. Without consideration of the story's allegorical meanings, the only plausible response to Gualtieri's arbitrary cruelty is horror and anger. M. Cottino-Jones has suggested that Dioneo's discordant obscenity at the end of this last novella serves as a poetic veil, a superficial distraction from the text's deeper truth. Along with many others[58], she emphasizes Griselda as a Christ-figure suffering beyond human measure, whose three wounds (two children apparently murdered at the Marchese's command; then eviction from her marriage and home) recall the three nails of crucifixion, and whose glorious reinstatement in her roles as wife and mother evoke Christ's resurrection and triumph[59]. Given that Job's patient suffering prefigures the suffering of Christ, it is unsurprising that the story of Griselda echoes both the figural suffering of Job in the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion.

Augustine sets Christ's resurrection as the *termine post quam* Scripture no longer transmits false speech that is sanctioned by either good intent or figural meaning:

> In figuris autem quod velut mendacium dicitur, bene intellectum verum invenitur. Apostoli vero in Epistolis suis aliter locuti sunt, aliterque conscripti Actus Apostolorum, jam videlicet revelato Testamento Novo, quod illis figuris propheticis velabatur. Denique in tot Epistolis apostolicis, atque in ipso tam grandi libro in quo actus eorum canonica veritate narrantur, non invenitur talis aliquis menticus, ut de illo ab istis ad mentiendi licentiam proponatur exemplum (*Contra men.*, XII 26).

> In figures, moreover, what is said apparently as a lie is found, when properly understood, to be true. But, the Apostles in their Epistles spoke other-

wise, and the Acts of the Apostles were otherwise composed, since by that time there had already been revealed the New Testament which was veiled in those prophetic figures. Finally, in the numerous apostolic Epistles and in the large book itself in which the acts of the Apostles are recorded with canonical truth, no one is found lying in such a way that his example can be proposed by them for freedom to lie.

The end of Jesus' time on earth also marks the end of the historical epoch in which real events (not limited to human speech) can prefigure Christ's sacrifice and resurrection[60]. While Boccaccio's sense of figural interpretation[61] would have been shaped by any number of Augustinian and other sources[62], *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio* place this unique emphasis on the historical limits of typological lies, actions, and events[63]. The *Decameron* ends with Griselda's patience, just as Christ's passion concludes God's allegory of things – Boccaccio lands on a narrative boundary for his book much like the one demarcated in history by Augustine. Before that boundary, even the most unseemly acts may turn out to be part of God's providential plan for humanity, and so we ought to take Panfilo's advice about Ciappelletto and suspend our judgment in such cases. Just as the resurrection gave Christians a new hermeneutic lens for history, Griselda's restoration might grant the *brigata* a new way of understanding the world before returning to a Florence unraveled by pestilence.

But Griselda's medieval modernity, and that of Boccaccio's other biblical figures recast in his own millennium, also scrambles the temporal boundaries of typology even as she embodies Christ, the fulfillment of all figural events in history. The torturous events of her life with Gualtieri do not prefigure the Passion, but rather echo it a millennium later. Dressed up as a small-time marquis from recent history, the allegory's God-figure is stripped of divinity and rendered monstrously cruel – a troubling conclusion for readers eager to find purely orthodox allegories in the *Decam-*

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[60] For Augustine's thinking on the prefiguration of Christ's second coming and the Final Judgment, see *De civitate Dei* XX.

[61] An essential intertext that is beyond the scope of this discussion is Boccaccio's defense of poetry and its figural language as a vehicle for truth in *Genealogia deorum gentilium* XIV. In relation to novellas cited here, see M. Cottino-Jones, *Fabula vs. Figura*, p. 40; M. Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 212; S. Barsella, *The Merchant and the Sacred*, cit., p. 14.

[62] For the pervasive figural hermeneutics of the European Middle Ages, see E. Auerbach, *Figura*, cit.

[63] Including the figurative speech of Jesus' parables and appearance of lying or pretending. See Augustine, *De men.*, V 7-8 and *Contra men.*, XIII 28. Arguing against the Priscillianists' claim that "insuper etiam Christum […] fuisse mentitum [even Christ has lied]" by acting as if he were going on, Augustine calls the pretense a "humanitus fictum [human fiction]" bearing "illius est significationis veritas subsecuta [the subsequent truth of what He had signified]", *Contra men.*, XIII 28.

eron[64]. But for the witnesses of a senseless apocalyptic plague, either in the fictional *brigata* or among Boccaccio's first readers and fellow survivors, it is perhaps understandable how one might arrive at such a dangerous theology. After all, anger strong enough to curse God to his face is the reaction the Devil expects to provoke in testing Job. And it is the same reaction that Dioneo primes his audience to have toward Gualtieri's shameful plot against Griselda: "una matta bestialità […] la quale io non consiglio alcun che segua, perciò che gran peccato che a costui ben n'avesse [senseless brutality […] I would not recommend that you follow his lead, because it is a real shame that he derived any benefit from it at all]" (*Dec.*, X 10, 3).

It is curious that cursing God for inflicting (or even simply allowing) the plague's massive devastation is absent from the common reactions to the *mortifera pestilenza* acknowledged by the Author[65], and even curiouser to note that he couches the advent of the plague in Dante's figural vocabulary for Beatrice, "the one who blesses". The pestilence announces itself by "i suoi dolorosi effetti, in miracolosa maniera, a dimostrare [showing its grievous effects in a miraculous way[66]]" (*Dec.*, I Intr. 9), echoing Beatrice's arrival "da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare [from heaven to show a miracle on earth]" (*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare*, v.8)[67]; her beneficent sweetness "che 'ntender non la può chi no la prova [as he who's missed it never knows]" (ivi, v. 11) is matched by the ravages of a death so horrifying that "se dagli occhi di molti e da' miei non fosse stato veduto, appena che io ardissi di crederlo [if I and many others had not seen these things with our own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe them]" (*Dec.*, I Intr. 16). The effect of Boccaccio's allusion to this pivotal sonnet in the *Vita nova* is to situate the *Decameron* in a figural context of its own, where it remains to be seen whether the suffering people will bless or curse God at the end of their trials and tribulations.

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[64] D. Cervigni, for example, is extremely sensitive to scriptural echoes in the *Decameron* and also extremely resistant to their figural function, at least in this novella: "I need to emphasize that *I do not see Griselda as a figure of Christ*, just as I do not see Gualtieri as the figure of God the Father"; emphasis original. D. Cervigni, *Making Amends*, cit., p. 452, 48n.

[65] Those who understood the plague as originating "da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali [sent down by God in His righteous anger to chastise us]" (*Dec.*, *Intr.* I, 8) dedicated themselves to pious supplication that was fruitless but apparently not resented or frustrating. Nor does Boccaccio describe anything that looks like anger or resentment among the primary reactions to the plague: quarantining in austerity with friends; hedonism in the face of near-certain death; moderation; flight. *Dec.*, *Intr.* I, 19-25. Along similar lines, K. Flasch observes how surprising it is that religious conversion is never seriously contemplated by Boccaccio as a possible reaction to the plague pandemic, *op. cit.,* p. 51.

[66] I have re-translated the passage to better emphasize Boccaccio's Dantean phrasing.

[67] Italian and English cited in D. Alighieri, *Vita nova*, ed. A. Frisardi, trans. A. Frisardi, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2011, pp. 39, 78-9.

The cataclysm of plague seems to re-open the door to an experience of time in which inexplicable events have not yet been revealed as prophetic. Boccaccio accomplishes this in part by weaving scriptural plots into the lives and deeds of his modern compatriots, perhaps starting with Augustine's canon of the lies that biblical protagonists got away with. As a result, most of the *Decameron*'s biblical plots are not as bleak as Griselda's long suffering, and instead are funny and outlandish enough to camoflage their sacred intertextualities. Erich Auerbach famously recognized Dante's adaptation of the Biblical *sermo humilis* for the sublime matter of his *poema sacro*[68]. In parallel, I suggest that Boccaccio adapted the *res humiles* of biblical narrative: not only the structural syntax of its plots but also the hermeneutic openness of a chain of everyday human actions. By dragging biblical mysteries into the present, Boccaccio implicitly asks: does God still speak to people through things, through history? And what do these once-prophetic stories reverberating through everyday life say about the human family's imperiled future?

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[68] E. Auerbach, *Sermo humilis* (1958), in *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Manheim, Pantheon Books, New York 1965, pp. 25-66; for Dante's exemplarity, see pp. 65-66.

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