

Sandra Carapezza, Marco Stucchi, Damiano Bondi,
Matteo Bisoni*

Decameron IV 9:

Modifying a Source to make Philosophical Claims

1. Introduction: Sources and Context

Boccaccio's works have a very close relationship with philosophy, especially moral philosophy¹. However, the *Decameron* is also a work of narrative fiction, in which the author dialogues with various sources. We may better understand Boccaccio's philosophical inclinations through his reinterpretations of sources. The article aims to explore *Dec. IV 9* in this sense: we will investigate the philosophical meaning (especially concerning moral philosophy and psychology, at that time considered a branch of philosophy) inherent in Boccaccio's intentional departures from his source material. In the ongoing debate about Boccaccio's relationship with his sources and intertexts², as well as the broader and more challenging question of originality in the short story genre³, *Decameron IV 9* serves as a prime example of how sources are displayed⁴. The more evident the reuse

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¹ J. Bartuschat, "I poeti non sono le scimmie dei filosofi": osservazioni sul rapporto tra poesia e filosofia nelle *Genealogie Deorum gentilium*, in A.M. Cabrini, A. D'Agostino (a cura di), *Boccaccio. Gli antichi e i moderni*, Ledizioni, Milano 2018, pp. 47-65.

² R. Bragantini, *Ancora su fonti e intertesti nel "Decameron"*. *Conferme e nuovi sondaggi*, in A.M. Cabrini, A. D'Agostino (a cura di), *Boccaccio. Gli antichi e i moderni*, Ledizioni, Milano 2018, pp. 115-138.

³ G. Mazzacurati, *All'ombra di Dioneo. Tipologia e percorsi della novella da Boccaccio a Bandello*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1996.

⁴ See H. Hauvette, *La 39^e nouvelle du Décaméron*, in "Romania", 41, 1912, pp. 184-205; H.-J. Neuschafer, *Il caso tipico e il caso particolare. Dalla 'vida' alla novella*, in M. Picone (a cura di), *Il racconto*, il Mulino, Bologna 1985, pp. 269-308; G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, a cura di V. Branca, Einaudi, Torino 1980, *ad loc.* The main source is the *Vida of Guillem de Cabestaing*, but we do not know what version of the *Vida* Boccaccio may have read:

of the transmitted motif, the more pronounced the deviation, highlighting the author's intentional manipulation. This is clear not only in the dynamics of source revelation employed by the author and in their subsequent interplay⁵, where the reader is alternately reassured by recognition and surprised by deviations, but also on a metaphorical level. The entire story can be interpreted as a metaphor for both the literary process (perhaps taking Mazzotta's idea to the extreme⁶) and the act of reading⁷. In the digestion of the beloved's body and the subsequent burial of the couple in a single sarcophagus, we can understand the process of assimilating literary tradition, which is introjected, digested, and definitively enclosed within the book by the author⁸. Moreover, medieval culture legitimizes the analogy between digestion and reading⁹. The primary reader is Boccaccio himself – the author – but the analogy also extends to anyone who reads the *Decameron*. In the story, the food (“vivandetta”) is consumed and digested by the woman, and women are identified in the preface as the ideal readers of the work, even if they were not its original audience.

The relationship between the text of the *Decameron* and the *vida* of Guillem de Cabestaing has been meticulously analyzed by critics¹⁰, who have thoughtfully examined the deviations from the source¹¹. We aim to revisit some of these deviations here, offering an interpretation that sheds new light on them.

The story culminates in the pivotal banquet scene, where the horrid truth is revealed, leading to the wife's suicide. The love affair between the

see J. Boutier, A.-H. Schutz, *Biographies des troubadours. Textes provençaux des 13e et 14e siècles*, Nizet, Paris 1964, pp. 530-555.

⁵ C. Perrus, *La “fabrique” de la fiction et l'instance de l'histoire dans “le Décaméron”*, “Chroniques italiennes”, 17/1, 2010, pp. 1-17.

⁶ G. Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's “Decameron”*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016, p. 152.

⁷ J. Singer, *How the Vida of Guilhem de Cabestanh “quasi tutta si disfece” (IV.9)*, in M. Sherberg (a cura di), *The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective*, University Press, Toronto 2020, pp. 157-180. Singer alludes to this based on Kirkham's idea (see V. Kirkham, *Dante, the Book Glutton, or, Food for Thought from Italian Poets*, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Binghamton 2004).

⁸ See Singer, *op. cit.*

⁹ See Kirkham, *op. cit.*; E.R. Curtius, *La letteratura europea e Medio Evo latino*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1992, pp. 154-156. The metaphor of food for speech is already in sacred texts. See e.g. ICor 3,2. Cfr. Petrus Comestor.

¹⁰ In addition to the studies cited above, see L. Rossi, *Il cuore, mistico pasto d'amore. Dal “Lai de Guiron” al Decameron*, Japadre, L'Aquila 1983; L. Terrusi, *Ancora sul “cuore mangiato”. Riflessioni su Decameron IV 9, con una postilla doniana*, “La Parola del Testo”, 2/1, 1998, pp. 49-62; M. Picone, “L'amoroso sangue”. *La IV giornata*, in M. Picone, M. Mesirca, *Introduzione al Decameron*, Cesati, Firenze 2004, pp. 115-140;

¹¹ Interesting remarks on this point have already been made by Giuseppe Noto in a lecture organized by Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei on February 29, 2016. Here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3rrrYayrDs>.

woman and the knight receives minimal attention. The act of eating holds significant importance in the narrative, justifying a comparison with another theme present in the text: the parallel between gluttony and love. Both sins fall under the category of incontinence in the canonical classification of sins. In Dante's *Inferno*, for instance, these faults are situated in adjacent circles. This reference to Dante is appropriate, since a textual clue points to *Inferno* VI and Boccaccio's commentary on it. The verb *disfare* (to undo, to dismantle) is infrequent in the *Decameron*; in tale IV 9, it appears in a clarification that serves merely to specify something about the following action: "come la donna cadde, non solamente morì ma quasi tutta si disfece"¹².

The author emphasizes that the woman's body is shattered as a result of the fall. Beyond the potential interpretations of this dismemberment – which will be discussed later – it's noteworthy that in his commentary on *Inferno* VI, 42 ("tu fosti, prima ch'io disfatto, fatto"¹³); in the *Esposizioni*, Boccaccio glosses the participle *disfatto* as follows: "cioè che io morissi, per ciò che nella morte questa composizione che noi chiamiamo "uomo" si disfa per lo partimento dell'anima; e così né ella, che se ne va, né il corpo, che rimane, è più uomo"¹⁴. The body-soul dichotomy, common in the literature of the time, acquires particular significance in this story, where the theme of the body plays a central role. The *disfatto* (unmade) body represents a body that no longer exists in its previous form. The story concludes with the topos of a double burial. For this to occur, the castellans, moved by pity, must gather the bodies of the lovers. The verb used in the text is "ricolti" (from *ricogliere*, meaning to gather, assemble, or collect), evoking the idea of re-composing the lovers after their disintegration by the husband's actions. When Guiglielmo Rossiglione sees the outcome of his actions, he realizes that he has acted wrongly ("aver mal fatto", § 24), using the same verb "fare" to express his regret. The murdered bodies are then gathered and placed together in a double grave, above which the tale of the two lovers is inscribed in verse. The verb "ricogliere" (to gather) here resonates with a metapoetic significance,

¹² *Dec.* IV 9 24, G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, a cura di G. Alfano, M. Fiorilla, A. Quondam, Rizzoli, Milano 2013; "the lady was not only killed by her fall but almost completely disfigured", translation by G.H. McWilliam, Penguin, London 1972.

¹³ "You were made before I was undone", *The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, by J. Hollander, R. Hollander, Doubleday & co., New York 2002-2007.

¹⁴ *Canto* VI I 20, in G. Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*, a cura di G. Padoan, Mondadori, Milano 1965, p. 349. "That is, before I died, insofar as the decomposition of what we call 'man' takes place in death through the departure of the soul. Thus, neither the soul, which departs, nor the body, which remains, is a man any longer": *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, edited by M. Papio, Toronto University Press, Toronto-Buffalo-London 2009, p. 306.

aligning with a literary tradition that serves as a source for the novella. In the literary realm, this verb carries a rich metapoetic value, reminiscent of Petrarch's intent to 'colligere fragmenta' (*gather the fragments*)¹⁵.

The closest Dantean parallel to the use of "disfare" in *Dec.* IV 9 can be found in Pia's words in *Purgatorio* V 134: "Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma"¹⁶. Here, Dante revisits the etymological play previously used in *Inferno* VI 42, a figure that subtly reappears in the novella, where the wife's "disfare" mirrors the husband's "aver mal fatto" ("having done wrong"). Two key points support the thesis that the memory of *Purgatorio* V is being invoked here. Despite the exhaustive efforts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, no definitive historical record of Pia's story has been found, suggesting a deliberate literary construction that resonates with the novella's themes. However, as early as the fourteenth century, a version of the events was circulating in which the woman was said to have died by falling from a castle window. For instance, the Anonimo Lombardo comments: "dum perfecissent cenam, stando ad fenestram in solaciis suis, quidam domicellus de mandato domini Nelli accepit istam dominam per pedes et extra domum proiecit, et statim mortua est"¹⁷. In the story, the husband's responsibility for his wife's death is not as direct, but the image of the wife – victim of a violent husband – falling from the window of an aristocratic residence is identical in both cases. The result is a woman's body that is literally destroyed. If the name of Pia in Dante's work evoked this earlier account from a few decades before Boccaccio's time, then seeing parallels with the story of Rossiglione's wife becomes justifiable. The second argument is structural: the ninth tale of the fourth day occupies the thirty-ninth position in the collection of one hundred tales. This continuous progressive numbering is supported by manuscripts such as Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, It. 482, which lists each tale with its corresponding number from one to one hundred in the table of contents. A similar method is seen in manuscript It. 62 of the same library. This type of identification was characteristic of the French circulation of the *Decameron* in the fifteenth century¹⁸. In

¹⁵ F. Petrarca, *Sec.* III: "Adero michi ipse quantum potero, et sparsa anime fragmenta recolligam, moraborque mecum sedulo. Sane nunc, dum loquimur, multa me magnaue, quamvis adhuc mortalia, negotia expectant".

¹⁶ "Siena made me, in Maremma I was undone" (tr. Hollander, cit.).

¹⁷ "after supper, as they stood at the window for their pleasure, a servant by his master Nello's order grabbed this woman by the feet and threw her out of the house, and she immediately died", translation by me. See L. Fiorentini, *Morte della Pia da Iacomo della Lana a Matteo Bandello*, in G. Brunetti (a cura di), *Sui commenti della Commedia di Dante a Bologna*, Bologna, Bologna UP, pp. 15-36.

¹⁸ See e.g. the ms. fr. 240 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France), translation by Laurent de Premierfait.

contrast, Dante's *Divine Comedy* maintains a more resilient tripartite division, making it difficult to simply number the cantos sequentially, such as calling the first canto of *Purgatory* "number 35". However, if one were to number the cantos progressively, a notable correspondence emerges between *Purgatory* V and *Decameron* IV 9. While this pairing does not always align perfectly, in this case it does. The violent deaths described in Dante's canto are mirrored in the *Decameron* tale, which, by the very nature of its narration, represents the apex of tragedy. The fourth day is dedicated to tales of unhappy love, and this particular tale, narrated by Filostrato, the King of the Fourth day, is meant to evoke the deepest compassion as it encapsulates the ultimate sorrow. As we will see in the next sections, the *literary compassion*, which dates back to the time of Dante and Boccaccio – i.e. the mimetic element which can be found in every story of passionate love – is here inherently criticized by another form *compassion*, the *reader's compassion* for the painful fate of a woman. That is why the *exemplum* of Pia is particularly important.

The story's most conspicuous distinction from its source material is its placement in the *Decameron*. Unlike the *vidas*, where narratives typically function as mere accompaniments to lyrics, the story of Guardastagno in the *Decameron* is framed as an oral tale, presented with a clear purpose and followed by the reactions of the listeners. The narrator, Filostrato, introduces the tale by emphasizing the key word "compassione" almost as a challenge to the previous storytellers. He promises to elevate the level of compassion, citing the higher social status of the protagonists and the greater cruelty involved. Scholars have already provided extensive and insightful analysis on the concept and interpretation of compassion in Boccaccio's work¹⁹. Here, it is worth focusing on a few significant intra- and intertextual references. The word "compassione" reappears in the famous *incipit* of the *Decameron*, where compassion for the afflicted is presented as a universal human trait. Filostrato, in his narrative, vows to amplify this essential human quality to its highest degree, which serves as an implicit defense of the day he reigns over. When the topic of the day is announced (III, *Conclusion* 6), it does not elicit any reactions from the group. Following Filostrato's words, the text describes a garden that is as idyllic as possible (§ 7); in this tranquil setting, Dioneo and Fiammetta sing the tragic song of the Châtelaine de Vergy and Guiglielmo (the onomastic resemblance to the protagonists of King Filostrato's tale is likely intentional, as it is another story of a husband who kills his wife). However, despite the lack of immediate opposition from the group, the

¹⁹ L. Surdich, *La compassione tra Dante e Boccaccio*, in V.L. Puccetti (a cura di), *Lectura Dantis Lupiensis*, Longo, Ravenna 2020, pp. 43-60; G. Zak, *Boccaccio and the Consolation of Literature*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 2022.

theme directly contradicts the original intent prescribed by Dioneo and approved by Pampinea in the introduction: to leave sorrowful thoughts behind in their country retreat. It is only at the beginning of the first tale that Fiammetta points out this inconsistency. But before this, between the conclusion of day III and the first tale of Day IV, the narrative is paused to allow space for the author's voice in the introduction to Day IV. Boccaccio intervenes here, after having Filostrato announce the theme of tragic love, and before the stories in this genre begin, culminating precisely with IV 9.

The theme of compassion links the requests of the authorial ego with those of the most emotionally expressive narrator in the group. In the *Proem*, the author immediately establishes the significance of this emotion, and later, within the introduction of day IV, defends himself by positioning himself as a potential object of compassion (IV *Introduction* 37), highlighting the suffering caused by his literary endeavors. The use of food-related language in this context aligns with *Decameron* IV 9. This connection between the narrator Filostrato and the authorial figure supports the view that IV 9 can be interpreted as a metapoetic reflection, illustrating the literary work Boccaccio is performing with his collection of short stories. As is customary for the final tale of the day, Filostrato is succeeded by Dioneo, who, leveraging his privilege, offers a story that contrasts sharply with the preceding somber tales. The shift in tone is emphasized by a quote from *Purgatory* I; Dioneo begins his story (IV 10) with the same words Dante uses to transition from Hell to Purgatory: "Le miserie degl'infelici amori raccontate, non che a voi, donne, ma a me hanno già *contristati gli occhi e 'l petto*"²⁰. However, it is important to note that Dioneo, along with Fiammetta – who also criticized Filostrato's theme – concluded the previous day by recounting the sorrowful song of the lady of the castle of Vergy. Thus, stories that evoke compassion are simply one of many possibilities within the novelistic genre. In this instance, the author not only defends this particular form of story but also advocates for the diversity of novelistic forms, each eliciting various emotional responses. Narration, therefore, enables humanity to experience a range of emotions.

Filostrato's role as the leader allows the brigata ("company") (an internal projection of the readers' universe) to experience compassion by sharing in the emotions of the protagonists. In this context, Boccaccio's commentary on *Inferno* VI, the canto of the gluttons, provides a relevant consideration. In the canto, Dante is invited to express sorrow for Ciaccio's suffering, feeling moved to tears (vv. 58-59). Boccaccio reflects on

²⁰ "These sorrowful accounts of ill-starred loves have brought so much affliction to my eyes and heart (to say nothing of yours, dear ladies)" (tr. G.H. McWilliam, *op. cit.*); see Pg I 18: "che m'avea contristati li occhi e 'l petto. (that had afflicted both my chest and eyes)"

this Dantean note, introducing the term ‘compassion’ and elaborating on it. He distinguishes between a complete form of empathy, which would lead to tears, and a more partial empathy, such as Dante’s, which stops short of crying because the identification with the suffering does not go further: “e mostra qui l’autore d’aver compassione di lui acciò che egli sel faccia benivolo a dovergli rispondere di ciò che intende di domandare. E nondimeno, quantunque dica: “a lacrimar m’invita”, non dice perciò che lacrimasse; volendo, per questo, mostrarne lui non essere stato di questo vizio maculato, ma pure alcuna volta essere stato da lui per appetito incitato, e perciò non piena, ma alcuna compassione in rimorsione del suo non pieno peccato ne dimostra”²¹. Boccaccio thus reflects on the mental processes activated when encountering another individual in a distressing situation. In the *Decameron*, this involves both the reader and the group listening to the stories. This creates a form of emotional mimicry, where the listener or reader mirrors the feelings and reactions of the characters depicted in the narratives.

2. Narcissism and “Passionate Love”

In *Decameron* IV 9, Guiglielmo Rossiglione and Guiglielmo Guardastagno present a second type of mimicry. This occurs on the level of onomastics, where the author intervenes twice by manipulating the source. Raimondo di Rossiglione becomes Guiglielmo di Rossiglione, thereby affirming an identity between the two men, which we will discuss in detail in the next section. The lover retains the name of the troubadour, but the transition from Cabestanh to Guardastagno is perhaps not by chance, nor solely attributable to assonance. According to Provençal etiquette, falling in love starts with a glance, but in this case, it’s an oblique glance – from the woman, refracted onto the friend/enemy – that also ignites jealousy between the two Guiglielmos. Finally, the name Guardastagno might evoke the classical myth of Narcissus, who dies by drowning in a pond due to a defect in the loving gaze: he believes he is in love with another, but is actually in love with his own reflection. The story of Narcissus had also undergone a famous reworking in the thirteenth-century *Novellino*.

²¹ G. Boccaccio, *Esposizioni*, cit., VI I 28, p. 351; “The author shows here that he feels compassion for the shade in order to garner his benevolence and, thus, so that he will respond to the questions the author intends to ask. However, although he says, ‘it makes me want to cry’, he does not say that he actually did so. Hence, the author demonstrates that he was not stained by this vice; rather, he was only occasionally tempted by appetite. Therefore, he shows us that he was moved only to partial, rather than complete, compassion in facing this limited sin of his” (tr. Papio, *op. cit.*, p. 308).

On the surface, the two narratives might appear incompatible: the myth of Narcissus epitomizes solipsistic love, while Boccaccio's tale embodies the classic love triangle. However, the complexities in both stories challenge this initial impression. In the myth of Narcissus, the figure of Echo, the quintessential mimetic nymph, is condemned to repeat what she hears, perpetually reflecting others back on themselves. Echo falls in love with Narcissus, but he rebuffs her in irritation; yet Echo, in a sense, already embodies an aspect of Narcissus. The reflection that Narcissus sees in the pond – an image with which he falls hopelessly in love – does nothing but replicate and return Narcissus to himself. In both stories, love at the extreme of mimicry converges with narcissism, and vice versa.

This parallel extends to the two Guiglielmos in Boccaccio's novella. At the outset, their similarities are explicitly enumerated: both are brave, passionate about tournaments, dressed in identical attire, and possess their own castles. The only distinction between them is that Rossiglione is married, while Guardastagno is not. In the original *vida*, not only do the two characters have different names, but they also exhibit distinct characteristics. Moreover, Boccaccio deviates from his source by omitting the name of the woman they both desire, referring to her only as "bellissima e vaga". The term "vaga" is recurrent in Boccaccio's works, often carrying the connotation of being "in love." In this tale, infatuation literally wanders (*vaga*) from one lover to another. At the end of the first day in the *Decameron*, Emilia sings a ballad that extols this very notion of *vaghezza* ("longing"), where narcissism reaches its zenith – not in the love of one's beauty, but in the love of one's own desire: "Io son sí vaga della mia bellezza / che d'altro amor già mai / non curerò né credo aver vaghezza. / Io veggio in quella, ognora ch'io mi specchio...". Dante, too, employs the term "vaga" in *Paradiso* XII 14-15, where he describes the nymph Echo, consumed by unrequited love, with the lines: [sometimes two rainbows arise one in response to the other] "a guisa del parlar di quella *vaga* / ch'amor consunse come sol vapori"²². In the short story, the ambiguity of the woman's initial infatuation mirrors this vagueness; it is uncertain who her affection first rests upon. However, what becomes clear is the object of her eventual passion, which sets off a chain of events leading to a tragic, yet inevitable, conclusion.

The tale of the two Guiglielmos, despite its brevity, offers a novelistic interpretation of a type of love that began to dominate Western literature and culture from the twelfth century onward. This form of love is what Denis de Rougemont famously termed "passionate love" in his seminal study *L'amour et l'Occident* (1939). At first glance, this love appears to

²² "like the voice of that wandering nymph / whom love consumed as the sun does vapors" (tr. Hollander, *op. cit.*).

exalt carnal passion; however, on a deeper level, it celebrates an Eros that remains perpetually unfulfilled – a desire that must be continuously thwarted in order to sustain its intensity. This is a love that ostensibly seeks fulfillment but, in truth, consistently eludes it, thriving on obstacles rather than the actual presence of the beloved.

The other is not cherished for their own intrinsic qualities or the authentic reality of their hopes and suffering. Instead, they serve as a mere pretext for a narcissistic self-exaltation that ultimately leads to death. The woman's anonymity in the story underscores her role as a mere instrument, an echo in the vast mechanism of desire that shifts from Guardastagno to the other Guiglielmo – who is idealized as a model of perfect realization – and then circles back to itself. This “desire to desire” of “love for love” inevitably culminates in physical death because only in the realm of the spirit can the union of the lovers be fully realized. This ideal fusion, symbolized by the union of their bodies and the ingestion of the heart, is perpetually obstructed by the constraints of earthly existence and societal norms. Indeed, while the narrative generally adopts a lighter, more materialistic tone in line with its literary genre, diverging from the grand, tragic myths of passionate love like that of Tristan and Isolde, the ending shifts to a darker and more somber register, more proper of tragedy. The lovers' bodies, once dismembered, are eventually reunited and buried together, marked by a commemorative plaque. What was “disfatto” (undone) is ultimately *atoned*: the etymology of the English term is useful here for underlining that the mimetic element inherent in all *compassion* (suffering together) aims to be ultimately redeemed by death, in which the lovers can be finally “at-one”. Their final union serves as a poignant alternative to the traditional epithalamic promise of “till death do you part”, embodying instead the sacramental vow of every (com)passionate love: “till death do you unite”.

3. Mimetic Desire and Violence

Through Rougemont's hermeneutic perspective, we have identified in the love-passion depicted in the tale as a disembodied idealization of the other and as a form of deadly narcissism – a “desire to desire” – a foundational myth of Western literature. Let us now apply the interpretative tools offered by René Girard to explore how Boccaccio's narrative nuances, which distance the story from its sources, may exemplify a novelistic truth that subverts the romantic lie of the myth. In *Decameron* IV 9, Boccaccio's deconstruction of the conventions of courtly love operates in two significant ways: first, by revealing the concrete obstacles inherent in desire that were only previously alluded to; and second, by eluci-

dating the relationship between desire and violence as it unfolds within the tragic framework of the story. All the details interwoven throughout Boccaccio's story clearly suggest that the root cause of the rivalry and violence is not difference but rather identity. This may initially seem counterintuitive. To grasp the significance of Boccaccio's deviation from his source, we must examine the origins of Guardastagno's desire and the unfolding of the subsequent violence. The homonymy and the mirrored nature of the two protagonists have already been noted. Additionally, it is important to recognize that in the *vida*, Guilhem de Cabestanh was not a friend but a vassal of Raimondo di Rossiglione. This distinction is crucial as it reflects Boccaccio's deliberate shift in the dynamics of desire. While the *vida* presents Guilhem de Cabestanh as Raymond's vassal, modulating William's desire through a contrast between inauthentic loyalty to the "sovereign" and authentic devotion to the lady – an element discussed in *L'amour et l'Occident*²³ – it remains anchored in the motifs and stylistic devices of the Breton romance and its later spiritualization in courtly lyric poetry. Interpreted through the framework of René Girard's *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*²⁴, the shift in narrative style achieved by Boccaccio's novella becomes clearer. The novella subverts the cold "mythical objectivity" of the *vida*, which constructs its characters around perceived absolute differences – where Guiglielmo is portrayed as "molto bello, pregiato in armi, cortese e in servizio di dame" ("very handsome, skilled in arms, courteous, and in the service of ladies"), while Raimondo is depicted as "scontroso, malvagio, ricco e orgoglioso" ("surly, malevolent, wealthy, and proud"). Boccaccio's approach alters the perspective on the plot dynamics, introducing narrative innovations that illuminate and address the gaps left by the original source.

In Girard's theory, the subject does not desire an object because of its inherent qualities; rather, the subject's desire is shaped by imitating the desire of another subject, who is recognized as a model or mediator. This mediator, due to the prestige and perceived fullness of being that is attributed to them, has the power to make the objects of their desire appear alluring, as if casting a spell that alters the substance of reality – or at least, that is how it seems to the subject who falls under the influence of mediation. In this imitative chain of desires, where the origin is always elusive, the experience of mediation can become so intense that mimetic desire reaches a metaphysical level: the subject begins to desire the very being of the mediator, while the object of desire becomes a mere simulacrum, assigned a secondary, vicarious value. Girard's analysis prioritizes the relational dynamic, emphasizing the concrete presence of the other

²³ D. De Rougemont, *L'amor e l'occident*, 10/18, Paris 2006.

²⁴ R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Grasset, Paris 2001.

over the autonomy of the desiring subject. Moreover, he underscores the critical role of the mediator's position in defining and shaping the evolution of this relationship.

Boccaccio, through his alterations to the source material, aligns his narrative with Girard's concept of mimetic desire. In his rendition, the subject and mediator are so intimately connected that they verge on becoming indistinguishable, embodying the paroxysm of mimetic doubles. Each knight imitates the other in every aspect that defines a noble knight, and it is through this very imitation that both the propriety of behavior and the legitimacy of desire are seemingly affirmed. At the highest degrees of internal mediation, however, the structure of desire begins to be destabilized, with the vertices of the desire triangle – subject, mediator, and object – constantly shifting positions. Desires themselves, subject to an uncontrollable polymorphism, can abruptly invert, with the model transforming into a rival: “in tanto che il grande amore che al Guardastagno portava in mortale odio convertì” (“so much that the great love that he bore to the Guardastagno was converted into mortal hatred”). Girard identifies this phenomenon as double mediation, a process in which the relationship's dynamics become increasingly volatile, and the other – once a model to be emulated – turns into an obstacle, a hindrance to achieving the coveted recognition as a mediator.

While the traditional interpretation attributes the rivalry between the two Guiglielmos to the woman, René Girard offers a contrasting perspective by reversing this causality. According to Girard, it is the mechanism of double mediation between the two knights that subtly introduces the woman as a catalyst for transforming their relationship into one of rivalry. This simulacral and ambiguous portrayal of the woman as an object of desire, mediated through their interaction, is substantiated by two key factors: first, Boccaccio deliberately omits both the woman's name and the songs that Guiglielmo had dedicated to Saurimonda in the original *vida*²⁵; second, and more importantly, within the story, love emerges without any definitive distinctions between the two men becoming apparent. This abstraction, leading to the disintegration of the object of desire, highlights the essence of double mediation. For Guardastagno, the woman becomes desirable precisely because she is desired by Rossiglione.

The duplicity of mediation thus reintroduces the theme of narcissistic specularity and enables us to reconstruct the genealogy of rivalry. How can we interpret narcissism through a Girardian lens? An intriguing approach is to shift the focus from Guardastagno to Rossiglione, as it is the

²⁵ However, we do not know for certain which version of the *vida* Boccaccio read.

latter's gaze that ultimately defines the deeper meaning of the narrative arc of the novella. Within the framework of mimetic theory, narcissism could be understood as a process of re-engaging with one's own desire: when the other imitates one's desire, they are, in effect, affirming one's role as a mediator, thereby acknowledging and validating the prestige and value that one aspires to embody. However, in this reflexive act of re-engaging with oneself (essentially, a desire to see oneself desired), a perilous process of derealization unfolds, since the other is not merely a reflection of a person's own self.

The impossibility of assimilating the other into one's own image, in a dramatic twist, generates the mimetic short circuit that Girard, borrowing from Gregory Bateson's terminology, defines as a double bind. The mediator's desire embodies two conflicting imperatives: "imitate me!" and simultaneously "do not imitate me!". Rossiglione, as the mediator, desires to be imitated because the perfect identity resulting from Guardastagno's imitation validates the role in which he finds self-recognition. However, when the other begins to imitate him "fuor di misura" ("excessively"), focusing intently on the one point of difference – his "bellissima e vaga" ("beautiful and charming") wife – this imitation threatens the sovereignty Rossiglione holds over the mediation dynamic. The one who had previously fueled Rossiglione's narcissistic desire for recognition (and was therefore a cherished friend) suddenly becomes the hated obstacle, the scandal that must be eliminated.

From the moment Rossiglione begins to premeditate his brutal crimes, Boccaccio introduces several significant departures from his source material, most notably by linking the theme of violence to Rossiglione's gaze. The scene of Guardastagno's murder and subsequent mutilation is particularly emblematic of this shift. In the *vida*, the narrative glosses over the heinous actions of Raimondo Rossiglione, portraying a sense of emotional detachment, especially in his delegation of the corpse's macabre treatment to others. Boccaccio, however, expands this crucial section of the novella considerably, emphasizing his cunning premeditation and, above all, dramatizing the violent act, which is carried out entirely and meticulously by the wretched Guiglielmo Rossiglione. Boccaccio's narrative lingers on Rossiglione's prolonged wait for the right moment to strike, his obsessive fixation on the new model-obstacle, Guardastagno, who imitates him so perfectly as to surpass and replace him in his wife's heart. The novella also introduces Rossiglione's final words to Guardastagno, none of which are present in the *vida*. These additions serve to build up to the horrific confrontation with his wife and his subsequent revenge, bringing to the fore a sense of guilt entirely absent in the original account. Rossiglione's confrontation with the obscene meal ("egli, per lo maleficio da lui commesso nel pensiero impedito, poco mangiò"; "he ate

little, for the evil he committed weighed on his mind”) marks the beginning of his ruinous downfall. Alongside the tragedy of the doomed lovers, Rossiglione undergoes the catastrophic drama of bearing responsibility as the mediator, recognizing his failure to manage the scandal he has provoked. Gazing upon the corpse of the obstacle after its elimination does not bring resolution; rather, it deepens his ruin, especially when the other has become a more “authentic” version of the model. The violence he commits not only fails to erase the obstacle but also leaves indelible traces that force Rossiglione to confront how his very existence has become entwined with, and ultimately indistinguishable from, the obstacle he sought so desperately to destroy.

Boccaccio ultimately reveals his speculative genius by altering the story’s conclusion. By this point, he has already established the framework of mediation in which all the characters operate, showing that they are all equally ensnared by the impersonal forces of desire. Given this context, it is no longer necessary, as it was in the *vida*, to emphasize a Manichean division between good and evil.

In the source, it is the king of Aragon who imposes a clear distinction between good and evil, meting out punishment to the malevolent Rossiglione and personally overseeing the erection of a monument to honor the two lovers. This reinforces the notion that the reader is already entrenched in the mythical objectivity mentioned earlier—a narrative construct that has already distinguished victims who serve the community’s interests from perpetrators of violence. Boccaccio, however, introduces a series of details that are not merely divergent from the source but signify a profound shift in narrative focus. The brutal destruction of the woman’s body foreshadows the subsequent reassembly of the lovers and their dignified burial, an act carried out autonomously by the community “con grandissimo dolore e pianto” (“amid widespread grief and mourning”) without the intervention of any formal authority. As René Girard explains in *La violence et le sacré*, it is often the community itself that enshrines the victim in myth, thereby assigning to the myth a regenerative value around which communal unity can coalesce²⁶. In contrast, Rossiglione, upon hearing his wife’s final words and witnessing her suicide, is struck with profound disorientation and a sudden realization that he may have erred gravely (“stordi forte e parvegli aver mal fatto”, “The spectacle of his wife’s fall threw Roussillon into a panic and made him repent the wickedness of his deed.”). This moment of recognition marks his

²⁶ For a Girardian analysis of the relation between violence and community in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* see M. Stucchi, *La folla nelle piazze del Decameron* (II 1, IV 2, V 6), in A. Aguti, D. Bondi (a cura di), *Il Sacro e la Città*, Urbino University Press, Urbino 2024, pp. 183-200.

awareness that the scandal now pervades his very existence, and that the guilt of his actions weighs heavily upon him. Consequently, he chooses to escape the potential violence of the community by self-expulsion. Boccaccio seems to understand that another victim, in this case, would only serve to further tarnish the courtly myth of the “due amanti reciprocamente infelici” (“two mutually unhappy lovers”).

4. Conclusions: Mimetic Desire in the *Decameron*

In conclusion, let us briefly summarize the main arguments presented and then offer further insights, drawn from other tales in the *Decameron*, to reinforce the central theses of this analysis. Our goal is to demonstrate that the modifications Boccaccio made to his source material were deliberate and reflect a nuanced understanding of what René Girard terms “mimetic desire”.

In the introduction, we briefly examined the primary source for *Decameron* IV 9 and contextualized the story within the larger framework of the collection. A notable point of interest was Boccaccio’s inventive detail regarding the woman’s death, specifically the destruction of her body (“si disfece”). We compared this with a similar use of the verb in *Purgatorio* V, where Pia recounts her own tale. We also analyzed the opening lines by Filostrato, focusing on the role of compassion within the text’s broader thematic structure. In the second section, we explored the transformation from the source’s ‘Cabestanh’ to the *Decameron*’s ‘Guardastagno’, employing the concept of narcissism. This phenomenon of desire, evident in Boccaccio’s narrative, was crucial to understanding the dynamics between the characters. Additionally, we applied Denis de Rougemont’s notion of ‘passionate love’ to clarify both the nature of the characters’ affections and the implications of the story’s tragic deaths. The third section delved into Boccaccio’s emphasis on the equality of the two “noble knights”, a detail not present in the source. Girardian analysis of mimetic desire proved essential here, as it posits that increased similarity between two individuals intensifies their mutual desires and conflicts. This theoretical framework helped elucidate the rivalry depicted in the story. Finally, we proposed a hypothesis regarding Boccaccio’s modification of the source’s conclusion, which he made more definitive and reassuring.

We now aim to demonstrate that the conjectures developed to explain the divergences from the source are not supported solely by the particular context of *Decameron* IV 9. Rather, it is plausible that Boccaccio, while crafting the *Decameron*, was implicitly engaging with the phenomena of desire that scholars like Rougemont and Girard would later explore in the twentieth century. In these concluding remarks, we

will outline a defense of this assertion, acknowledging that our analysis will be neither exhaustive nor an attempt to trace the evolution of these themes throughout the narratives of the ten young storytellers.

The application of a Girardian reading to some passages of the *Decameron* has already been initiated in recent years by scholars such as Raffaele Girardi²⁷ and Chiara Lombardi²⁸, with additional brief references in Pennisi²⁹ and Holmes³⁰. Notably, the plague in the *Decameron* is not merely a contingent historical context but rather represents a social and spiritual condition marked by the disintegration of human relationships and the hierarchies that regulate them. It was described as “la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane, quasi caduta e dissolute” (“all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city”; Introduction to the First Day, 23) with significant repercussions on human desire. Boccaccio’s famous depiction of the Black Death dedicates more attention to its social effects than to its medical aspects. Cardini³¹ has appropriately highlighted the Girardian implications of the plague in his analysis of its “orrido cominciamento” (“grim beginning”).

“Borrowed desire”, or suggested desire, appears frequently throughout the short stories, manifesting not only in amorous contexts. For example, the drive to equal one’s model propels the action in X 3, while the display and imitation of desire underpin the comic narratives of stories III and IX from the Eighth Day. In its more traditionally amorous form, which has been the primary focus of this work, mimetic desire is evident from the First Day. In the fifth story, the Marchioness of Monferrato neutralizes the “borrowed” love in which the King of France is ensnared, demonstrating that, apart from others’ desires, objects of love are inherently equal. The Second Day further explores this theme by delving into the rivalrous and violent aspects of mimetic desire, moving away from the extraordinary and sudden reversals common in the First Day. Notably, the tale of Alatiel (II 7) exemplifies how the desire or possession by a third party incites a cycle of violent deaths surrounding a young princess. In II 9, Bernabò flaunts his own desire’s self-sufficiency and the impossibility

²⁷ See R. Girardi, *Mascherate boccacciane. Il riso di piazza nel “Decameron”*, in R. Girardi (a cura di) *Boccaccio e lo spettacolo della parola. Il Decameron dalla scrittura alla scena*, Edizioni di pagina, Bari 2013, pp. 23-49.

²⁸ See C. Lombardi, *Rapporti di forza e desiderio mimetico alle origini della storia*, in “Morphology and Historical Sequence”, n. 18, 2021, pp. 139-152.

²⁹ See F. A. Pennisi, *Un-Masking Venice: Allegory and the Politics of Reading in Decameron IV.2*, in “Heliotropia”, Vol. 2: Is. 1, Article 2, 2004.

³⁰ See O. Holmes, *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature. Ethics and Mischief in the Decameron*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023.

³¹ See F. Cardini, *Cento novelle contro la morte*, Salerno Editrice, Roma 2007.

of external intrusions into his married life, while Ambrogiuolo exploits Bernabò's inherent insecurity, exacerbating his pride and, in turn, falling victim to this display of self-sufficiency. The rapid mutual contagion between the two initiates a cycle of violence, with some violent acts being carried out and others narrowly avoided. In IV 1, Tancredi, who appears morbidly interested in his daughter Ghismonda³², ultimately pushes her toward the obstacle – one he has created himself, as Ghismonda astutely reveals – embodied by one of his valets. The theme of mimetic desire takes on a crucial role in the long and intricate antepenultimate tale of the work. Tito and Gisippo, two childhood friends so alike that they both desire the same woman, experience a rivalry that, in tune with the extraordinary miracles reserved for this day by Boccaccio, concludes not with death or exclusion but with the salvation of all the characters.

As mentioned, this brief review highlights some key passages that reveal the presence of the relational phenomenon we have shown to be fundamental in IV 9. Future studies will be able to define more precisely the function and significance of mimetic desire – and related phenomena such as envy, narcissism, and the scapegoat mechanism – in the *Decameron* and in Boccaccio's literary output. It is important, however, as Giuseppe Fornari demonstrates in the essay *Il volto segreto della conversione: lo strano caso di Ser Ciappelletto*³³ – which partially draws on some Girardian insights – not to limit oneself to a purely applicative approach. While a direct application of Rougemont and Girard's conceptual tools has proven appropriate for the novella under examination, it is highly probable that Boccaccio, in continuity with Dante and others, reflected on themes like these throughout his work, developing an original and nuanced exploration that largely remains to be fully reconstructed.

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³² See Branca's commentary in his translation, and also C. Varotti, *Figli innamorati: l'istinto, la gelosia, la tolleranza*, "Griseldaonline. Didattica per la scuola", 2020.

³³ See G. Fornari, *Il volto segreto della conversione: lo strano caso di ser Ciappelletto*, in S. R. Arapia, R. Di Pasquale (a cura di), *Il cambiamento nei processi mentali*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2009, pp. 125-63.

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