THE DECALOGUE IN THE *DECAMERON*

By

TIMOTHY CURCIO

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Italian

Written under the direction of

Professor Alessandro Vettori

And approved by

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October, 2020
My dissertation provides insight into the academic debate concerning the moral message of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Although the earlier tradition of critical commentary on the topic tends to disregard the text’s didactic scope, more recent scholars generally point out the ethical values of this literary masterpiece. I argue that the work’s morality can be judged more effectively by applying the Ten Commandments as its original interpretative key. This approach highlights the centrality of Christian thought, which has been largely overlooked because of the *Decameron*’s often salacious material. I argue that the apocalyptic reality ushered in by the plague incites Boccaccio to reconsider prevailing laws and ethics, specifically spiritual and religious laws, like the Ten Commandments. After careful analysis of the Decalogue in the *Decameron*, I conclude that Boccaccio takes a more compassionate stance on morality. The author affirms the New Testament’s Greatest Commandment and its Golden Rule, rather than the rigidity of the Ten
Commandments of the Old Testament. As I examine primary and secondary sources through a historical and interpretive approach, I do a close reading of numerous novellas of the Decameron, and I also consider biblical commentaries by theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure. I am in constant conversation with Boccaccio criticism, which provides the framework for my research. My dissertation spans four chapters and connects the Ten Commandments thematically. “Observance,” the first chapter, investigates the polemical way in which religious observance and authority are depicted by the text; this is where I highlight idolatry, sabbath, and honor thy mother and thy father. Chapter Two, “Word,” focuses on the use of immoral language through the second and eighth commandments that prohibit blasphemy and deceit. The third chapter, entitled “Deed,” investigates the commandments of murder and adultery, where I examine the instances in Day Five and Day Seven when the decision to commit murder or adultery is considered a righteous act. Concupiscence is the topic of the fourth chapter, entitled “Desire,” a concept that encompasses the seventh, the ninth, and the tenth commandments prohibiting theft and coveting; here, I highlight the ethical tensions between Day Two, based on greed, and Day Ten, based on generosity. As a witness to the collapse of society during the plague in 1348, Boccaccio reevaluates right and wrong, and his articulation of moral dilemmas is ageless because all generations must grapple with political, social, and thereby moral upheaval.
Acknowledgements

Though, at times, writing can feel like such a solitary act, the completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of others. First, I would be remiss to not express my gratitude to Giovanni Boccaccio for his enduring masterpiece that takes on new meaning as I complete my dissertation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Stories, the act of storytelling, and its byproducts, connect us a little more and socially distance us a little less.

Thank you to Professor Alessandro Duranti for his epic course on Boccaccio that impassioned and invigorated a 24-year-old from North Jersey at *Le Lettere* in Florence. Also, thanks to Erin Kelly for her feedback and for her indispensable course on academic writing. Thank you to my many students whose curiosity and courage to critically confront literature in a language not their own have inspired me.

I am grateful to my committee for their vital role: Professor Paola Gambarota for her pragmatic advice, Professor David Marsh for his fruitful suggestions, and Professor Susanna Barsella for taking the time to be my external reader. Additionally, I am indebted to Professor Alessandro Vettori for his mentorship and unwavering guidance throughout this journey. His Dante course sophomore year at Rutgers was a truly seminal experience when, for the first time, a piece of literature moved my mind and my emotions.

Also, I am thankful to my friends and family for their love and support: Barbara, Carl, Matt, Ant, Jackie, Dan, Mom, and Dad who has a lasting fascination with Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*. 
Last but not least, this work would not have come to fruition without my sounding board/editor/best friend/wife Nicole. In the words of Boccaccio, “La nostra mente tutta possiede e signoreggia Amore con la sua deità, e tu sai che non è sicura cosa alle sue potenzie resistere.”
# Contents

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION ................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................. iv
Contents .................................................................................................... vi
Introduction ............................................................................................... 1
CHAPTER 1 OBSERVANCE ........................................................................ 17
1.1 Thou Shalt Not Have False Gods......................................................... 18
1.2 Keep Holy the Sabbath ....................................................................... 34
1.3 Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother ..................................................... 51
CHAPTER 2 WORD .................................................................................... 65
2.1 Thou Shalt Not Take the Name of the Lord Thy God in Vain .............. 66
2.2 Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness against Thy Neighbor ............... 79
CHAPTER 3 DEED ................................................................................... 91
3.1 Thou Shalt Not Kill ............................................................................. 92
3.2 Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery ....................................................... 106
CHAPTER 4 DESIRE ............................................................................. 121
4.1 Thou Shalt Not Steal .......................................................................... 122
4.2 Thou Shalt Not Covet ........................................................................ 131
Conclusion ............................................................................................... 146
Bibliography ........................................................................................... 151
Introduction

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”
“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”
-Matthew 19: 16-17

The Italian novella is a genre traditionally dismissed as a mere divertissement lacking serious artistic contribution. Today, this underestimation has been eclipsed, as modern literary critics provide evidence to the contrary. The polygenetic composition of the Italian novella, coupled with its condensed form, provides fertile ground when one assesses its literary value. The novella is an amalgam of many earlier genres like exempla, lais, fabliaux, cantari, and bestiaries, to name a few. This mixed configuration complicates the novella’s message and its critical interpretations. Its moral dimension is seldom straightforward and therefore difficult to determine. Moreover, the intermingling of diletto and utile creates confusion, and is even more complex when one evaluates a work that contains many novellas. This ambiguity, however, is where interpretation and critical debate thrive.

Seven centuries after Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the Decameron, the text continues to stump scholars who attempt to solve the enigma of its moral message. It is particularly difficult to evaluate to what degree his short stories are meant to amuse, and to what degree edify. What is clear, however, is that Boccaccio is concerned with rules and regulations throughout the text. Some of the work’s most noteworthy novellas are those in which a character must interpret a law, rule, or command. So often, characters must decide whether a rule should or should not be followed. The decision to obey or
disobey is made according to the character’s circumstances in the context of, his or her moral code or place in society. This idea is best encapsulated by the text’s Proem when the narrator introduces the subject matter of the text and highlights its utility: “in quanto potranno cognoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare” (Proem.14). The text goes on to demonstrate that life’s decisions are much more complex than the simple choice between “fuggire” or “seguitare.” The decision to adhere to or reject established ethics, whether mercantile, feudal, or religious, is fertile ground for Boccaccio’s artistic invention and experimentation. The text does not blindly accept these rules and laws without contemplation, or without urging the reader to reflect on them.

Critics of the Decameron have brought to light Boccaccio’s tendency to forge his narratives within this murky moral space. Boccaccio’s text plays in the space between ethical principles and human choices where the binary choice between right and wrong is not quite so simple, especially when adhering to rigid church dogma. Mercantile and courtly values are most commonly associated with Boccaccio’s short stories. However, critics have not adequately addressed the importance of Judeo-Christian values in the text. I aim to contribute to the debate on the Decameron’s moral orientation by focusing particularly on Judeo-Christian philosophy, encapsulated by the Ten Commandments.

My research investigates several questions: Can a more productive system of interpreting a novella’s moral intention be developed? In what way does short story fiction reflect societal and individual reactions to ethically imposed norms? Does transgression of established precepts shed light on society’s view of these precepts? More specifically, can the framework of the Ten Commandments within the Decameron’s ten days be identified and what relation does it have to the moral makeup of the work?
The theoretical framework for this research reflects an academic tradition that has attempted to assess Boccaccio’s ethical position in the *Decameron*. The text has sparked lively debate about its moral makeup. This commentary ranges from the view that Boccaccio is the ultimate aesthete whose work is completely void of a didactic scope, to a moralist highly concerned with ethical value, to several other opinions situated between the two poles. For instance, De Sanctis and Singleton represent the early position that Boccaccio’s sole aim was art as entertainment, resulting in escapism. Others like Auerbach, Scaglione, and Sapegno dismiss a moral emphasis in the work and focus on the worldly and naturalistic leanings of Boccaccio, embodied in his carnal characters. Neri and Branca offer another explanation for the moral aim of the work. For them, the work’s moral orientation is reflected by the text’s overarching thematic progression from vice to virtue. Under this interpretation, Boccaccio’s “human comedy” mirrors Dante’s *Divine Comedy* by beginning with the world’s worst man, Ser Ciappelletto, in 1.1 and ascending to the absolute example of humility with Griselda in 10.10. Similarly, Kirkham contributes to the discussion by bringing Aquinas and Aristotelian virtues to the forefront.

More recently, scholars point to a moralist stance in the work, yet they acknowledge how difficult it is to evaluate. With a purely structural reading, Todorov relies solely on plot development by suggesting a formulaic schema under which each of the one hundred novellas can be categorized. Nissen recognizes that a totalizing interpretation of the work’s message is highly problematic. Following Todorov’s lead, Nissen advances a practical system for evaluating the ethical message of all one hundred of Boccaccio’s short stories. His system is based on three ethics, which he labels ethical
modes: acquisition, renunciation, and retribution. Nissen asserts that the moral significance of each novella can be determined by analyzing the main character’s choices in relation to these three “ethical modes.” This approach simplifies the multifarious nature of the work by measuring the moral direction of each novella with one standard. With Nissen’s approach as a model, I apply an unambiguous standard, the Ten Commandments, to the text’s complex moral makeup. In addition, my approach is grounded in a robust tradition of medieval commentary on the Ten Commandments that elaborates on these precise moral dilemmas.

In a recent study on the topic, *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron*, Migiel moves the debate beyond questioning whether there is a moral dimension to the work. Instead, her research is concerned with how Boccaccio constructs his moral considerations and, more importantly, how the reader receives them. Migiel states that, “the Decameron complicates a landscape of blacks and whites, that it calls into question the world of established authorities.” I, too, maintain that the Decameron calls established norms into question. With my research, though, I contribute to these debates by utilizing the most enduring set of laws, the Ten Commandments, to ground and measure the complex moral decision-making that takes place in the Decameron to take a step closer toward determining the text’s moral outlook.

To take on these research questions I rely on primary and secondary sources through a historical and interpretive approach. I analyze a broad range of novellas from the Decameron. Additionally, biblical commentaries on the Ten Commandments by theologians like Augustine, Bonaventure, and Aquinas help delineate the historical importance of the Decalogue in medieval Italy. Naturally, the variety of Boccaccio
criticism is fundamental to positioning my research within this academic debate. I rely on an extensive bibliography on Boccaccio’s works to engage, accept, or reject previous studies on the *Decameron*’s ethical dimension.

My investigation employs a close reading and analysis of select novellas that engage the Ten Commandments. I examine the presence of each precept in multiple short stories and analyze how these precepts are treated throughout the text. An inquiry into these ideals reveals a more comprehensive view of the work’s ethical stance. My dissertation spans four chapters and connects the Ten Commandments thematically.

In Chapter One, “Observance,” I argue that the *Decameron* encourages its readers to reconsider absolute adherence to religious authorities. To achieve this, I analyze the text’s relation to the first commandment, idolatry, the third commandment, keep holy the Sabbath, and the fourth commandment honor thy father and thy mother. I investigate the first commandment, idolatry, on Day One because in many novellas of this day the author artistically exploits the use and misuse of relics and the worship of graven images. Then, I examine the third commandment, keep holy the Sabbath, in novellas that punish excessive religious observance. Finally, I argue that the fourth day of the *Decameron* brings the fourth commandment into question, obey thy father and thy mother, as so many authoritative family members obstruct the love of youthful protagonists. The text recognizes that the laws of nature are at odds with divine law and that those who blindly follow religious observances without some degree of contemplation or consideration, are punished for neglecting their own human reason.

Thereafter, the second chapter, “Word,” deals with the power of discourse and the moral use of one’s voice. Verbal ability and the power of speech are obvious motifs
throughout the entirety of Boccaccio’s text, but this chapter specifically analyzes the second and eighth commandments, which prohibit taking the Lord’s name in vain and bearing false witness. I argue that the text portrays immoral speech as acceptable, as long as the immoral speech is artfully crafted. This chapter also expounds on Boccaccio’s theoretical ideas regarding the relationship of fiction and deceit. I analyze select novellas of Day Eight and their relation to the eighth commandment, falsum testimonium, where novellas celebrate the ability of articulate characters to wield words and weave falsehoods on a day dedicated to le beffe, characteristic pranks based on deceit.

Next, Chapter Three, “Deed,” focuses on two straightforward commandments that are carried out by one’s hand or through one’s actions, murder and adultery. I highlight how the text critiques traditional theological notions as it invites the reader to contemplate when the transgression of these two sins can be considered justifiable acts. First, I analyze the fifth day of the Decameron and its relation to the fifth commandment that forbids violence and anger. All ten novellas of Day Five address this sin in some way, but I closely analyze three novellas that question the justifiability of violence and anger: 5.1, 5.6, and 5.8. The seventh day of the Decameron deals solely with the theme of adultery which is present in all ten of the novellas on this day. However, adultery is not always portrayed as a negative act; on occasion, it is seen as a righteous one. I demonstrate how Day Seven reveals adultery as a necessary evil for subjugated married women who are praised for breaking the sixth commandment as a form of self-defense.

“Desire,” the final chapter, investigates the seventh, the ninth, and the tenth commandments which outlaw theft and coveting the possessions of others. The sin of unrestrained desire underlies these commandments. First, I examine the greed of the
merchant class on Day Two by considering two types of theft, *rapina* and *furtum*. On this
day, the text associates the sin of greed with the growing merchant class and offers
conflicting rewards or punishments for certain thieves. Then, I argue that Day Ten is not
a celebration of the value of generosity, as others have asserted, but a case study of what
it means to be generous. The ninth and tenth commandments in scripture represent the sin
of concupiscence and prohibit coveting other’s possessions, thereby urging one toward
contentment of possessions. I argue that Day Ten’s lauded acts of largesse are not so
straightforward, rather they are quite controversial. I maintain that the generous acts of
Day Ten counterbalance the greed of Day Two, but, more importantly, that the text
challenges the reader to consider the true meaning of proper generosity.

In 14th-century Italy, a preoccupation with following rules, whether divine or
human, inevitably leads to consideration of Judeo-Christian ethics. Cormac Ó Cuilleanàin
aptly depicts Boccaccio’s tendency to equate religion with precepts and rules:

For Boccaccio treats religion primarily as a set of historical rules and external
observances rather than as ‘an interior state of submissive attention to God.’ Far
from trivializing it, Boccaccio’s passionate concern with the rules, observance and
civilizing artifices of society necessarily gives religion a central role in his
imaginative practice. Rules and observances, the laws and metaphors of society,
are Boccaccio’s narrative lifeblood. (34)

Ó Cuileanàin points out how religion functions synonymously with law in Boccaccio’s
conception of order in the text. Boccaccio’s knowledge of and interest in ecclesiastical
law can be attributed to the author’s study of canon law as a youth in Naples. The
author’s law background undoubtedly had an impact on his literary production. Thus, we
should consider the *Decameron*’s relation to Judeo-Christian laws.¹

Judeo-Christian law is encapsulated by the delineation and explanation of moral

¹ See Kirkham “Morale” for a breakdown of the concepts of law, ethics, and morals in the *Decameron*.
law or *moralia* offered by the Old Testament. The title itself, *Decameron*, instantly places the work into a biblical discourse by evoking St. Ambrose’s *Hexaemeron*, a series of exegetical commentaries on the six days of creation. Furthermore, the Old Testament’s ominous language and tone echo throughout the *Decameron*’s introduction. This biblical resonance is particularly palpable as the narrator portrays society’s moral collapse induced by the plague. Boccaccio’s linguistic choices in the introduction conjure up images from the book of Exodus, like Moses’ ten plagues of Egypt.² For instance, this linguistic resemblance is apparent when a vengeful God sends a plague upon the people of Israel as punishment for their immoral behavior. The Israelites fall into debauchery while Moses is on Mount Sinai:

> quibus ait haec dicit Dominus Deus Israhel ponat vir gladium super femur suum ite et redite de porta usque ad portam per medium castrorum et occidat unusquisque fratem et amicum et proximum suum fecerunt filii Levi iuxta sermonem Mosi cecideruntque in die illo quasi tria milia hominum

And he said to them: Thus saith the Lord God of Israel: Put every man his sword upon his thigh: go, and return from gate to gate through the midst of the camp, and let every man kill his brother, and friend, and neighbour. And the sons of Levi did according to the words of Moses, and there were slain that day about three and twenty thousand men. (*Vulgate Latin Bible With English Translation*, Exod. 32: 27-28).

This brutal scene culminates in countless deaths while it emphasizes the apathy necessary to murder those who are closest, such as “fratrem et amicum et proximum suum.” The physical proximity of these listed words accentuates the closeness inherent to the terms. Despite Moses’ plea for atonement, God sends a plague on his own people as punishment. Likewise, Boccaccio’s introduction dramatically depicts a chaos of biblical

---

² Interestingly, there is a tradition of medieval biblical commentators who compare the Ten Commandments to the ten plagues of Egypt starting with Augustine, then followed by Peter Lombard, William of Auxerre, and Bonaventure (Smith).
proportion spawned by the plague in Florence: “l’uno cittadino l’altro schifasse e quasi niuno avesse dell’altro cura e i parenti insieme rade volte o non mai si visitassero e di lontano . . . che l’un fratello l’altro abbandonava e il zio il nepote e la sorella il fratello e spesse volte la donna il suo marito” (1.Intro.27). Like the passage from Exodus, the poignant and succinct list of close kin stands out while it also points to an unfathomable indifference. Words like “fratello, parenti, and cittadino” seem to mimic the biblical vocabulary and stylistically produce a similar effect. Much like its biblical counterpart, this quotation highlights a people so void of moral direction that they disregard those closest. Considering the biblical tone with which the narrator opens the text, we must treat the work as more than just escapist storytelling. On the contrary, serious moral reflections on the Decameron’s material are undeniable.3

God’s moral law and its delegation are embodied by Moses who is notably absent from the Decameron. However, Boccaccio references this biblical figure in two of his vernacular works.4 For example, Moses appears during Boccaccio’s digression that defends poetry in Vite di Dante. One of the text’s more memorable moments, this digression focuses on a poet’s ability to use images to address questions of morality more effectively:

Così li poeti nelle loro opere, le quali noi chiamiamo «poesia» . . . ne mostrano le cagioni delle cose, gli effetti delle virtù e de’ vizii, e che fuggire dobbiamo e che seguire, acciò che pervenire possiamo, virtuosamente operando, a quel fine, il quale essi, che il vero Iddio debitamente non conosceano somma salute credevano. Volle lo Spirito Santo mostrare nel rubro verdissimo, nel quale Moisè vide, quasi come una fiamma ardente, Iddio, la verginità di Colei che più che altra creatura fu pura, e che doveva essere abitazione e ricetto del Signore della natura, non doversi, per la concezione né per lo parto del Verbo del Padre, contaminare.

3 Hollander 14-15 provides the most concise explanation of the debated moral orientation of the text highlighting four distinct positions in “The Decameron Proem.” Migiel’s book The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron is the latest to address it. See the Introduction.
4 Boccaccio also refers to Moses four times in the Genealogia deorum gentilium.
This reference to Moses unquestionably calls to mind the *Decameron*’s Proem with word choice: “gli effetti delle virtù e de’ vizii, e che fuggire dobbiamo e che seguire.” The subsequent sentence employs the imagery of Moses and the burning bush to illustrate Boccaccio’s point. This metaliterary maneuver demonstrates a poet’s ability to fashion images to better explain a moral concept. Again, Moses’ presence in Boccaccio’s work comes by means of Dante, the authoritative literary voice on Christian morality.

Boccaccio highlights Moses’ fame as a lawgiver in *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia*. In Canto 4 of *Inferno*, through the vessel of Virgil, Dante refers to the Old Testament figure as “Moisè legista e ubidiente” (IV.57). In a matter of four words, Dante’s succinct epithet illustrates the conception of the biblical figure at the time. Boccaccio’s Literal Exposition of this verse characterizes Moses as well: “salito in sul monte Sinai e quivi dimorato in digiuni e penitenza quaranta dì, ebbe da Dio due tavole, nelle quali erano scritti i comandamenti della legge, la quale esso, disceso dal monte, diede al popolo: e però il sopranomina l'autore « legista »” (185). When Boccaccio portrays Moses in his texts, he characterizes him as the lawgiver and he consistently associates him with ethics, morals, virtues, and vices. Given Boccaccio’s conception of Moses and his “comandamenti della legge,” a consideration of the role that the Ten Commandments play in the *Decameron* can provide a unique way to assess the text’s moral makeup.

Among the gamut of human choices and situations in the *Decameron*, there is a constant flow of power or command. In the text, the word “comandare” appears 123

---

5 Kirkham maintains that the moral orientation of the *Decameron* is influenced by Aristotle through the intermediary of Aquinas: “Aristotele termina il suo trattato morale con una discussione della legge (*Etica* 1179), perché per attingere la virtù le buone leggi sono essenziali e quindi ogni uomo buono dev’esser legislatore” (263).
times and “comandamento” occurs 53 times (Quondam 1689). Different levels of commanding or commandment govern a multitude of Boccaccio’s characters who occupy all strata of society. If the Decameron is a mosaic of society, as many critics have suggested, what holds its diverse tiles together is an ever-present chain of command:

Il titolare dell’imperium e della maiestas esercita il potere di comandare . . . è una catena progressiva di comando, che da Dio (III 8 48) e dai suoi comandamenti (I 1 48) discende ai re (veri: III 2 29) e al papa («pastor principale» I 2 48), ai principi (IV 1 24), e ai signori di ogni genere e rango (V 7 45), ai titolari di qualsiasi tipo di potere (vescovo: VIII 4 35; badesse: IX 2 12; padroni di navi: IV 4 19; persino frate Cipolla: VI 10 32).

“In modo del tutto analogo funziona la catena di comando nell’interno domestico: i mariti comandano alle mogli (II 9 1) e (con la moglie, ma in ambiti distinti) alla famiglia dei servitori (V 8 13), a ogni singolo fante o fantasca; e i padri comandano ai figli (V 7 50) . . . Sulle giovani donne, poi, grava un potere di comando diffuso: le loro vite dipendono «da’ comandamenti de’ padri, delle madri, de’ fratelli e de’ mariti» (Proemio 10). (Quondam 1689)

Authorities based on hierarchy are pervasive in the work.6 Time and again, the plot of Boccaccio’s novellas hinges on commandments that are established rapidly and succinctly for the reader. These novellas’ narration and plot development proceed in many directions from this starting point. Different levels of commandment provide order, while simultaneously allowing the disorder needed in plot development to construct an effective story.7

Other critics have detected an Old Testament inspiration in the Decameron’s introduction.8 The Old Testament backdrop is an appropriate pretext for moral reflection on the array of human choices contained in the one hundred tales. While developing the

---

6 “Il suo locus è tanto la comunità universale quanto l’anima dell’uomo, cementate da una grande gerarchia morale in cui il corpo ubbedisce all’anima, gli appetiti ubbediscono alla ragione, la donna ubbedisce all’uomo, uomini e donne ubbediscono ai loro sovrani e tutti i buoni cristiani ubbediscono a Dio” (Kirkham 268).

7 See Todorov’s structural reading on novella’s plot equilibrium.

8 “God’s presence is also serious and strongly marked in the description of the plague, where He is mentioned twice, both times in the guise of angry and awe-inspiring Old Testament Lord” (Potter 42).
frame of the text, through tone and lexicon, the authorial voice sets the stage for a
spiritual and biblical consideration of the material to come. At times, the introduction
resembles the textual representation of the Ten Commandments, which is enumerated in
Exodus 20 and reiterated in Deuteronomy 5:

\[
\text{ego sum Dominus Deus tuus fortis zelotes visitans iniquitatem patrum in filiis in}
tertiam et quartam generationem eorum qui oderunt me: et faciens misericordiam
in milia his qui diligunt me et custodiunt praecepta mea}
\]

I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon
the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me … And
shewing mercy unto thousands to them that love me, and keep my
commandments. (Exod. 20: 5-6)

The vindictive personification of God promises multigenerational punishment for man’s
iniquity. The Decameron’s introduction echoes the Decalogue: “pervenne la mortifera
pestilenza: la quale per operazion de’ corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da
giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali” (1.Intro.8). And later: “l’ira
di Dio a punire le iniquità degli uomini con quella pistolenza” (1.Intro.25). Though
Boccaccio refers to his contemporary Florentine citizens here, an analogy with the
Israelites, who prefigure Christian followers, is evident.9 Therefore, the supreme moral
code, the Ten Commandments, can also be applied to the true addressee of the
Decameron, Boccaccio’s contemporaries.

A reader of the Decameron does not have to go beyond the first novella to
encounter the Decalogue. The first novella of the 100 tales is both a representation of and
a commentary on the direction of the subsequent 99, and the Ten Commandments play a
significant role in its storyline. The Ten Commandments’ primary position in this

9 Gibaldi, too, identifies this metaphor: “The pestilence that is ravaging the Italian city is for Boccaccio far
more than just a natural disaster. As John Addington Symonds and others have suggested, it serves as a
convenient metaphor for the ethical and social deterioration of Trecento Florence” (349).
introductory novella underscores its significance throughout the corpus of the work.

Moreover, the main character of the Decameron’s first tale is guilty of disobeying all ten precepts. N.S. Thompson states that “Boccaccio makes it so much more in that Ser Cepparello manages to break all Ten Commandments and, at the opening of Boccaccio’s “comedy,” could well be seen fictively as an entrance to hell, except that he becomes unwittingly sanctified by the pious people of France” (87). Ciappelletto’s extravagant wickedness encompasses all of man’s sins, yet, he is ultimately revered as “san Ciappelletto.” Also, the ultimate transgressor, Ser Ciappelletto, refers explicitly to the Decalogue during his notorious confession: “veggendo tutto il dì gli uomini fare le sconce cose, non servare i comandamenti di Dio, non temere i suoi giudicii” (1.1.48). Ciappelletto ironically projects his transgression of all Ten Commandments on to others. This irony reveals the polemical way in which the text addresses the Ten Commandments from the onset. If someone who actively disobeys all ten precepts of God’s covenant with man is judged by others as “reputato per santo” (1.1.1), perhaps the author is suggesting that these precepts, which have been quite literally set in stone, should be evaluated more closely.

Starting with such a controversial religious context, the reader of the Decameron enters a world of organized chaos. The highly schematic structure and topographical formation of days, themes, narrators, and novellas intimate possible symbolic interpretations. Scholars have offered a variety of viable textual patterns. For instance, Anastaplo underlines the work’s suggestive organization and poses the following

---

10 Papio outlines many in “Patterns of Meaning in the Decameron.” See Ferrante’s “Narrative Patterns in the Decameron,” “The Frame Characters of the Decameron: A Progression of Virtues,” and Barolini’s “The Wheel of the Decameron.”
question: “We have already noticed that much is made of ten. Are we thereby invited to reconsider the Ten Commandments” (Anastaplo 56)? Indeed, the Ten Commandments were a prominent topic of conversation at the time, as the church reforms of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 installed the Decalogue as a central concept to church teachings, from the schools in Paris on down to the laity. Thirteenth century theologians produced extensive material on the topic of the Decalogue. Even Bonaventure and Aquinas composed vital theoretical commentaries on the Ten Commandments. Both Bonaventure’s *Collationes De Decem Praeceptis* and Aquinas’ *Collationes in Decem Praeceptis* are a collection of sermons given during Lent that instruct their followers about the meaning and application of the Ten Commandments. In addition, more practical works like Thomas of Chobham’s *Summa confessorum*, a handbook on confession, was widely circulated. By Boccaccio’s time in the mid- and late-14th century, “the commandments became a pillar of catechesis, a means of teaching the laity about their faith, and a checklist to ingrain the habits of private confession; and they continued to be discussed in biblical commentary and theological *summae*, in the academic setting of the schools” (Smith 216). Given the important cultural position of the commandments at the time, Boccaccio’s narrative engagement with them should prove fruitful.

Along with the historical relevance of the Ten Commandments at the time,

---


12 Smith states that “the Decalogue is useful because, in the years after the Fourth Lateran Council, when the ideas of the Council passed into local diocesan legislation, the Commandments was one of the texts commonly cited as being among those the laity should be taught” (21).

13 See Alessandro Vettori’s article “Religio amoris. Il sesso come rituale religioso nel *Decameron*” for a study on the sacrament of confession in the *Decameron*.
evocative parallels between the Decalogue and the *Decameron* on a structural level merit further analysis. For example, the numerical and thematic correspondence of certain commandments and certain *giornate* is thought-provoking. Ò Cuilleanáin draws attention to some of these patterns while being wary of overestimating their literary significance:

Seven sacraments, three divine virtues, ten commandments, seven years’ difference between the youngest man and the youngest woman of the *cornice*—patterns and suggestions and associations mingle in the reader’s consciousness, collectively hinting at a satisfying web of meaning but each individually appearing false and reductive when chosen from the general flow of correspondences, as pebbles lose their shine when plucked from a stream. The patterns are carefully created by the author. (82-83)

Still, the numerical and thematic correspondence between specific commandments and specific days of the *Decameron* are rather suggestive. For instance, the first commandment on idolatry is pertinent to the novellas of Day One, especially the first three. The fourth commandment to honor thy father and thy mother and Day Four also exhibit curious connections since many short stories narrate how an authoritative mother, father, brother, or church father impedes the desires of the main character. The fifth day consistently presents violence, prohibited by the fifth commandment. McWilliam implies a connection between the seventh commandment forbidding adultery which is the explicit topic of the seventh day, although Augustine’s enumeration positions this commandment as the sixth commandment (ci). In addition, the eighth commandment prohibits lies and Day Eight is one of the most dishonest days of the ten. Furthermore, the ninth and tenth commandments are originally one in scripture, but later Augustine separates them into two laws. This commandment prohibits coveting other’s possessions and, fittingly, Day Ten of the *Decameron* employs the theme of liberality, which focuses exclusively on the concept of desiring the goods of others. These structural coincidences demand closer
consideration of the interplay between the text’s moral message and the ten moralia that pass from the Old Testament to the New.

Like Ó Cuilleanàin, Papio warns of overgeneralizing the Decameron’s multifaceted structure: “As all teachers of Boccaccio know, there is no such thing as a completely airtight generalization. Just as we make a pronouncement regarding the work in its entirety, a small voice of warning sounds (or should be sounding) in our ears” (58). While I acknowledge this warning, I maintain that the connection between the Ten Commandments and the organization of the Decameron’s ten days merits closer examination and adds a novel avenue to address the text’s moral message. As others have stated,¹⁴ my contention is that Boccaccio hints at possible symbolic patterns, but he does not intend an all-encompassing hidden secret that unlocks a greater significance to the text and its structure. Instead, I contend that the Decameron establishes a dialogue with the Decalogue; in some cases, it follows it and in others it contradicts it. As a representation of human behavior, the narrator, the novellas and the cornice constantly negotiate the moral code fixed in the Decalogue. For Boccaccio, the plague is an accelerant that facilitates a reconsideration of prevailing laws, like the Ten Commandments. Moreover, Boccaccio’s vision of morality in the text is a more fluid and flexible one that more closely resembles the New Covenant’s Greatest Commandment than the unforgiving rules of the Old Covenant’s Ten Commandments.

---

¹⁴ “The existence of such patterns does not prove that Boccaccio had a tightly worked-out scheme for all the stories of the Decameron but certainly that he had definite ideas in his mind, which he was consciously playing with” (Ferrante 587).
CHAPTER 1

OBSERVANCE
1.1 Thou Shalt Not Have False Gods

ego sum Dominus Deus tuus qui eduxi te de terra Aegypti de domo servitutis non habebis deos alienos coram me non facies tibi sculptile neque omnem similitudinem quae est in caelo desuper et quae in terra deorsum nec eorum quae sunt in aquis sub terra non adorabis ea neque coles ego sum Dominus Deus tuus fortis zelotes visitans iniquitatem patrum in filiis in tertiam et quartam generationem eorum qui oderunt me

I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt not have strange gods before me. Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them: I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.
-Exodus 20: 2-5

The first commandment is unprecedently long and known for its unique threat to those who transgress its law. Best represented by the sin of idolatry, the first commandment is arguably pertinent to all ten novellas of the Decameron’s first day. In addition to the declared “tema libero,” Vittore Branca maintains that religion is the theme of Day One (36). I would go further by suggesting that the theme of Day One transcends the institution of religion to the more intangible notion of faith.\textsuperscript{15} Faith is, of course, the quintessential principle proposed by the first commandment.

Let us take a closer look at the medieval interpretation of this commandment. The medieval interpretation of the first commandment is broader than just heresy and the worship of other religions. Grosseteste, like other theologians, conceives of this commandment as worshipping things other than God like money, lust, pride, envy, the sun, the moon, the stars or objects made of gold (Smith 79-80). Bearing this exegetical

\textsuperscript{15} Potter, too, underscores the distinction that Boccaccio makes between Church and God. See Chapter II.
reading in mind, each novella of the first day features an instance in which a character falls into the sin of idolatry. Each novella presents characters who regard something worldly above God: 1) Ciappelletto’s worldly priorities are countless, 2) Abraam converts from Judaism to Christianity, the one true religion, 3) Melchisidech and Saladin prioritize riches while questioning the authenticity of the three monotheistic religions, 4) the monk and the abbot are overcome by lust, 5) the Marchioness of Monferrato halts the King of France’s lascivious “folle amore,” 6) the inquisitor’s hypocritical avarice is reprimanded by a clever remark, 7) Bergamino rebukes Can Grande’s avarice, 8) Guiglielmo Borsiere, too, scolds “l’avarizia di messer Ermino de’ Grimaldi,” 9) the lady of Gascony’s aggressors are punished, and 10) Maestro Alberto chastises Malgherida’s pride and vanity. If Bonaventure maintains that the first commandment is the foundation of everything, then I would propose that the first day, based on faith, is the foundation of the Decameron.

More than the connection between the first day and the first commandment, I am interested in how this commandment provides Boccaccio space for his artistic invention and its implications. While considering the theological debate surrounding the first commandment, I examine the first three novellas of the Decameron and two others that deal with the worship of saints and relics (2.1 and 6.10). I argue that Boccaccio capitalizes on controversial aspects of the Ten Commandments, like idolatry, as a source of literary creation.

The first three novellas of the Decameron address the question of faith directly and each novella ponders the discrepancy between faith and worldly institutions. Stewart detects this very notion:
The first three tales seem, therefore, closely connected. They carry a similar message … What is in question is not a revolutionary rejection of the traditional religions … nor even an attitude of skepticism or religious indifference. Strategically situated in a position of prominence, the three tales form rather a triptych on the paramount value of our faith in God. (Stewart 98)

These three novellas demonstrate that faith should transcend earthly preoccupations despite the ambiguity and polemics found in their plots.16 I contend that the sin of idolatry and its complexities can shed further light on the role that faith plays in these three extremely religious tales.

First, we must concentrate on 1.1, which is a crucial touchstone novella for the Ten Commandments and its core is an ambiguous message about Christian faith. Ciappelletto, the superior sinner from Prato, is venerated as a saint. As Panfilo articulates, the unknowable gap between “il giudicio di Dio” and “quel degli uomini” (1.1.6) makes up the tale’s moral parameters. Does God truly permit ser Ciappelletto, “un suo nemico” (1.1.90), to be saved and sanctified? In accordance with the inverted nature of the Decameron, a story that should discourage one’s faith in Christianity, unexpectedly encourages the piety of the Burgundian laity who worship San Ciappelletto. Furthermore, the narrator urges the listeners (and readers) of the novella to believe that “purità della fè” (1.1.90) supersedes human error. The reader is asked to take a leap of faith since God’s providence works in mysterious ways. Panfilo’s closing remarks of the novella capture this idea:

E se così è, grandissima si può la benignità di Dio cognoescere verso noi, la quale non al nostro errore ma alla purità della fè riguardando, così facendo noi nostro mezzano un suo nemico, amico credendolo, ci essaudisce, come se a uno veramente santo per mezzano della sua grazia ricorressimo. E per ciò, acciò che noi per la sua grazia nelle presenti avversità e in questa compagnia così lieta

---

16 Cottino-Jones expounds on the interdependence of these three novellas and how they address questions of faith (77-88). Stewart agrees: “All three stories make the point that man cannot, by his own powers, comprehend the ways of God” (588).
The alliteration of what (“siamo sani e salvi servati”) appears to be poetic verse embedded in prose draws our attention. Panfilo reinforces the first commandment’s order to praise God’s name and to revere him alone. The first commandment is in full view given the gerund “lodando” which comes after the attention-grabbing alliteration of “siamo sani e salvi servati.” The gerund slows the narration, resulting in further reflection on the next words “il suo nome.” Also, the reticence to name God “Lui” requests greater reflection on the praise for God’s name. The two gerunds “lodando” and “avendo” enclose “il suo nome” and “Lui in reverenza.” Thus, adoration of God’s name is the main spotlight as the novella most known for its transgressiveness concludes.

In addition, Panfilo’s final remarks harken back to his, and the novella’s, opening lines.17 Panfilo stresses the obligation to laud God’s name in the very first words of the first novella:

Convenevole cosa è, carissime donne, che ciascheduna cosa la quale l’uomo fa, dallo ammirabile e santo nome di Colui, il quale di tutte fu facitore, le dea principio … intendo da una delle sue maravigliose cose incominciare, acciò che, quella udita, la nostra speranza in Lui, si come in cosa impermutabile, si fermi e sempre sia da noi il suo nome lodato. (1.1.2, emphasis mine)

Like Panfilo’s closing comments, alliteration (italicized above) stands out in his opening comments. This time the c sound culminates in “Colui.” Again, the name of the almighty stands above all else: “Colui” and “Lui.” The novella’s focus is circular, as it begins with the phrase “sempre sia da noi il suo nome lodato” (1.1.2) and ends with “lodando il suo nome nel quale cominciata l’abbiamo” (1.1.91). Praise for God’s name is

---

17 Wallace highlights how readers tend to disregard the opening paragraph. He acknowledges that its length demands attention (27).
both alpha and omega of the first and most sinful novella.\textsuperscript{18} Panfilo recounts the marvelous story to reinforce their belief in and praise for the Lord. The message, then, is that despite human error in judgment, faith in God’s divine judgment is just and his name must be lauded above all else. It is worth noting here that Bonaventure regarded the first commandment as much more positive than negative by focusing on the law’s plea to observe: “Rather, it is not the prohibition of idolatry so much as an order to adoration of the only one, true God” (Smith 93). Bonaventure asserts that one must actively exalt God. Boccaccio’s often-debated irreligiosity is based primarily on his criticism of the clergy, yet he never directly blasphemes the name of God. On the contrary, the praise for God’s name in his works is unrelenting. The brigata, their characters, and the narrator steadfastly invoke the name of God in numerous forms: “occorrenze: sono complessivamente 475, distribuite nelle varie forme (Dio, Domenedio, Iddio, Idio; più 2 di Creatore, 9 di Colui, 4 Lui)” (Quondam 1673). While the author typically assaults the church’s representatives and institutional practices, we can see from this first novella that he nevertheless reveres the name of God itself.

The first novella shows the positive side of the first commandment, while the second novella of the Decameron shows the negative injunction against idolatry. 1.2 tells the story of Abraam’s conversion to Christianity and centers on the question of following a false religion, an integral concept of the first commandment. Giannotto’s concern for his wise friend’s only defect, his erroneous Jewish faith, is the basis of the narration:

\textsuperscript{18} Padoan points out that the text begins and ends in God’s name: “A ben guardare tra le pieghe del discorso, il Boccaccio anche nel Decameron si rivela intimamente credente. Se è vero che è mera osservanza della tradizione che l’opera inizi e finisca nel nome di Dio, è però anche vero che in tali dichiarazioni, come anche nelle poche volte che il pensiero si volge al Creatore in brevi considerazioni di religiosità (I 1, 2–4; Conclus., 3; II 7, 6; Conclus., 1 e 29), si avverte la sincerità di fondo che le ispira, un ossequio non solo formale e di prammatica, che contrasta – per la mentalità moderna – con quelle espressioni equivoche ove il nome di Dio è pure citato” (54).
“l’anima d’un così valente e savio e buono uomo per difetto di fede andasse a perdizione; e per ciò amichevolmente lo ‘ncominciò a pregare che egli lasciasse gli errori della fede giudaica e ritornassesì alla verità cristiana” (1.2.5-6). Following the trajectory of 1.1, the narrator, Neifile, concludes her tale too with harsh irony that affirms Christian faith over human misdeeds. The sins of the Catholic clergy in Rome are the principal reason for which Abraam converts to Christianity. Abraam classifies the clergy’s hypocrisy:

`quivi niuna santità, niuna divozione, niuna buona opera o esempio di vita o d’altro in alcuno che cherico fosse veder mi parve, ma lussuria, avarizia e gulosità, fraude, invidia e superbia e simili cose e piggiori, se piggiori esser possono in alcuno, mi vi parve in tanta grazia di tutti vedere, che io ho più tosto quella per una fucina di diaboliche operazioni che di divine. (1.2.24-25)`

This passage underlines the seven deadly sins minus wrath: lust, avarice, gluttony, fraud, envy, and pride. Geographically, Abraam’s journey mirrors the Dantesque journey that results in salvation. He descends to Rome from Paris where he bears witness to the breadth of the clergy’s sins. During Abraam’s pilgrimage or “fatìca” (1.2.13&15), he closely and thoughtfully observes the clergy’s faults who “deono dare e con l’opere e con le parole vera testimonianza” (1.2.3) of God’s benevolence. Upon his ascension and return to France, Abraam (Giovanni after his conversion) reports the wickedness he observed. Abraam’s heresy as a Jew is redeemed through the sacrament of baptism while those who administer the sacraments, the Roman ecclesiastics, commit grave sins. The clergy’s heresy is the precise type of idolatry of which Decalogue commentators like Grosseteste warned.

The next novella, like the last, features a common Hebrew name from the Old Testament, Melchisedech. Boccaccio creates another story within the indeterminate space of Christian faith. Both Stewart and Ferrante support this position. Ferrante affirms: “And
the third, the tale of the three rings, makes the intriguing point that man cannot be sure, on his own, which religion is the true one, one must presumably trust to God and accept the one he has, at least if he is a Christian” (Ferrante 587-588). Filomena’s narration of Melchisedech, Saladin, and the parable of the three rings in 1.3 is predicated on the question of false gods. Saladin poses the following sensitive “quistione” meant to entrap Melchisedech for monetary purposes: “io saprei volentieri da te quale delle tre leggi tu reputi la verace, o la giudica, o la saracina o la cristiana” (1.3.8). Recognizing the delicate nature of the topic, Melchisedech thinks quickly and tells the well-known medieval parable, thereby resolving his precarious situation and leaving the debate open-ended:

si rimase la quistione, qual fosse il vero erede del padre, in pendente: e ancora pende. E così vi dico, signor mio, delle tre leggi alli tre popoli date da Dio padre, delle quali la quistione proponeste: ciascun la sua eredità, la sua vera legge e i suoi comandamenti dirittamente si crede avere e fare, ma chi se l’abbia, come degli anelli, ancora pende la quistione». (1.3.16)

The lack of a concrete answer begs the question of which “legge” is “la verace.” Stewart maintains that the message of the novella is that the three rings (religions) are indistinguishable. However, I would suggest that the answer to the debatable “quistione” is indeed Christianity, considering the Decameron’s medieval context and the brigata’s avid reverence for God. As we have seen, the line that the text does not cross is blaspheming God or questioning his divine judgment directly. The human representatives of Christianity, however, are fair game, particularly the most hypocritical of them. Additionally, Filomena’s introduction to this novella proves that the issue is essentially settled by the two previous novellas: “Per ciò che già e di Dio e della verità della nostra
fede è assai bene stato detto” (1.3.3). Despite the clergy’s vices in Rome (and Ciappelletto’s), Christianity is declared as the one true faith. More importantly, though, it is certain that the author artfully operates on debated theological grounds to develop his storylines. As a result, it will always be difficult to determine Boccaccio’s level of theological interest, but he clearly adopts these religious questions for literary invention as he forces the reader to reflect on the matters.

Beyond the obvious connection of 1.3 to the first commandment, another aspect of this tale merits attention. The first commandment prohibits worshipping anything as an idol, besides God. Biblical commentators identify worshipping riches as one of the most common pitfalls into the sin of idolatry. Likewise, the plot of 1.3 is based on both Saladin’s desire for acquiring money and Melchisedech’s desire for preserving his. The novella is laden with terms of worth, value, and money: “valore, tesoro, denari, ricco, usura, gioie, care, prezioso, quantità.”

Saladin’s and Melchisedech’s preoccupation with money is further evidenced by the way in which they are presented. The first words of Filomena’s narration seem to describe a valuable object: “il valore del quale fu tanto” (1.3.6); whereas it refers to Saladin’s grandeur. Melchisedech is introduced as “un ricco giudeo” (1.3.6) and “valente uomo” (1.3.8) who “si era avaro” (1.3.7). Lastly, the man in Melchisdech’s parable is described as “un grande uomo e ricco” (1.3.11). The metaphorical ring represents the inestimable value of faith: “intra l’altre gioie più care che nel suo tesoro avesse, era uno anello bellissimo e prezioso” (1.3.11). In addition to

---

19 Stewart points out that Filomena’s comments contradict her own interpretation of the novella. To justify this, she provides examples in which the narrators’ comments only serve structural purposes (98).
20 Padoan views this novella as evidence that Boccaccio was disinterested in the large questions of religion given that he is more interested in Melchisedech’s witty remarks than the theological debate (58).
21 Mercantile ethics, often in contradiction with Christian ethics, are important factors in the first three novellas as well.
the overtones of *cupiditas*, the beautiful and precious piece of jewelry calls to mind the main symbol of *idolatria*, the golden calf. In Exodus 32, while Moses is on Mt. Sinai, Aaron forges the golden calf from the Israelites’ jewelry.²² As we have established, medieval commentators of the Ten Commandments consider idolatry more than heresy alone:

they do not want readers to think that having other gods only refers to the sort of falling into idolatry represented by the episode of the golden calf (Ex 32). The idolatry they worried about was not a matter of the exotic and esoteric, but the everyday substitution of something other than God as the most important part of a believer’s life. Whether this was money or family or even pride in their own piety, it was always wrong: there could be no other gods than Yahweh. (Smith 80-81)

On the surface, 1.3 addresses the larger and more straightforward question of false religions, while the subtext concerns other forms of idolatry like *cupiditas*. Hence, this novella both explicitly and implicitly engages the first commandment’s debated principles.

Another prevalent issue regarding the sin of idolatry with which the *Decameron* is concerned is the Church’s growing reliance on saints and relics. The Christian use of relics and worship of graven images was greatly criticized, particularly by Jews given the Church’s heavy reliance on pictures, carved images, and crosses. As we have seen in 1.2, turning religious objects into a thriving marketplace is one of the principal sins that Abraam observes in Rome:

E più avanti guardando, in tanto tutti avari e cupidi di denari gli vide, che parimente l’uman sangue, anzi il cristiano, e le divine cose, chenti che elle si fossero o a sacrificii o a benefici appartenenti, a denari e vendevano e comperavano, maggior mercantantia faccendone e più sensali avendone che a

---

²² dixitque ad eos Aaron tollite inaures aureas de uxorum filiorumque et filiarum vestrarum auribus et adferite ad me

And Aaron said to them: Take the golden earrings from the ears of your wives, and your sons and daughters, and bring them to me (Exod. 32: 2).
Parigi di drappi o d’alcuna altra cosa non erano, avendo alla manifesta simonia “procureria” posto nome. (1.2.21)

Wallace and Vettori remind us of the economic benefits that relics generated in the Middle Ages (Vettori 14). Like other medieval scholars, Boccaccio’s criticism of this practice is clear. He artistically exploits the conflict by presenting novellas that are predicated on the misuse of relics and religious objects. For instance, Ciappelletto is venerated, even though the interlocutors (the two brothers, the brigata, and the reader) are in the privileged position of knowing his true nature. Simpleminded believers, the Burgundian laity, kiss the feet of San Ciappelletto, the embodiment of man’s sinfulness:

da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere: e convenne che tutto il giorno così fosse tenuto, acciò che da tutti potesse essere veduto e visitato … e a mano a mano il di seguente vi cominciarono le genti a andare e a accender lumi e a adorarlo, e per conseguente a botarsi e a appicarvi le imagini della cera secondo la promession fatta. (1.1.86-87)

In light of the first commandment, “non adorabis ea neque coles,” the word “adorarlo” is problematic. Adoring anything other than God is already a sensitive concept. The Burgundians’ adoration for a sinner like Ciappelletto complicates it further. The Burgundians unknowingly fall into the serious sin of idolatry by adoring graven images (“le imagini della cera”) of Ciappelletto. Theological authorities like Bonaventure worried that the laity would misunderstand the proper worship of images since the worldly and the otherworldly were easily conflated and, therefore, he makes the distinction between dulia, veneration and homage to created beings, and latria, worship given to God.23 The Decameron calls attention to this polemical concern as we see again

23 “By the honor of dulia we are to honor all in whom there is power, wisdom and holiness … we honor the saints who are in heaven as those in whom there is exceptional holiness. Similarly, a honor of dulia is given to images, not because of the image or picture itself, but because of what is signified by it. To God alone is given the honor of latria” (Bonaventure 51).
that where religious tension resides, Boccaccio’s narration thrives.

Another critique of the misuse of graven images comes across in 2.1 where Martellino mocks the veneration and intercession of St. Arrigo, a truly holy man, unlike Ciappelletto. Critics tie 2.1 and 1.1 together for many reasons, like their similar plots and their position on their respective days, to name a few. As others have pointed out, one novella ends with a saint’s funeral, while the other begins with one. Another parallel worth examining is each novellas’ focus on the body and clothing. Martellino uses his extraordinary ability to distort his body to see and touch St. Arrigo’s corpse, the main objective of the novella. The rough mob mentality of the Trevigiani punishes Martellino for his false miracle, reminiscent of how the Burgundians ravage Ciappelletto’s cadaver for relics: “E così dicendo il pigliarono e giù del luogo dove era il tirarono, e presolo per li capelli e stracciati tutti i panni indosso gli’incominciarono a dare delle pugna e de’ calci; né parea a colui essere uomo che a questo far non correa” (2.1.18). In the case of Martellino, the fervent crowd punishes him for his deception while, still a fierce reaction, the Burgundian crowd pillages Ciappelletto’s body in search of their own salvation: “da tutti fu andato a basciargli i piedi e le mani, e tutti i panni gli furono indosso stracciati, tenendosi beato chi pure un poco di quegli potesse avere” (1.1.86). Here, the mundane is transformed into the sacred. Medieval Christianity is notorious for the oversaturation of religious images and the laity’s overreliance on material things like saints’ relics. The impassioned faithful treat the human body in an excessively harsh way whether sacred or not.\(^\text{24}\) Ciappelletto’s and Martellino’s respective tales question the profanation of holy objects. Boccaccio asks us if medieval believers’ passionate attachment to material things

\(^{24}\) Huizinga states: “In the matter of relics the deep and straightforward faith of the Middle Ages was never afraid of disillusionment or profanation through handling holy things coarsely” (150).
like relics is misguided. He addresses these legitimate theological concerns through the most biting of ways, humor.

An undeniable theme that runs throughout the novellas that contemplate idolatry is their comical tenor. Humor functions both aesthetically and ethically on multiple textual levels in these novellas. For example, the brigata’s laughter adds another layer to the reader’s reception of these profane tales. Panfilo’s novella tracing Ciappelletto’s rise to sainthood provokes laughter by some of the women of the brigata, although we do not know which: “La novella di Panfilo fu in parte risa e tutta commendata dalle donne” (1.2.2). The brigata’s uncertain reception points to the polemical and ambiguous tone of the material that flirts with the question of who or what should be sanctified. Also, Martellino’s false miracle in Neifile’s tale is built on its ludic nature from the first lines: “Spesse volte, carissime donne, avenne che chi altrui s’è di beffare ingegnato, e massimamente quelle cose che sono da reverire, s’è con le beffe e talvolta col danno a sé solo ritrovato” (2.1.2). Mocking “quelle cose che sono da reverire” is a metaliterary concern for which Boccaccio’s Decameron is famous. The text’s humor enables it to criticize the misuse of holy objects.

The laughter of an interior audience in 2.1 also encourages the mocking of religious objects. Martellino, a court jester, incites laughter through his performance of a serious and blasphemous offense. Neifile emphasizes the laughter of those in the position of spectator throughout her account. The anonymous Florentine who recognizes Martellino’s charade bursts out in laughter: “veggendolo ridirizzato e riconosciutolo, subitamente cominciò a ridere” (2.1.14). Followed by the three Florentine men’s innkeeper: “l’oste loro ritrovato, come il fatto era gli raccontarono; di che esso ridendo,
gli menò a un Sandro Agolani” (2.1.30). Sandro, who effectively saves Martellino, chuckles as well: “Sandro, dopo molte risa, andatosene al signore” (2.1.31). Lastly, the man who liberates Martellino laughs: “Il signore fece grandissime risa di così fatto accidente” (2.1.33). The contagious laughter even boils over into the subsequent novella as the brigata laughs uncontrollably: “Degli accidenti di Martellino da Neifile raccontati senza modo risero le donne, e massimamente tra’ giovani Filostrato” (2.2.1). Such unrestrained laughter suggests that skepticism about the intercession of saints and their relics was an accepted criticism of the time. Those aware of the artifice are in on the joke, while the gullible laity is not. Mocking a religious objected is normalized further by the excessive laughter of the interior spectators who are in on the joke.

Another character celebrated for his both humorous and deceptive performance regarding holy images is Frate Cipolla in 6.10, but where Martellino’s distortion is physical, Cipolla’s distortion is linguistic. His verbal acrobatics generate the novella’s comedic tone, as he manipulates and ridicules holy images that are familiar to the collective faithful. Cipolla’s embellishment or distortion of collective images is twofold. It results in effective comedy while criticizing the laity’s overreliance on holy objects. Cipolla’s extensive list of “sante reliquie” are improvisations on well-known Christian symbols like: “il dito dello Spirito Santo, unghie de’ gherubini, vestimenti della santa Fé catolica, raggi della stella che apparve a’ tre Magi in Oriente, ampolla del sudore di san Michele quando combatte col diavole” (6.10.45). Cipolla possesses the verbal ability to make the unreal real. By transforming and manipulating these images, Cipolla escapes his predicament while inducing the reader’s reflection on medieval worshipper’s exaggerated dependence on relics. As Potter aptly points out:
The desanctification of relics is carried out in an especially interesting way, because it quite deliberately underlines material referents, whose absence is one of the prerequisites of sanctity. Boccaccio thus draws attention to the flaw inherent in the very concept of relics—and of other forms of idolatry for that matter. (Potter 66).

I agree with Potter, yet I would add that the “flaw” to which Boccaccio draws attention also lies in the authority who sanctions an object as holy. Cipolla, with all his human downfalls, is representative of those who embody that authority. Relics and their inherent flaws are criticized, but, more poignantly, so are those who grant the relics’ sanctification. Being skeptical of relics is being skeptical of the authority that deems relics saintly. Marcus, too, considers the novella’s questioning of sanctification: “By corporealizing the incorporeal, the friar usurps a divine prerogative and calls down upon himself the inescapable charge of idolatry” (75). Cipolla takes on the role of the divine by sanctifying worldly materials. The extent of the friar’s idolatry is quite severe, amplified by his status as a man of the cloth.

Cipolla decidedly disregards the tenets of the first commandment with his idolatrous ruse, but is still admired for his ability as an orator. Once again, the brigata laughs, particularly at Frate Cipolla’s invented pilgrimage and phony relics: “Questa novella porse igualmente a tutta la brigata grandissimo piacere e sollazzo, e molto per tutti fu riso di fra Cipolla e massimamente del suo pellegrinaggio e delle reliquie” (6.Concl.1). There are internal spectators in this novella as well. Cipolla’s two friends, Giovanni del Bragoniera and Biagio Pizzini, are described as “due giovani astuti molto” (6.10.13). This description separates the two young Tuscans from their credulous fellow Certaldans, who are “uomini e … femine semplici” (6.10.30). The two Certaldans laugh when they decide to swap Cipolla’s parrot feather, the supposed “penna dell’agnol
Gabriello,” for coal. In the end, after witnessing his sermon, Giovanni and Biagio laugh again: “avevan tanto riso” (6.10.55). Laughter is not only a reflective act, but also a liberating one. Potter affirms that “the tone of the Decameron’s commentary on organized religion is bitter rather than funny; the jokes are extremely subversive and the attacks demonstrably virulent” (47-48). Boccaccio criticizes the abuse of relics through pointed and subversive humor. Exaggerated reliance on relics is a serious societal concern as superficial worship began to overtake proper worship in the Middle Ages (Huizinga 137). Boccaccio is a trailblazer on the subject, as the issue of the authenticity of relics is not officially addressed until two centuries later with church reforms at the Council of Trent.

After examining the Decameron’s engagement with the first commandment, what conclusions can be drawn? One pattern that emerges is how humor is inextricable from each of the novellas I examine. To participate in this controversial theological space, Boccaccio’s dexterity as a comedic writer is a prerequisite. Comedy functions as an antidote to the seriousness of the profound questions around which Boccaccio’s text tiptoes. Aquinas views idolatry as the greatest and most detestable sin, but the Decameron’s humor conceals the gravity of these ethical concerns and renders it more palatable to the reader while functioning as an effective form of criticism. Dioneo, Boccaccio’s principal proxy, offers his take on humor: “Io non so se io mi dica che sia accidental vizio e per malvagità di costume ne’ mortali sopravenuto, o se pure è nella natura peccato, il rider più tosto delle cattive cose che delle buone opere, e specialmente quando quelle cotali a noi non pertengono” (5.10.3). Dioneo provides the reader an invitation to laugh at the taboo, especially from the vantage point of an outside spectator.
The many spectators within these novellas, too, lead the reader to laugh at the sacrilegious abuse of relics. These outside spectators permit a medieval audience to laugh at “quelle cose che sono da reverire” in an age much less secular than today.

As we have seen, an application of the Ten Commandments can simplify the text’s blurry moral message. As far as methodology, the text plays in the realm of weighty theological debate and addresses the same questions that sparked fervent debate among Decalogue commentators. Boccaccio uses theological tensions inherent to the first commandment as artistic fodder to formulate his tales. Aside from methodology, a nuanced moral message can be identified. The opening trinity of novellas (1.1, 1.2, and 1.3) expresses that God transcends earthly institutions and human judgment. The text reveres God regardless of Ciappelletto’s questionable canonization. Abraam converts to Christianity despite the Roman clergy’s hypocrisy. Melchisedech proposes his unsolvable question that demonstrates that faith is based on the unknowable and exceeds what is knowable. If a reader of the Decameron were to stop after the first three novellas, the moral takeaway would be much different than that of its reputation as a faithless book. These three novellas preach a message of faith within a highly religious context. They address polemical ideas concerning idolatry and they urge us to believe in the unbelievable. At the same time, Martellino’s and Cipolla’s novellas both build on and problematize the faithful message expressed by the first three novellas; they encourage us to be mindful of sacred objects, but to be skeptical of them when the authority presiding over their sanctity is human, not divine. Relics are inherently earthly, existing as material objects, and therein lies the problem. Here, the separation between man and God is the fundamental issue with which Boccaccio grapples. In the Middle Ages, where seeing is
believing, he urges us to be wary of blind adherence to any authority besides God.

1.2 Keep Holy the Sabbath

Observe the day of the sabbath, to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee. Six days shalt thou labour, and shalt do all thy works. The seventh is the day of the sabbath, that is, the rest of the Lord thy God. Thou shalt not do any work therein, thou nor thy son nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant nor thy maidservant, nor thy ox, nor thy ass, nor any of thy beasts, nor the stranger that is within thy gates: that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest, even as thyself. Remember that thou also didst serve in Egypt, and the Lord thy God brought thee out from thence with a strong hand, and a stretched out arm. Therefore hath he commanded thee that thou shouldst observe the sabbath day.

-Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

The third commandment, according to Augustine’s enumeration, is rather long and distinct. It is not a prohibitive, but a positive precept, that urges one to observe. Fundamentally, this commandment emphasizes the obligation to attend mass on the Sabbath. This is a point of contention in the Middle Ages; Jews strongly criticized Christians for changing the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Biblical commentators justify this shift by highlighting the new creation, Jesus’ arrival, and the fact that the resurrection took place on a Sunday. The text addresses this commandment for the first time in 1.1 as the narrator outlines Ciappelletto’s vices. It is abundantly clear that

---

25 The numbering and division of the Decalogue varies according to different traditions. Augustine’s division is the most accepted by the Roman Catholic tradition.
Ciappelletto vehemently disregards this rule: “A chiesa non usava giammai, e i sacramenti di quella tutti come vil cosa con abominevoli parole scherniva; e così in contrario le taverne e gli altri disonesti luoghi visitava volentieri e usavagli” (1.1.14). Here, Ciappelletto’s extreme wickedness is on full display as he forgoes his spiritual duty of attending church, yet he religiously frequents places of ill repute. Ciappelletto blatantly violates this Christian tenet, therefore, from the first tale on it is established that foregoing church on the Sabbath is a spiritual offense. With this in mind, I examine the text’s engagement with the third commandment which, like the first commandment, urges proper religious observance.

Although compulsory church service on the Sabbath is the basis of this commandment, this precept goes beyond just attending church. For medieval exegetes, the third commandment espoused an outward and an inward meaning. The outward meaning addressed what a holy day should appear like from the outside, while the inward meaning referred to leaving time for quiet reflection and for contemplation of God (Smith 101-102). For instance, Aquinas prescribes that one must keep holy the Sabbath through prayer, fasting, offering sacrifices, giving alms, listening to God’s word, contemplating divine things, and resting from sin, such as the passions of the flesh. In truly Boccaccian fashion, both the outward and inward meaning of this precept are skillfully exploited on several occasions in the Decameron. Boccaccio engages with this commandment in both the work’s cornice and in its individual novellas. In addition to 2.10, 3.4, and 3.10, I analyze the brigata’s devotional behavior in the frame story.

One novella that is woven around the observance of the Sabbath is Dioneo’s tale on Day Two. In 2.10, Messer Riccardo foregoes his marital duties to his much younger
wife, Bartolomea, to observe countless religious holidays and rituals. As a result, his wife prefers to remain with her own abductor, Paganino, “essendo a lui il calendario caduto da cintola e ogni festa o feria uscita di mente” (2.10.16). This characterization of Paganino reveals him to be the antithesis of Bartolomea’s husband. Bartolomea follows her youthful passions rather than her overly religious husband’s commandments. In this case, the critique of the third commandment is overt, as Dioneo adheres to the common Decameronian rule that human nature cannot and should not be confined.

Through Bartolomea’s refusal to observe Riccardo’s incessant list of holy days, the text criticizes the restrictiveness of the third commandment. Attention to word choice proves this to be true. The evolution of the plot of 2.10, and of Bartolomea, can be traced through the polysemous use of the word “festa.” In this novella, “festa” appears fourteen times, eight times in the singular and six times in the plural form “feste.” As the story progresses, the meaning of the term “festa” changes. The first use of the term, in accordance with the Latin significance of festus, underlines the joyful way with which Riccardo welcomes his young bride on their wedding night, even though, he is barely able to consummate the marriage: “La quale il giudice menata con grandissima festa a casa sua” (2.10.7). Thereafter, the usage of “festa” functions as a referent to Riccardo’s dutiful observance of liturgical hours, holidays, and fasting schedule. The next appearance of “festa” occurs when Riccardo teaches Bartolomea “un calendario buono da fanciulli” (2.10.8):

niun dì era che non solamente una festa ma molte non ne fossero, a reverenza delle quali per diverse cagioni mostrava l'uomo e la donna doversi abstenere da così fatti congiuignimenti, sopra questi aggiugnendo digiuni e quattro tempora e vigilie d'apostoli e di mille altri santi e venerdì e sabati e la domenica del Signore e la quaresima tutta, e certi punti della luna e altre eccezion molte. (2.10.9)
Riccardo outlines a continuous period of “festa” that requires the couple to forego intercourse completely.

Immediately following the last use of “festa” in reference to observing the Sabbath, the narration abruptly shifts as Bartolomea is abducted by Paganino. A shift takes place in both the plot and in Bartolomea’s mentality: “il giudice e le sue leggi le furono uscite di mente” (2.10.16). Riccardo approaches Paganino to bargain for the restitution of his wife and Paganino gallantly allows Riccardo to see Bartolomea, but she pretends to not recognize her lawfully wedded husband: “Il che vedendo il giudice, che aspettava di dovere essere con grandissima festa ricevuto da lei” (2.10.23). Here, the use of “festa” recalls Riccardo’s greeting of his wife on their wedding night. This time though, the roles are reversed because Bartolomea is in the position to greet Riccardo “con grandissima festa,” but she refuses to even recognize him. Now in the authoritative role, Bartolomea appropriates Riccardo’s use of “festa” and asserts her independence.

Next, “feste” and honoring the Sabbath are transformed into a signifier for adulterous sex. Bartolomea ridicules Riccardo’s adherence to religious holidays by eroticizing the term, a common arm in Boccaccio’s artistic arsenal. Bartolomea no longer speaks like the wife of a judge, rather, like the wife of a pirate as she emphatically rejects Riccardo’s constrictive rules:

anzi mi paravate un banditor di sagre e di feste, si ben le sapavate, e le digiune e le vigilia. E dicovi che se voi aveste tante feste fatte fare a’ lavoratori che le vostre possession lavoravano, quante faciavate fare a colui che il mio piccol campicello aveva a lavorare, voi non avreste mai ricolto granel di grano . . . col quale io mi sto in questa camera, nella quale non si sa che cosa festa sia, dico di quelle feste che voi, più divoto a Dio che a’ servigi delle donne, cotante celebravate; né mai dentro a quello uscio entrò né sabato né venerdì né vigilia né quattro tempora né quaresima, ch’è così lunga, anzi di di e di notte ci si lavora e

26 See Almansi 75 for the intermingling of the religious and the erotic in The Writer as Liar: Narrative Technique in the Decameron.
Bartolomea’s lengthy monologue uses “festa” and the observance of liturgical hours as means to chastise her sexually inadequate husband. Moreover, her metaphorical use of “working” and “working the fields” on the Sabbath alludes to the scriptural representation of the third commandment, which accentuates the prohibition of work done by any person. Bartolomea artfully employs the language and concepts previously taught to her by Riccardo as she enthusiastically mocks him. Shunned and rejected, Riccardo returns to Bologna. To further accentuate his loss of power, the judge once “dotato d’ingegno” is reduced to folly and unable to articulate more than one phrase: “niuna altra cosa rispondeva, se non: «Il mal furo non vuol festa»; e dopo non molto tempo si morì” (2.10.42). The final appearance of “festa” in the mouth of Riccardo illustrates his complete loss of authority.

Directly after 2.10 which is based on not honoring the Sabbath, appropriate divina vacatio carries over to the frame story in the conclusion of Day Two. As we have seen, proper divina vacatio goes beyond attending church as it also implies an emptying of the mind in order to turn to God. This includes meditation, prayer, rejoicing, holy reading, psalm-singing, and offering sacrifices. Neifile, the subsequent queen, recommends that

---

27 Working the field comes up again in Filostrato’s novella in 3.1. This is another novella that intermingles devotion and adultery with Masetto and the nuns: “E similmente sono ancora di quegli assai che credono troppo bene che la zappa e la vanga e le grosse vivande e i disagi tolgano del tutto a’ lavoratori della terra i concupiscibili appetiti e rendan loro d’intelletto e d’avvedimento grossissimi” (3.1.4).

28 non facies in eo quicquam operis tu et filius tuus et filia servus et ancilla et bos et asinu s et omne iumentum tuum et peregrinus qui est intra portas tuas ut requiescat servus et ancilla tua sicut et tu [Thou shalt not do any work therein, thou nor thy son nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant nor thy maidservant, nor thy ox, nor thy ass, nor any of thy beasts, nor the stranger that is within thy gates: that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest, even as thyself.] (Deut. 5: 14)
they suspend storytelling on Friday, in honor of the Passion, and on Saturday, in reverence for the Virgin Mary: “per che giusta cosa e molto onesta reputerei che, a onor di Dio, più tosto a orazioni che a novelle vacassimo” (2.Concl.5). The group uses the time to contemplate the passion, recite prayers, and fast, instead of storytelling.

McWilliam points out the queen’s justification for establishing this new routine: “One other reason Neifile gives for desisting from storytelling on Saturday afternoons is that the approach of Sunday should be honored by resting from one’s labours” (lvii). The brigata’s strict observance of devotional ritual clashes strongly with many of their protagonists, most obviously Bartolomea, who vowed to carry out her metaphorical “labors” day and night. The clear juxtaposition between Bartolomea and the brigata is evidenced by the final lines of Day Two: “estimando la reina tempo essere di doversi andare a posare, co’ torchi avanti ciascuno alla sua camera se n’andò. E li due di seguenti a quelle cose vacando che prima la reina avea ragionate, con disiderio aspettarono la domenica” (2.Concl.16). First, the narrator underscores the brigata’s obedience to authority which is embodied by the queen, Neifile. The narrator, then, highlights that each member retires to his or her own room and thereby, preserves each member’s honest and virtuous conduct. Lastly, after “vacando,” they await Sunday with “disiderio.” Desire is a multifaceted term that takes on many meanings throughout the Decameron and the brigata’s desire for Sunday further contrasts with Bartolomea’s youthful desire for sex on the Sabbath.

The brigata meticulously observes the third commandment, but this is counterbalanced by the stories they tell. At the time, the Sabbath commenced on Saturday at sundown in preparation of Sunday to come. In 1.1 though, the text presents
this practice with a much less serious tone as Ciappelletto performs his hyperbolic confession. Ciappelletto feigns to have scrupulously violated this practice:

«Io mi ricordo che io feci al fante mio, un sabato dopo nona, spazzare la casa e non ebbi alla santa domenica quella reverenza che io dovea».
«Oh!» disse il frate «figliol mio, cotesta è leggier cosa.»
«Non,» disse ser Ciappelletto «non dite leggier cosa, chè la domenica è troppo da onorare, però che in così fatto di risuscitò da morte a vita il nostro Signore.»

(1.1.58-60)

Ciappelletto exploits the custom rhetorically, so much so, that he goes as far as castigating his saintly confessor who dismissed the gravity of his violation. Ciappelletto ironically seizes the role of his confessor and reminds the friar about the importance of honoring the Sabbath. Next to the brigata’s clear observation of this aspect of the third commandment, Ciappelletto offers the reader the opposite viewpoint. This exemplifies the characteristically ambiguous way in which Boccaccio deals with Christian ethics. Unlike the exempla of his contemporaries, like Passavanti and Cavalca, Boccaccio does not offer an overt moral. The author leaves it up to the reader to question and to reflect on these ideals through the lens of his or her own moral judgments.

The brigata’s actions on the Sabbath add more to the contradictory way in which the textportrays adherence to the third commandment. Although the members of the brigata piously obey the third commandment, seemingly to the letter, they require their servants to labor on Sunday, which is explicitly prohibited by the Decalogue in Exodus

---

29 Barsella points out the innovation in Boccaccio’s moral teaching: “Another element that reveals the presence of an already humanistic educative mentality in the Decameron is the fact that, unlike these religious and courtly models, the Decameron refrains from a traditional form of explicit moral teaching; indeed, it does not set a priori rules of behaviour, but instead presents stories that offer the readers the opportunity to reflect openly on moral issues. The novelle are no longer medieval examples with which the author imposes his judgment upon his readers, but open-ended representations of often verisimilar situations” (133-134). See Kircher’s article “The Modality of Moral Communication in the Decameron’s First Day, in Contrast to the Mirror of the Exemplum.”
and Deuteronomy. In the introduction to Day Three, the first Sunday of the Ten Days, Neifile declares that they must observe the Sabbath, yet, in accordance with the expected chain of command, she directs the servants to prepare all that is needed for their transfer to the new location. Specifically, Dioneo’s *siniscalco*, identified as Parmeno, oversees this relocation:

L’aurora già di vermiglia cominciava, appressandosi il sole, a divenir rancia, quando la domenica, la reina … avendo già il siniscalco gran pezzo davanti mandato al luogo dove andar doveano assai delle cose oportune e chi quivi preparasse quello che bisognava . . . prestamente fatta ogni altra cosa caricare, quasi quindi il campo levato, con la salmeria n’andò e con la famiglia rimasa appresso delle donne e de’ signori. (3.Intro.2)

The imagery of servants and beasts of burden evokes the biblical version of the third commandment. In scripture, the third commandment places servants and beasts on the same level, directly prohibiting that “servus et ancilla, et bos, et asinus, et omne iumentum tuum” labor on the Sabbath. Likewise, in the *Decameron*, the servants and the “salmeria” are placed syntactically on the same level with a chiasmic construction: “con la salmeria n’andò e con la famiglia (emphasis mine).” Thus, Neifile disobeys the third commandment because she follows earthly hierarchy while she neglects heavenly law. In addition, the narrator assumes a lexicon reminiscent of military exploits. This mundane military chain of command supersedes the law expounded on by the Decalogue. The *brigata* does not follow the sacred commandment as closely as their reputation would

---

30 *non facies in eo quicquam operis tu et filius tuus et filia servus et ancilla et bos et asinus et omne iumentum tuum et peregrinus qui est intra portas tuas ut requiescat servus et ancilla tua sicut et tu* (Deut. 5:14)

31 “Boccaccio took great care to show that his protagonists observed the prescribed Friday and Saturday fasts, and that they refrained from telling stories on those two days, which correspond to those between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Once again Christianity is emphasized while the role of the ecclesiastic institution is seriously weakened, if not omitted” (Potter 56).

32 “il lessico è giocosamente militare (*campo e salmerie*): il siniscalco “leva le tende dell’accampamento” e si avvia, con carri e bestie da soma” (Quondam 523n2).
suggest. Even more, Neifile, “che non meno era di cortesi costumi che di bellezze ornata” (1.2.2), is distinguished by her tendency to strictly observe authority. As *Decameronian* law dictates, not everything is as it appears on the surface, given that Neifile, the member of the *brigata* most likely to abide by authoritative rule, transgresses divine law.

Immediately following Neifile’s uncharacteristic violation of the third commandment, the introduction to Day Three problematizes the *brigata*’s righteous reputation even more. Day Three’s introduction is best known for its extensive description of the storytellers’ new location as a *locus amoenus*. It is traditionally interpreted as an allegorical Garden of Eden marked by its extremely ordered and harmonious appearance. On the Sabbath, in this extremely biblically connoted space, the actions of the *brigata* continue to depart from those of their servants. The ten youths proceed with “lento passo” while singing, dancing, reading, and playing games. On the contrary, their servants are ordered to labor: “andati furono, fatto dintorno alla bella fonte metter le tavole e quivi prima sei canzonetta cantate e alquanti balli fatti, come alla reina piacque, andarono a mangiare: e con grandissimo e bello e riposato ordine serviti” (3.Intro.14). Again, biblical exegesis of the period indicates that the text illustrates this Christian tenet to be a thorny one. Aquinas asserts:

> Non enim ad ludendum ordinatur talis dies, sed ad laudandum et orandum dominum Deum. Unde Augustinus dicit, quod minus malum est tali die arare, quam ludere. (S.Th. *De decem praecptis*, a. 5)

---

33 “Neifile seems to represent a certain Ghibelline sensibility within the *brigata*, regularly favoring authority figures (fathers, guardians, masters, *podestà*, kings and so on). This attitude is reflected as well in her perspective on the duty to respect one’s ruler or superior (sons, daughters, servants, wives, knights, et al.) in particular and to revere the ordered and established societal institutions and traditions (hierarchy of power in family, clan and country) in general” (Decameron Web).

34 See Getto’s “legge del capovolgimento” (59).

35 Migiel notes the *brigata*’s move on Day Three to the garden marks a move towards more illicit tales: “The entry into erotic matters is delayed, as if to represent the narrators’ initial resistance—then their surrender—to the pull of concupiscence” (161).
And accordingly this day is not set aside for the sole exercise of games, but to praise and pray to the Lord God. Wherefore St. Augustine says that it is a lesser evil to plow than to play on this day. (Thomas 20)

According to Aquinas and Augustine, the brigata’s comportment on the Sabbath is more wicked than that of their inferior servants. In opting for merriment to pass the time on Sunday, the brigata violates the religious conventions of their day.

Yet, on the second Sunday of the Decameron, Day Eight, the brigata attends mass. Lauretta, also known for her tendency to respect order and authority, is the queen of this day. Lauretta’s reign mirrors Neifile’s, given that she follows Neifile’s precedent of suspending storytelling on Friday and Saturday:

Voi sapete, nobili donne e voi giovani, che domane è quel dì che alla passione del nostro Signore è consecrato, il quale, se ben vi ricorda, noi divotamente celebrammo essendo reina Neifile e a’ ragionamenti dilettevoli demmo luogo; e il simigliante facemmo del sabato subsequente. Per che, volendo il buono esempio datone da Neifile seguitare, estimo che onesta cosa sia che domane e l’altro dì, come i passati giorni facemmo, dal nostro dilettevole novellare ci astegniamo, quello a memoria riducendoci che in così fatti giorni per la salute delle nostre anime adivenne. (7.Concl.17)

Lauretta’s emphasis on “ragionamenti dilettevoli” and “dilettevole novellare” accentuates the need for cessation of storytelling, especially after Dioneo’s scandalous reign on Day Seven. The linguistic choice of “dilettevole” calls to mind the Horatian idea of a poet’s need to delectare. The group praises Lauretta’s sobering substitution of “divoto parlare” (7.Concl.18) and prayer for pleasurable storytelling as it seems they may be taking too much delight in storytelling with an entire day dedicated to the theme of adultery. In

The defining characteristic of Lauretta is the way in which that Justice is meted out. In her world view, women should obey men. Lauretta serves as a vocal reminder of the male dominance of medieval society … Lauretta serves as the bond between the brigata's stories and the harsh realities of 14th-century Italy … To drive home the point that women lie beneath men within the societal order, Lauretta also comes back to Law and its relationship to women” (Decameron Web).

Poets wish either to instruct or to delight. Horace, Ars poetica delectare in Domino et dabit tibi petitiones cordis tui
fact, Lauretta goes one step further than Neifile as they, for the first time since meeting in Santa Maria Novella, actually attend a nearby chapel, the brigata’s first and only break from isolation (McWilliam 851n1). Lauretta dutifully decides that they should satisfy their *divino oficio*: “la domenica mattina … poi in su la mezza terza una chiesetta lor vicina visitata, in quella il divino oficio ascoltarono” (8.Intro.2). Nevertheless, Lauretta, like Neifile, promotes singing and dancing on the Sabbath: “E a casa tornatisene, poi che la letizia e con festa ebber mangiato, cantarono e danzarono alquanto” (8.Intro.2).

Therefore, even the most honest of the “onesta brigata” infringe on the third commandment by overlooking its inward meaning.

In Boccaccio’s paradoxical world of the *Decameron*, even the brigata, the most virtuous representation of honorable behavior, is guilty of transgressions, when we strictly interpret the third commandment. The clergy, on the other hand, infamous for behaving badly in the *Decameron*, ought to be recognized as the supreme model of piety. Medieval commentaries on the Ten Commandments make it clear that the clergy should be held to the most rigorous ethical standards in relation to God’s commandments. The clergy’s observance of religious duties, or lack thereof, adds another important aspect to this investigation. Instead of observing devotional practices, members of the clergy often take advantage of devotional observance for their own benefit.

A noteworthy abuse of clerical authority takes place in 3.4 as Dom Felice profits from Fra Puccio’s radical ritualistic piety. Dom Felice arrives in Florence directly from Paris, the center of theological eruditeness. Puccio is a Franciscan tertiary who stringently

---

39 Delight in the Lord, and he will give thee the requests of thy heart (Psalms.36.4).

39 In her article “Clergy in the Decameron: Another Look?” Smarr points out that Boccaccio accompanies examples of clergy behaving badly with counter-examples of clergy acting appropriately at almost every level.
adheres to the third commandment: 

"usava molto la chiesa. E per ciò che uomo idiota era e di grossa pasta, diceva suoi paternostri, andava alle prediche, stava alle messe, né mai falliva che alle laude che cantavano i secolari esso non fosse, e digiunava e disciplinavasi, e bucinavasi che egli era degli scopatori” (3.4.5). Felice leverages his prominent role as a well-studied intellectual by taking advantage of Fra Puccio’s exorbitant devotional habits to sleep with his beautiful wife, Isabetta, who is “giovane ancora di ventotto in trenta anni, fresca e bella e ritondetta che pareva una mela casolana” (3.4.6).

This novella, recounted by Panfilo, is closely related to 2.10 as it mirrors its plotline in which a young wife is asked to forego her physical passions for her older husband’s religious devotion. Also, strict adherence to canonical hours, fasting, and abstinence plays a significant role in both novellas. For Dom Felice, canonical hours are merely an apparatus that he utilizes to make a cuckold of the devout Fra Puccio. Much like Bartolomea, Isabetta mocks her husband when she employs religious terminology with a rather blasphemous effect. Isabetta’s desire is adulterous, whereas Puccio’s “disidero è di divenir santo” (3.4.12). Boccaccio’s artful linguistic prowess is on full display as he utilizes the elasticity of the words “desire” and “Paradiso” and superimposes a sexual connotation on them. Puccio desires to earn his place in Paradiso while Isabetta desires an erotic Paradiso. In fact, by the end of the story Puccio’s version of Paradiso is superseded by Isabetta’s: “Tu fai fare la penitenzia a frate Puccio, per la quale noi abbiamo guadagnato il Paradiso” (3.4.32). When we compare the progression

---

40 This is reminiscent of the language that describes Ciappelletto who “A chiesa non usava giammai.” If we compare Ciappelletto to Puccio, a critique of those who devotedly attend church is obvious. The worst man ever is venerated as a saint, while the other is made a cuckold by an erudite man of the cloth.

41 Todorović notes that this is the only novella that pits two clerics against each other. Usually it is a layman and a cleric (78).
of Puccio in 3.4 to Riccardo in 2.10, the message is obvious. The overly religious, who exaggerate the importance of devotional customs related to the Sabbath, ultimately end up as victims. Hence, it is a Boccaccian tenet that following sacred rules too vigorously results in misfortune.\footnote{This critique was a concern in the Middle Ages: “The highest mysteries of the creed became covered with a crust of superficial piety. Even the profound faith in the eucharist expands into childish beliefs” (Huizinga 139).}

Another example of clergy who abuse devotional observance is apparent in 3.10. Referring to the tale of Alibech and Rustico, Almansi highlights the “precise parallelism set up between erotic ritual and religious ceremony” (84). The faux religious ceremony that Rustico devises for Alibech also calls into question the ritualistic aspect of the third commandment.\footnote{The numerical correspondences are curious, given the importance of numerology. It must be stated again that a novella from the Third Day, which is a Sunday, provokes reflection on the third commandment.} In his commentary on the Decalogue, Aquinas maintains that the third commandment not only implores one to observe holy days, but moreover, to actively keep them holy: “Voluit enim ut esset certus dies in quo intenderent homines ad servitium Dei” (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 5). “God wished that a certain day be set aside on which men direct their minds to the service of the Lord” (Thomas 17). And again: “Istis ergo duobus modis debemus festa celebrare; quia et pure, et mancipando se divino servitio” (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 5). “Therefore, in these two ways we ought to celebrate the feasts, that is, both “purely and by giving ourselves over to divine service” (Thomas 22). Alibech zealously carries out her “divine service” imposed by Rustico, her religious authority.\footnote{Storey, too, underscores the importance of Alibech’s “divine service” to the novella (167).} Various forms of the word service are repeated time and again throughout the episode: “servire, servivano, servigio, servisse, servirà” (3.10). “Servire a Dio” is the phrase that is most repeated. Rustico manipulates Alibech’s
volition to serve God by converting it into a volition to sin, albeit unknowingly: “per che s’avisò come, sotto spezie di servire a Dio, lei dovesse recare a’ suoi piaceri” (3.10.11). The novella’s conclusion oozes with irony as Alibech criticizes Neerbale for taking her away from her naive but sinful service: “non essendo ancora Neerbale giaciuto con lei, rispose che il serviva di rimettere il diavolo in Inferno e che Neerbale avea fatto gran peccato d’averla tolta da così fatto servigio” (3.10.33). Through Alibech’s devoted service, the text ironically highlights a danger against which medieval theologians warned. Theologians feared that the endless growth of observances, images, and religious interpretations could lead to deterioration in quality (Huizinga 137). Aware that growing fascination with ritualistic aspects of Christianity could lead to profanation of the holy, Boccaccio’s text places this dilemma in plain sight.

Alibech’s novella plays on another important aspect of the third commandment. The third commandment is one of two positive commandments that urge action, instead of prohibiting action. Smith highlights the proactive quality of this commandment: “Merely doing nothing on the sabbath was not sufficient because, as everyone knew, idle hands make the devil’s work” (Smith 101-102). As we have seen, Alibech is driven by her childlike desire to serve God: “«Padre mio, io son qui venuta per servire a Dio e non per istare oziosa; andiamo a rimettere il diavolo in inferno»” (3.10.26). Here, direct discourse places Alibech’s faithful desire to actively serve God in opposition to Rustico’s idleness, who, of course, should be most aware of its danger.\(^45\) We know that Boccaccio read and translated Aquinas who is particularly relevant to this novella:

\(^{45}\) Grossvogel keys in on this aspect as well: “With the passing of time, Alibech’s zeal to serve God runs against Rustico’s “ozio” [idleness], a word which not only recalls the Ovidian “otium” [idle life] often associated with lovers, but also the deadly sin of “accidia” [sloth] which often afflicted hermits in the desert, according to St Cassian of Marseilles” (230).
Et nota, quod expectamus requiem de tribus: de labore praesentis vitae, de tentationum concussione, et de Diaboli servitude. (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 5)

We hope for the rest from three things: from the labors of the present life, from the struggles of temptations, and from servitude to the Devil. (Thomas 19)

In line with the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath, Alibech aims to actively serve the Lord, while unknowingly serving Rustico’s proverbial “devil.” According to Aquinas’ commentary on this commandment, then, Rustico willingly and Alibech unwittingly, violate the rules of proper divina vacatio by ritualistically putting the devil back in Hell. Rustico takes advantage of the “giovane ubidiente” as he succumbs to the struggles of temptation: “E lasciati stare dall’una delle parti i pensier santi e l’orazioni e le discipline, a recarsi per la memoria la giovanezza e la bellezza di costei incominciò” (3.10.9). Therefore, in this case, obeying religious authority leads to transgression.⁴⁶

The way in which the brigata reacts to novellas can be an effective gauge of honorable comportment of the time. Let us not forget that the brigata recounts both blatantly blasphemous stories, 3.4 and 3.10, on Sunday. The intermingling of the erotic and the sacred is a taboo topic, and even more so on a Sunday. Yet, Panfilo’s and Dioneo’s stories spark the laughter of their female audience: “Aveva Panfilo non senza risa delle donne finita la novella di frate Puccio” (3.5.2) and “Mille fiate o più aveva la novella di Dioneo a rider mosse l’oneste donne” (3.Concl.1). The qualifying use of the adjective “oneste” reinforces the inappropriateness of their laughter, particularly on the Sabbath. In addition, the banter between Filostrato and Neifile on this day goes further by referencing the adulterous acts of Rustico and Masetto when they tease each other. Potter also recognizes this tension: “The behavior of the ten initiands, who refrain from telling

⁴⁶ Vettori demonstrates that confession in the Decameron paradoxically leads to transgression (9).
stories on Fridays and Saturdays out of respect for the Passion, does not always seem to fit in with their comments and their jokes, or with the statements made in the stories” (8). The brigata’s conduct would suggest that, to an extent, disobedience of the third commandment to keep holy the Sabbath is acceptable.

Here, it is worth mentioning that the tenth novella, always recounted by Dioneo except for Day One, continues to come up in my investigation of the third commandment.47 If Neifile and Lauretta represent obedience to authority, Dioneo certainly symbolizes defiance of authority. Both Neifile and Lauretta suspend storytelling after Dioneo’s sexually charged novellas (3.10 and 7.10) that adopt Christian language and mix the erotic with the religious. It is not surprising that Dioneo, the only member of the brigata with the right to follow or disregard the decree of the day’s king or queen, emerges when we investigate observance: “che io a questa legge non sia costretto” (1.Concl.12). Dioneo has a problematic rapport with rules and authority. In most cases, he and his protagonists, opt to not follow the commandments or rules that have been imposed upon them. Indeed, Dioneo says it best that laws and ethics are to be reevaluated during moments of chaos like the social turmoil created by the plague. His remarks come in response to some of the women of the brigata who object to the licentious material he chooses for the topic of Day Seven:

pensando che il tempo è tale che, guardandosi e gli uomini e le donne d’operar disonestamente, ogni ragionare è conceduto. Or non sapete voi che, per la perversità di questa stagione, li giudici hanno lasciati i tribunali? le leggi, così le

---

47 Dioneo also recounts 4.10 in which Mazzeo, like Riccardo, makes his young and beautiful wife observe holy days. This, too, results in an adulterous affair. “Il quale, come messer Riccardo di Chinzica, di cui dicemmo, alla sua insegnava le feste e le digiune, così costui a costei mostrava che il giacere con una donna una volta si penava a ristorar non so quanti di, e simili ciance; di che ella viveva pessimamente contenta” (4.10.5).
Dioneo calls into question adherence to law with a repetition of rhetorical questions, underscored by the emphatic use of question marks. Dioneo justifies his provocative choice by explaining that under extenuating circumstances, one may question the validity of laws, both divine and human. Thus, the reader is asked to do the same. Not only the reader, but I would suggest that the author, Boccaccio, quarrels with the very same questions. Boccaccio utilizes Dioneo as his proxy, and he effectively distances himself as he tackles such controversial subject matter.

The Decameron’s differing ethical voices and moral instances tend to blend. On the level of protagonists, should Ciappelletto or Bartolomea’s deliberate disregard for moral law steer the reader’s analysis? In fact, both cases end rather positively, one a saint, while the other satisfied. On the narratorial level, should we focus on Neifile’s and Lauretta’s pious observance of liturgical hours or Dioneo’s brazen transgression? The text presents the brigata as the ultimate example of devout Christians. However, closer analysis points to tensions even in their behavior. After having examined how the text addresses the third commandment, keep holy the Sabbath, the puzzling moral message is somewhat clearer. Is it better to obey it or disobey? In virtually every case, whether severely or minimally, characters disobey the third commandment. On the spectrum from Ciappelletto to the brigata, each character disregards the law to keep holy the Sabbath to varying degrees. Some disobey the law blatantly, while deeper investigation reveals minor infractions of others. On one hand, those who overdo their religious observance tend to suffer negative consequences like Riccardo, Puccio, and Rustico. On the other

---

48 This echoes 1.Intro.23-24.
hand, those who disobey this commandment because human nature is being restrained, undergo positive outcomes like Bartolomea and Isabetta. Under closer scrutiny, those revered as the most virtuous, the *brigata* (Neifile and Lauretta), actually break the commandment even though this seems to be what Ciappelletto’s saintly confessor calls “leggier cosa.” In his upended and plague-ridden world of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio questions the regulation of one’s religious devotion while he criticizes the overregulation of it.

### 1.3 Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother

Honora patrem tuum et matrem, sicut praecepit tibi Dominus Deus tuus, ut longo vivas tempore, et bene sit tibi in terra, quam Dominus Deus tuus datus est tibi.

Honor thy father and mother, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee: that thou mayst live a long time, and it may be well with thee in the land, which the Lord thy God will give thee.

-Deuteronomy 5: 16

Parallels between the organization of the *Decameron*’s ten days and the Ten Commandments continue to mount as the novellas of the fourth day bring the fourth commandment into question. Like the third commandment, the fourth commandment is a positive one, and it precedes the prohibitions of the Decalogue’s final six “Thou shalt not.” This commandment is the first of the ten precepts that addresses how to treat one’s neighbor, and its prominence in this position expresses how important the domestic sphere is in relation to God (Smith 107). According to the medieval understanding of the fourth commandment, the authority that one must honor extends beyond biological
parents to any authoritative figure, whether a brother, a husband, or even a church cleric. In fact, Ferrante identifies a revealing pattern on Day Four: “The main obstacle to love on the fourth day is one lover’s family (a possessive father in 1, watchful cousins in 2, a grandfather in 4, brothers in 5, a mother in 8, a jealous husband in 9)” (595). Day Four, then, challenges the fourth commandment and its restrictive authorities. Furthermore, Day Four questions the circumstances under which it is acceptable to disobey thy father and thy mother. One of the Decameron’s quintessential governing rules is that the forces of love cannot be regulated. In the world of the Decameron, attempts to regulate the forces of love are futile, since it is part of human nature. Although much critical attention has been devoted to this notion, a new way to consider this well-established Boccaccian code is through the lens of the fourth commandment. I argue that the ethical dilemma between obeying your parents or obeying nature forms the crux of Day Four. To do so, I examine the author’s introduction to Day Four and several of its novellas with reference to a related novella, 5.4.

Interestingly, medieval commentaries on the Ten Commandments discuss this question. In their respective commentaries on the Decalogue, both Aquinas and Bonaventure address the proper and improper instances in which one may disobey his or her parents. Bonaventure states that:

Quia debemus vivere secundum consilium ipsorum et expendere secundum ipsorum imperium et quando, exigunt, subministrare obsequium. Si tamen parentes aliquid velint, dicant, vel imperent, quod sit contra profectum nostrae salutis, non est ipsis in talibus pietas exhibenda. (Collatio V.10)

---

49 Sherberg also reads Day Four as a day that questions patriarchal authorities, especially when read in relation to Day Five. See “The Patriarch’s Pleasure and the Frametale Crisis: Decameron IV-V.”

50 Aquinas brings up this problematic aspect of the fourth commandment: “Item tertio quia docuerunt nos, debemus eis obedire. Coloss. III, 20: filii obedite parentibus vestris per omnia, nisi scilicet in his quae sunt contra Deum” (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 6). “We must obey our parents, for they have instructed us. “Children, obey your parents in all things.” This excepts, of course, those things which are contrary to God” (Thomas 32).
we should live according to their counsel, spend according to their authority, and offer our service when they demand it. If, however, parents wish, speak or command anything that is contrary to our salvation, then, in such cases, respect is not to be shown them. (75)

The *Decameron* takes up this ethical dilemma with the tragic novellas of Day Four and offers its own answer to the question of when it is right to disobey thy father and thy mother.

First, we must consider the author’s unexpected intervention in the introduction to the fourth day where important theoretical concepts about the text are established. Day Four’s tragic progression, presided over by Filiostroto, is prefaced by the unique self-standing “non una novella intera” (4.Intro.11) of Filippo Balducci and his son, which directly takes on the question of nature versus nurture. Filippo raises his son “al servigio di Dio,”
shielded from the seductive dangers of the world on “Monte Asinaio” (4.Intro.15). Fedi outlines the thematic and structural importance of the so-called 101st novella: “Parla della natura incoercibile, come tutte le novelle successive … mette in scena giovani ‘violentati’ da anziani, quasi sempre genitori o loro vicari … instaura lo schema amore-coercizione-trasgressione che sarà tipicissimo di ogni storia poi narrata” (48). The theme of Filippo Balducci’s tale addresses familial power struggles, like the stories of Day Four thereafter. Fedi refers to this theme of Day Four as the “dissoluzione dell’etica familiare” (49). Although Fedi ties Day Four’s theme of familial discord to the mercantile ethic of *Trecento* Florence, it can also be viewed under the light of the fourth commandment. Viewed this way, Day Four presents novellas that problematize the

---

51 Intertextual play between Alibech’s innocence and the innocence of Filippo’s son is evident here.
52 Monte Asinaio refers to Monte Senario, a historical location outside of Florence in the Mugello region. One cannot help but notice the linguistic resemblance to Mount Sinai where Moses received the two tablets that crystalize God’s law.
Christian duty to “honor thy father and thy mother” since so many of the protagonists of this day, starting with Filippo’s son, deliberately disobey their parental figures. Consequently, the parent-child relationship, which is to be representative of our relationship with God, breaks down.

The parable of Filippo Balducci sets the stage for Day Four, a day full of stories with inadequate attempts of coercion by familial authorities. The first and most obvious example of a failed attempt of coercion on Day Four comes in the introduction. Filippo, aware of human nature, worries about his son giving in to his natural desires when he sees a group of beautiful women for the first time. The father refers to them as goslings “per non destare nel concupiscibile appetito del giovane alcuno inchinevole disiderio” (4.Intro.23). Despite such an innocent and secluded upbringing, Filippo naturally disobeys his father’s instruction to ignore the young ladies who Filippo calls “mala cosa” (4.Intro.21). The parable demonstrates that a father’s direction, no matter how extreme, falls short of hindering the forces of human nature. While the author defends himself from the criticism that he is too concerned with women, he uses Filippo’s filial disobedience to demonstrate that the forces of nature are extremely powerful: “quando colui che nudrito, allevato, accresciuto sopra un monte salvatico e solitario, infra li termini d’una piccola cella, senza altra compagnia che del padre, come vi vide, sole da lui disiderate foste, sole adomandate, sole con l’affezion seguitate” (4.Intro.31). The author’s repetitive rhetoric illustrates that even Filippo’s most onerous coercion and fatherly authority cannot squelch the thirst of human instinct. This lesson serves as the pretext for the entirety of Day Four.
This precise motif continues with the first novella of the day, 4.1. Ghismonda disobeys her father Tancredi, prince of Salerno, and chooses Guiscardo as her lover to fill the void left by her father’s unwillingness to remarry her. Ghismonda’s rational defense of her “natural peccato” (4.1.35) to her father could also be addressed to Filippo Balducci: “Sono adunque, sì come da te generata, di carne, e sì poco vivuta, che ancor son giovane, e per l’una cosa e per l’altra piena di concupiscibile disidero” (4.1.34). Both stories challenge familial authority and therefore, the fourth commandment, as they highlight the incoercible forces of nature. Ghismonda even goes further when she questions the validity of the sin itself: “questo peccato, se peccato è” (4.1.44).

Ghismonda, a widow, sins when she takes a lover outside of marriage, considered adultery at the time. Though, her greater sin is perhaps that she disobeys her father’s authority who refused to marry her because he selfishly desired her for himself. In both tales, human nature usurps the authority of the head of the family.

The fourth novella of the fourth day also reinforces the idea that human nature, particularly love, compels youths to disobey their parents’ commands. Like the tale of Ghismonda, the setting for 4.4 is a royal one. Gerbino is diligently raised by his grandfather, the King of Sicily: “dal suo avolo con diligenzia allevato” (4.4.4).

Guglielmo, the king, represents the controlling force and father figure in this novella. In conformity with the topos of amor de lonh, Gerbino and the nameless princess of Tunis fall in love through word of mouth. The princess’ father, the King of Tunis, makes a pact with Guglielmo that Gerbino would not interfere with his plan to marry his daughter to the King of Granada. Gerbino actively disregards his grandfather’s decree and sets sail into the Mediterranean to intervene. Gerbino, driven by love, defies the will of his
grandfather. In fact, at times the language of this novella recalls Dante. For instance, the text recalls Canto 2 of the *Inferno*, “amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare” (v.72), as Gerbino justifies the defiance of his grandfather: “Gerbino … non sapeva che farsi: ma pur da amor sospinto” (4.4.15). The Dantesque resonance intensifies the power of love that drives Gerbino to disobey. In addition, the impassioned speech that Gerbino gives to his crew resembles Canto 26, in which Ulysses invigorates and convinces his crew to go beyond the limits imposed on them: “Io amo: amor m’indusse a darvi la presente fatica … le quali, se valorosi uomini siete, con poca fatica, virilmente combattendo, acquistar possiamo” (4.4.17). In Ulysses’ memorable account, he cites his respect for his father when he lists things that could not deter him from his quest to go beyond known limits: “né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta / del vecchio padre …” (v.94-95). Like Ulysses, Gerbino, literally and figuratively, tests the waters beyond his boundaries as he sets sail for the Mediterranean. Gerbino’s “folle volo” violates his obligation to honor his grandfather’s authority.

Again, the text’s word choice helps identify how youthful love supersedes fatherly authority in this novella. Throughout the novella, the key term, “fede,” encapsulates the restrictions that Guglielmo imposes on his grandson. Beginning with the first words of the novella in the rubric, the text underscores Gerbino’s defiance of his grandfather: “Gerbino, contra la fede data dal re Guiglielmo suo avolo, combatte” (4.4.1). Gerbino does not observe the pledge that his grandfather makes with the King of Tunis: “Il re di Tunisi, saputa la novella, suoi ambasciadori di nero vestiti ad ar Guglielmo suo avolo, combatte” (4.4.26). Consequently, Gerbino’s grandfather is forced to murder him for the sake of his regal reputation: “il
condannò nella testa e in sua presenzia gliele fece tagliare, volendo avanti senza nipote rimanere che esser tenuto re senza fede” (4.4.26). In effect, Guglielmo’s word, promised to the King of Tunis, matters more than the life of his own grandson. Gerbino violated the “fede” of his grandfather for the sake of courtly love. Then, this act of insubordination to the patriarch results in the devastating deaths of two young lovers who never consummate their love, accentuated by the decapitation of Guglielmo’s own kin. Therefore, like Ghismonda, Gerbino’s violation of the fourth commandment does not go unpunished.

Now, it would be useful to recall the wording of the fourth commandment:

“honora patrem tuum et matrem tuam” (Exod. 20: 12). The obligation to honor one’s mother is included in the exhortation to honor one’s father. Although the patriarchal system is undeniably at play in the Decameron, the power of matriarchs also arises in the text. As a matter of fact, Sherberg refers to the matriarchal makeup of the Decameron and the predominantly female brigata who will eventually return to their roles in the patriarchal society of Florence (236). Additionally, we should not overlook the audience to whom the text is addressed, women who are “ristrette da’ voleri, da’ piaceri, da’ comandamenti de’ padri, delle madri, de’ fratelli, e de’ mariti” (Proem.10, emphasis mine). This list of restrictive forces places mothers prominently above brothers and husbands. In addition to the patriarchal structure questioned on Day Four, the authority embodied by mothers should be investigated. Are mothers, like fathers, guilty of perpetuating the repression of human nature in the Decameron?

---

53 Another decapitation due to love forcing youths beyond set boundaries comes in 4.5 as Lisabetta defies her three brothers.
An excellent example in which a mother exercises her authority over her son takes place in 4.8. Girolamo, son of a rich merchant who passed away, loves a girl of lower social status, Salvestra. Girolamo’s mother and his guardians carefully oversee his upbringing: “I tutori del fanciullo insieme con la madre di lui bene e lealmente le sue cose guidaronno” (4.8.5). Girolamo’s mother opposes his love for Salvestra due to her lower rank. Although Girolamo’s love for Salvestra makes up the nucleus of the story, the narrator, Neifile, rapidly recounts the young couple’s love story with little intrigue and less emphasis. Meanwhile, Neifile spends more of her narrative attention on Girolamo’s mother and her disdain for her son’s love. Even the rubric places the pleas of Girolamo’s mother in the forefront: “Girolamo ama la Salvestra: va, costretto a’ prieghi della madre, a Parigi” (4.8.1). Girolamo’s mother obstructs his love for Salvestra and coerces him to go to Paris so that “ella gli uscirà dell’animo e potrengli poscia dare alcuna giovane ben nata per moglie” (4.8.8-9). Neifile places the demands of his mother, who is never named despite playing such a crucial role, at the center of her narration. She introduces the novella by plainly pointing out that it is not as much about Girolamo’s love story as it is about a woman, Girolamo’s mother, who presumed she could halt the forces of love. Neifile prefaces the story in the following way:

Alcuni, al mio giudicio, valorose donne, sono li quali più che l’altre genti si credon sapere e sanno meno; e per questo non solamente a’ consigli degli uomini ma ancora contra la natura delle cose presummono d’opporre il senno loro; della quale presunzione già grandissimi mali sono avvenuti e alcun bene non se ne vide giammai. E per ciò che tra l’altre naturali cose quella che meno riceve consiglio o operazione in contrario è amore, la cui natura è tale che più tosto per se medesimo consumar si può che per avvedimento alcun torre via, m’è venuto nell’animo di narrarvi una novella d’una donna la quale, mentre che ella cercò d’esser più savia che a lei non s’apparteneva e che non era e ancor che non sostenea la cosa in che studiava mostrare il senno suo, credendo dello innamorato cuor trarre amore, il qual forse v’avevano messo le stelle, pervenne a cacciare a un’ora amore e l’anima del corpo al figliuolo. (4.8.3-4)
Neifile’s introduction continues the theme of irrepresible love evidenced by her insistence on it being natural: “la natura delle cose,” “l’altre naturali cose,” and “la cui natura.” This time, a mother inhabits the role of oppressive figure. Before one reads the novella, it is evident that his mother’s restriction will lead to a deadly conclusion as both Girolamo “disideroso di morire” (4.8.22) and Salvestra essentially die of a broken heart. The familiar story of romance is secondary to Girolamo’s mother and her plans to thwart it.

With the true protagonist of 4.8 identified as “la dolorosa madre” (4.8.29), we then ask for whom is the moral message intended? Girolamo’s mother loses her son due to her attempt to stifle his love. Her misguidance as an authoritative figure results in the novella’s extremely somber conclusion, just as in the novella of Gerbino. This conclusion is marked by copious amounts of tears as the community mourns the loss of the young lovers. Not just a father like Tancredi, but even a mother cannot successfully obstruct the power of love. Neifile emphatically reinforces this notion at the end of the novella as she exclaims, “Maravigliosa cosa è a pensare quanto sieno difficili a investigare le forze d’amore” (4.8.32)! This harsh lesson is aimed more at Girolamo’s mother than Girolamo himself. It is incumbent upon the parent in the authoritative position to guide her child judiciously. Here, parental overbearingness leads to devastating loss.

The fourth commandment is the only commandment that contains a promise to those who abide by its law. A reward for honoring one’s parents appears in the second half of the commandment: “Honor thy father and mother, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee: that thou mayst live a long time, and it may be well with thee in the land, which the Lord thy God will give thee” (Deut. 5: 16). The defiant protagonists of
Day Four do anything but “live a long time.” In these tragic stories they disobey their parents and, as a result, die very young. Therefore, the tragic and premature deaths of the characters of Day Four are consistent with the biblical appearance of the fourth commandment.

However, how does the text address the fourth commandment in a different register? During his theatrical and amusing confession, Ciappelletto’s list of trespasses culminates with dishonoring his mother. The conclusion of the penitential episode is marked by Ciappelletto’s contrived whimpering. Ciappelletto’s tears are much less somber than those of Ghismonda or Elisabetta on Day Four. Narratively, Ciappelletto builds up his confession with great suspense and anticipation for a rather anticlimactic transgression:

«Padre mio, poscia che voi mi promettete di pregare Idio per me, e io il vi dirò: sappiate che, quando io ero piccolino, io bestemmiiai una volta la mamma mia». E così detto ricominciò a pianger forte . . . «Oimè, padre mio, che dite voi? la mamma mia dolce, che mi portò in corpo nove mesi il di e la notte e portommi in collo più di cento volte! troppo feci male a bestemmiarla e troppo è gran peccato; e se voi non pregate Idio per me, egli non mi sarà perdonato». (1.1.71-73)

Ciappelletto facetiously breaks the fourth commandment with his “gran peccato.” With his performance, Ciappellettomocks the sacrament of penance and the sin itself. If Ciappelletto’s greatest sin is cursing his mother, then likely this is his least severe sin. In fact, the confessor finds himself having to justify the levity of Ciappelletto’s sin, and he dismisses it as a minor offense. In addition, the friar, “gran maestro in Iscrittura” (1.1.30), contradicts scripture: “qui maledixerit patri suo et matri morte moriatur [He that curseth his father or mother, shall die the death]” (Exod 21: 17). Through the satirical role reversal of Ciappelletto and his confessor, the text criticizes excessive observance of this tenet. Guided by the principle of the “via mezzana,” the text reproaches this
disproportionate penalty for dishonoring one’s father or mother even if affirmed by Exodus.

Like Ciappelletto’s novella, 5.4 takes on the question of filial obedience through a comedic rather than tragic key. Critics tie this novella to the tragic tales of Day Four because of the related plot development. Filostrato, the king of tragedy, this time tells a whimsical novella with a similar storyline that ends much differently than any of the heart wrenching novellas from his reign on Day Four.\(^{54}\) Again, parental prohibition of illicit youthful love offers the backdrop for this novella. Caterina disobeys the will of both of her parents, Lizio da Valbona and, his wife, Giacomina who strictly monitor their prized daughter: “per ciò che sola era al padre e alla madre rimasa, sommamente da loro era amata e avuta cara e con maravigliosa diligenza guardata” (5.4.5).\(^{55}\) As we have seen in other novellas from Day Four, the overregulation of Caterina’s parents should lead to a tearful conclusion. The primary difference in this case is that the main authoritative figure, Lizio, is aware of and recognizes what Ghismonda refers to as, “le leggi della giovanezza” (4.1.33). Simultaneously, Lizio saves face and the life of his daughter’s lover: “Ricciardo, questo non meritò l’amore il quale io ti portava e la fede la quale io aveva in te; ma pur, poi che così è e a tanto fallo t’ha trasportato la giovanezza, acciò che tu tolga a te la morte e a me la vergogna, sposa per tua legittima moglie la Caterina” (5.4.43). Lizio recognizes what Tancredi denied, youth’s unrestrainable propulsion towards eros. Like Ghismonda, Ricciardo simply obeys his natural carnal appetite: “l’ardente amore e l’appetito del possedere la cosa amata” (5.4.45). Unlike Ghismonda,

\(^{54}\) Marcus notes that Filostrato’s comical novella makes amends for the macabre topic of Day Four (55).
\(^{55}\) The “maravigliosa diligenza guardata” is akin to the way in which Gerbino is raised by his grandfather in 4.4: “con diligenzia allevato” (4.4.4).
Ricciardo and Caterina live happily ever after with the approval of family and friends who legitimize their nuptials. In juxtaposition to the novellas of Day Four, Lizio subordinates the laws of both society and the church to the laws of youth. For Caterina, the result is “gran festa” (5.4.49) opposed to “general dolore” (4.1.62) for Ghismonda. Thus, a child’s deviation from the fourth commandment appears to be inevitable. The parent is the variable in the equation. Lizio’s flexibility and foresight grants the lieto fine, whereas Tancredi’s severity is the reason for his infelice fine.

Day Four of the Decameron certainly addresses the principles of the fourth commandment and its concern with authority within the familial sphere. On Day Four, those who choose to rebel against the familial hierarchy experience great tragedy. This indicates that disobeying your parents is immoral, but the novellas of this day are more nuanced than that. Does such tragedy function as a cautionary tale for the restrictive parents or for the disobedient children? Who, ultimately, learns their lesson? Boccaccio’s multidimensional text makes it difficult to know for sure. When we consider at whom the moral message is directed, we realize that the tragedy in these novellas tends to focus more on the parental figure than the disobedient youth. Whoever plays the role of regulating force shares the misfortune, whether patriarch, like Ghismonda’s possessive father, regal grandfather, like Guglielmo, or matriarch, like Girolamo’s demanding mother. The novellas of Day Four function as cautionary tales for parents who dole out restrictions on nature. This becomes even clearer when we compare Lizio to Tancredi, as one father acknowledges and accepts the laws of nature, while the other disregards these laws. In the introduction to Day Four, the authorial voice explicitly declares that “naturalmente operiamo; alle cui leggi, cioè della natura, voler contrastare troppo gran
forze bisognano, e spesse volte non solamente invano ma con grandissimo danno del faticante s’adoperano” (4.Intro.41). The author makes it clear that it is not only pointless to oppose nature, but that those who try to, often generate “grandissimo danno.”

Let us go back to where we began. When is it a moral decision to disobey thy father or thy mother? Aquinas tells us that we may disobey our parents when their commands are contrary to God. After examining a variety of novellas that engage this ethic, Boccaccio’s assessment of what is contrary to God becomes manifest. It seems that Boccaccio would chisel his own law onto the tablets of Moses: Thou shalt honor figures of authority who respect the laws of nature. Quondam’s linguistic study discusses the author’s use of “leggi” in the Decameron:

Non ci sono soltanto le leggi divine e umane a reggere e governare le «cose del mondo»: devono fare i conti con quelle della Natura (IV Introduzione 41), e in particolare con «le leggi della giovanezza» (IV 1 33), che «è tutta sottoposto all’amorose leggi» (X 8 17).
È questo il punto di più intensa contraddizione e instabilità nel sistema ben ordinato delle leggi umane e divine, perché «le leggi d’amore sono di maggior potenza che alcune altre: elle rompono non che quelle della amistà ma le divine» (X 8 16). (1688)

The laws of nature (which include the laws of youth and love, often one and the same in the text) surpass divine law. The Boccaccian message would require, then, an amendment to the fourth commandment.

Given the collapse of social order in conjunction with the advent of the plague, the Decameron calls for the laws that govern society to be restructured. Boccaccio’s hundred tales in particular reassess moral law. Having studied canon law, Boccaccio is quite attentive to the observance of laws and his narration highlights flaws in Christian law. He cannot resist subverting all sorts of authority, especially when that authority is religious. As we have seen with the commandments that urge observance, the first on
idolatry, the third on the Sabbath, and the fourth on familial authority, Boccaccio’s text encourages a more reasonable approach to one’s religious practice. In each case, he warns us of excessive observance to any authority, especially if human, but at the same time, he requests a certain level of skepticism when making moral decisions.
CHAPTER 2

WORD
2.1 Thou Shalt Not Take the Name of the Lord Thy God in Vain

non usurpabis nomen Domini Dei tui frustra quia non erit inpunitus qui super re vana nomen eius adsumpserit

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for he shall not be unpunished that taketh his name upon a vain thing.
-Deuteronomy 5: 11

Given the medieval fascination with symmetry, Augustine divides the Decalogue’s two tablets into three and seven; the first three commandments comprise the first tablet, while the subsequent seven make up the second tablet. The first tablet addresses one’s relationship with God, whereas the second tablet addresses one’s relationship with his or her neighbors. The second commandment prohibits taking the Lord’s name in vain. This commandment focuses on harm caused through words not to one’s neighbors, but to God. Two interpretations, one literal and one spiritual, lay the groundwork for this precept. Oaths were a fundamental part of medieval culture, and on a literal level, this commandment prohibits swearing oaths pro nihilo. This means that one must not swear unnecessarily by the name of God. Apart from the literal, the allegorical meaning of this commandment prohibits the denial of Christ’s dual nature, man and divine, through speech. The nature of blasphemy is especially difficult to pinpoint precisely because it is a spoken sin, not a concrete action. The notion of blasphemy mutates throughout the ages and becomes difficult to distinguish from heresy. Levy points out that “both offenses blurred in meaning and blended with faction, sedition, schism, apostasy, and sacrilege” (32). Nevertheless, medieval Decalogue commentators address it as speaking adversely about God, the church, or its saints, which stems from its
allegorical interpretation. In fact, these commentators tend to focus their theological arguments more on the question of oaths than swearing. Nonetheless, both the literal and the allegorical interpretations of the second commandment surface in Boccaccio’s centonovelle.

What, then, is Boccaccio’s view of taking the Lord’s name in vain? Because the text is self-aware of its irreverent language and subject matter, it offers a great deal to consider when we examine how it treats the serious sin of blasphemy. I argue that although the punishment for blasphemy in the Middle Ages was severe, the text does not regard or portray blasphemous words as particularly sinful. The theme of irreverent language is ubiquitous in the work. Characters like Ciappelletto (1.1.), an anonymous “valente uomo” (1.6), Currado Gianfigliazzi (6.4), and Calandrino (8.6) are guilty of blasphemy. I analyze these instances of blasphemy to draw a conclusion about the text’s moral message regarding the sinfulness of irreverent words.

Not surprisingly, Ciappelletto is the first character to broach the subject of blasphemy and this instance foreshadows the thorny way in which the text will address blasphemy. In 1.1, a sequence of four instances of blasphemy appears. First, the reader learns early on, via the narrator’s vice-ridden portrayal of Ciappelletto, the objective truth that Ciappelletto is an unapologetic blasphemer: “Bestemmiatore di Dio e de’ Santi era grandissimo” (1.1.13). Then, during his false confession, Ciappelletto rebukes a group of men, with which he is surely associated, for taking the Lord’s name in vain: “Egli sono state assai volte il dì che io vorrei più tosto essere stato morto che vivo, veggendo i giovani andar dietro alle vanità e udendogli giurare e spergiurare” (1.1.49). The terms “vanità” and “giurare e spergiurare” recall the second commandment as Ciappelletto, a
deceitful notary, criticizes those who transgress this commandment, even though he
epitomizes this sin. This rhetorical fabrication also contains a glimmer of truth in that
Ciappelletto witnesses the violation of oaths in his profession daily. The third occasion of
blasphemy comes as Ciappelletto dramatically articulates to his confessor that he had
cursed his mother. Ciappelletto induces the dismissal, and ultimately, the forgiveness of
his bestemmia from his confessor:

Disse il frate: «O figliuol mio, or parti questo così gran peccato? o gli uomini
bestemmiano tutto il giorno Idio, e sì perdona Egli volentieri a chi si pente
d’averlo bestemmiato; e tu non credi che Egli perdoni a te questo? Non piagner,
confortati, ché fermamente, se tu fossi stato un di quegli che il posero in croce,
avendo la contrizione che io ti veggo, si ti perdonerebbe Egli». (1.1.72)

To comfort Ciappelletto, the friar points out that blasphemies against God are
widespread. In contrast to the reader, the friar is unaware of the inconsistency between
the dishonest notary’s words and deeds. Lastly, as a result of Ciappelletto’s confession,
the friar gives a fire and brimstone speech to the Burgundian laity: “«E voi, maladetti da
Dio, per ogni fuscello di paglia che vi si volge tra’ piedi bestemmiate Idio e la Madre e
tutta la corte di Paradiso»” (1.1.85). The friar’s reference here to Matthew 7: 3 is
particularly relevant because in this verse, Jesus warns his disciples to examine their own
vices before judging those of others. In fact, historically the Burgundians had a reputation
for swearing.56 At the same time, Ciappelletto, a notorious blasphemer, uses false
language to earn redemption for his own pernicious speech. The irony of San Ciappelletto
elevated to “la corte di Paradiso” (1.1.85) is piercing. The punishment, an essential aspect
of this sin, seems misplaced as Ciappelletto is absolved and canonized for his

56 “The Burgundians had the reputation of being abominable swearers; for the rest, says Gerson, the whole
of France, for all her Christianity, suffers more than any other country from the effects of this horrible sin,
which causes pestilence, war and famine. Even monks were guilty of mild swearing” (Huizinga 146).
blasphemous ways, while the Burgundians are chastised. Thus, the first time the second commandment appears, the text presents it in a polemical manner.

Shortly thereafter, the second commandment comes up again in 1.6, a novella that portrays the clergy’s hypocrisy as more wicked than the verbal sin of blasphemy. This rather short novella deals with a few aspects of the second commandment. An avaricious inquisitor investigates an anonymous Florentine, characterized as “un valente uomo secolare” (1.6.3), for a blasphemous remark that he made about his own vintage of wine. It comes to the attention of the inquisitor that the man remarked to some friends that his wine is so good that even Christ would drink it: “un buono uomo, assai più ricco di denar che di senno, al quale, non già per difetto di fede ma semplicemente parlando forse da vino o da soperchia letizia riscaldato, era venuto detto un di a una sua brigata sé avere un vino si buono che ne berebbe Cristo” (1.6.5). Despite the man’s lack of ill-intention, his comment indeed constitutes as blasphemy. First, he undeniably uses Jesus’ name in vanum, that is to say, unnecessarily. Furthermore, the man’s comment focuses more on Jesus’ human side than his divine side, and, therefore, he denies the dual nature of Christ by treating him as a “Cinciglione o alcuno altro di voi bevitori, e briachi e tavernieri” (1.6.8). The man’s comment, although mild, falls under the medieval category of blasphemy because he profanes the figure of Christ for something as trivial as the taste of wine. However, the Florentine man’s final biting remark against “la malvagia ipocresia de’ religiosi” (1.6.1) mends and trumps his own verbal violation.

To demonstrate the fine line between wicked and sacred words, this novella employs images of sustenance (vino, broda, brodaiuola). Smarr, one of the few critics to address this novella in depth, also identifies images of food and wine as fundamental to
this tale, in addition to the two novellas that surround it (153). She interprets the novella as a reflection on literal language and spiritual language in which wine symbolizes proper charity and soup represents false charity. However, my focus is on immoral speech and I maintain that the tale equates words with sustenance since the New Testament had a tradition in which words are referred to as nourishment.\(^{57}\) For instance, in Matthew 4: 4,\(^{58}\) Jesus proclaims that man does not live on bread alone but on every word from the mouth of God.\(^{59}\) The two main images of nourishment in this novella, wine and soup, are directly tied to the Florentine protagonist’s words. His blasphemous words are associated with the delicious wine, while his witty words that reproach the clergy are associated with the soup. In this tale, wine and soup function as signifiers for the larger question of the power of language. The tale makes it clear that using language carelessly or in vain can be dangerous, given the threat of inquisition that the Florentine man received for his blasphemous remark about wine. Meanwhile, well formulated and thought-out speech, like the Florentine man’s “bel detto” (1.6.1) that castigates the clergy’s abuse of the leftover soup, has the power to defuse dangerous circumstances.

In addition to the images of sustenance, the tale emphasizes the use of one’s mouth (mordace, Boccadoro) which again points to the proper or improper use of words. “Biting” words enclose the novella as the first paragraph of the narration refers to the Florentine man’s “morso” (1.6.3) of the inquisitor, while its final paragraph extends the quip to the inquisitor’s fellow clergymen: “aveva morsi” (1.6.20). In addition, the

\(^{57}\) bonus eris minister Christi Iesu enutritus verbis fidei thou shalt be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished up in the words of faith (Timothy 1 4.6).

\(^{58}\) References to the New Testament, in particular the gospel of Matthew, play a vital role in the fabric of this tale. In fact, the gospel of Matthew comes up twice (Matthew 26: 47 in 1.6.6 and Matthew 19: 29 in 1.6.12 and 1.6.17). Through the word of the gospel, the inquisitor pursues his greedy investigation “cum gladiis et fustibus” (1.6.6) and is scolded “Voi riceverete per ognun cento” (1.6.17).

\(^{59}\) non in pane solo vivet homo sed in omni verbo quod procedit de ore Dei
persistent use of *verba dicendi* cannot go unnoticed: “bel detto, parlando, detto, rispose, domandò, disseglì, parlava, parli, dimandare, disse, dice, dirò.” As Emilia’s narration leads up to the Florentine’s final rebuke, there is a shift from *verba dicendi* to *udire*. As the two main characters converse, a form of *udire* appears six times between paragraphs 11 and 15: “udire, udi, udita, Udistù, udissi, udinne.” In the closing paragraph, the exchange between the inquisitor and the inquisitee culminates with an instance of *verba sentiendi*: “lo ’nquisitore sentendo trafiggere” (1.6.20). This sequence demonstrates that the message that travels from speaker to listener is successful since it is essential for both speaker and interlocutor to fulfill their respective roles in the transaction of an effective motto. The inquisitor immediately understands the criticism that the Florentine man artfully delivers. This heightened attention to spoken word and the transaction of speech further highlights how the novella is most concerned with the subtleties of words.

Furthermore, the novella’s attention to spoken word becomes evident when we consider how the novella uses direct discourse. The original blasphemous remark appears via indirect speech. Since the inquisitor did not hear the blasphemy firsthand, this distances the Florentine man’s infraction even further: “era venuto detto un di a una sua brigata sé avere un vino sì buono che ne berebbe Cristo” (1.6.5). Meanwhile, the resolving motto appears in the narration as the last and most impactful use of direct discourse in the novella: “«io vel dirò … voi dentro tutti vi dovrete affogare» (1.6.19). The use of direct speech presents a verbatim account and, therefore, holds more weight than the original blasphemous remark which was reported through a third party. The Florentine man’s concluding morso, the most significant line of the novella, carries
greater emphasis because it comes directly from the mouth of the protagonist. Thus, the original blasphemous comments give way to the impactful witticism.

Lastly, the Florentine’s witty remark is based on scripture which adds even greater potency to the rebuke of the hypocritical clergy. Through the word of the gospel, the Florentine transforms his blasfemo into a biasimo of the inquisitor. The final paragraph of the novella displays this transformation: “lo ‘nquisitore sentendo trafiggere la lor brodaiuola ipocrisia tutto si turbò; e se non fosse che biasimo portava di quello che fatto avea, un altro processo gli avrebbe addosso fatto” (1.6.20). Biasimare and bestemmiare share the same etymological root, blasphēméō, which means to harm through speech in Greek. This linguistic transformation damages the reputation of the inquisitor in front of his peers, which is the very definition of blasphemy. As the text demonstrates, words are capable of effecting change: “E quale fu quella parola che t’ha mosso” (1.6.16)? In effect, the rich man uses “the good word” to reprimand the avaricious friar and his bad intentions. The Florentine man liberates himself from punishment with his unanticipated biasimo while he exposes his inquisitor as an even greater blasphemer. Therefore, this novella shows that a pointed “ridevol motto” (1.6.20) exceeds a harmless bestemmia. Not only, but a successful motto can save one from peril by annulling and completely transforming a dangerous situation.

Another instance of blasphemous speech comes on the day that is most associated with eloquence, Day Six. This time, 6.4 offers a glimpse into the moral severity of blasphemy within the text in another brief novella. Chichibio narrowly escapes Currado Gianfigliazzi’s dangerous threat thanks to a hilarious response when Currado challenges Chichibio’s lie. Chichibio concocts a lie to cover up that he gave one of the crane’s legs
that he was preparing for his master to a woman he wanted to impress, Brunetta. When questioned about the missing leg, Chichibio claims that cranes possess only one leg. In front of his guests, Currado reprimands his cook with a menacing threat that unnecessarily calls on the name of the Lord:

«Poi che tu di’ di farmelo veder ne’ vivi, cose che io mai più non vidi né udi’ dire che fosse, e io il voglio veder domattina e sarò contento; ma io ti giuro in sul corpo di Cristo che, se altrimenti sarà, che io ti farò conciare in maniera, che tu con tuo danno ti ricorderai, sempre che tu ci viverai, del nome mio». (6.4.13)

Currado’s blasphemy, here, is a minor detail within the framework of the story. The sternness of Currado’s threat is a much more important aspect of the narrative as the text offers no reflection on the fact that Currado swears on the body of Christ, ironically in a tale about supper. Instead, the text focuses on Chichibio’s lifesaving retort. Provided that the text glosses over Currado’s verbal sin, it is apparent that taking the Lord’s name in vain is considered a minor offense. On a day so focused on the nature of speech, Day Six, the text favors witty language over irreverent language.

In the Boccaccian novella, Currado’s transgression of the second commandment is an afterthought. However, two centuries later we see a markedly different reaction to Currado’s blasphemy. In Giovanni Della Casa’s famed treatise on polite behavior, Galateo, the narrator draws attention to Decameron 6.4, specifically, Currado’s profane language. As Della Casa’s narrator discusses the appropriate way to treat one’s servants in front of guests, he refers to Currado’s behavior as an illustrative example. First, he commends Currado for tempering his reaction in front of his guests at the dinner table when he reprimands Chichibio for his insolence. Thereafter, he makes the point of castigating Currado for taking the Lord’s name in vain:
Della Casa’s narrator could not overlook Currado’s blasphemy, even though his main point is to illustrate a host’s proper comportment in front of guests. Clearly, Della Casa is much more sensitive to this sin than Boccaccio as a papal legate to Venice and archbishop of Benevento. Characterized by the ethos of the Counter-Reformation, Della Casa’s treatise on proper behavior reflects a stricter sense of morality, at least regarding the sin of blasphemy. Two centuries earlier, Boccaccio does not hesitate to include the blasphemous statement that amplifies the seriousness of Currado’s threat in his text. When compared to Della Casa’s ethical rigidity, Boccaccio’s minor concern for the violation of the second commandment becomes apparent. In the *Decameron*, Currado’s callous use of language draws no attention, whereas Chichibio’s witty and lifesaving motto is the novella’s primary focus. The cook’s potent use of language seems to be to superior to his master who is unable to make his point without invoking God’s name in vain. Chichibio possesses a much more effective use of rhetoric and outshines his master’s blasphemous language.

The second of the four novellas that feature Calandrino, 8.6, deals with the second commandment but from a different angle. Here, Calandrino, the ultimate simpleton, demonstrates a greater ethical awareness than his savvy counterparts. Calandrino, like characters before, calls on the Lord’s name but, this time, with good reason. His friends, Bruno and Buffalmacco, steal his pig and fabricate a plan that makes Calandrino appear
guilty of the theft. As Bruno questions him, Calandrino attests to his innocence by swearing on the Lord’s name that he was not guilty of the disappearance of his own pig:

«Oimè» disse Calandrino «ché io dico da dovero.»

«Cosi di’,» diceva Bruno «grida forte, sì che paia bene che sia stato così.»

Calandrino gridava allora più forte e diceva: «Al corpo di Dio, che io dico da dovero che egli m’è stato imbolato».

E Brun diceva: «Ben di’, ben di’: e’ si vuol ben dir così, grida forte, fatti ben sentire, sì che egli paia vero».

Disse Calandrino: «Tu mi faresti dar l’anima al nemico: io dico che tu non mi credi, se io non sia impiccato per la gola, che egli m’è stato imbolato!» (8.6.19-23)

As he is interrogated, with a crescendo-like tone, Calandrino swears on the body of Christ. An alliterative and repetitious d-sound pervades the dialogue between Bruno and Buffalmacco: “disse, dico da dovero, di’, diceva, grida, gridava, al corpo di Dio, che io dico da dovero, diceva, ben di’, ben di, dir.”60 This rhetorical device draws attention to Calandrino’s explicit appeal to Dio. Unlike the blasphemers we have seen before, however, Calandrino abides by the second commandment. In fact, Aquinas outlines the circumstances in which one is permitted to call upon the name of God. According to him, one may call upon God as a witness if swearing an oath to defend oneself. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Calandrino fears the repercussions of his blasphemy while Bruno calls on God as he carries out his deceit:

Disse allora Bruno: «Se Dio mi salvi, questo è mal fatto, se vero è; ma tu sai, Calandrino, che ieri io t’insegnai dir così: io non vorrei che tu a un’ora ti facessi beffe di moglieta e di noi».

Calandrino incominciò a gridare e a dire: «Deh perché mi farete disperare? e bestemmiare Idio e’ santi e ciò che v’è?» (8.6.28-29)

Unexpectedly, the gullible Calandrino is more cognizant of transgressing the second commandment than more rational characters like Bruno and Buffalmacco who exploit

---

60 Emphasis is mine.
language for their own benefit. In a highly dialogic novella, Bruno and Buffalmacco’s “arte” (8.6.55) opposes Calandrino’s “giuramenti” (8.6.54). In the end, Calandrino’s prudent and honest use of the Lord’s name fails to overcome Bruno and Buffalmacco’s artful language. As a conclusion, Calandrino loses his pig, is wrongfully accused, and swindled out of two capons. In other words, clever blasphemy profits over naïve honesty.

Although the characters of the *Decameron* novellas break the second commandment, it is the text’s narrators who choose to tell stories that are fundamentally based on the use of irreverent speech. More than their female counterparts, male members of the *brigata* tend to recount stories that are full of irreverent words and ideas. For example, Panfilo commences the entire work with his sacrilegious tale of the saintly sinner Ciappelletto. Undoubtedly, Dioneo’s many novellas are characteristically irreverent as his first tale, 1.4, tells of a monk and an abbot that break their vow of chastity. Also, Dioneo recounts Frate Cipolla’s unforgettable sermon in 6.10 which features “il venerabile padre messer Nonmibalasmete Sevoipiace” (6.10.43). Filostrato, too, recounts a decidedly irreverent novella, 3.1, in which nuns and the abbess break their vow with God to attain their object of desire, Masetto. In fact, in this taboo novella Filostrato tells of Masetto who invokes the name of Christ rather scandalously in its final lines:

```
Così adunque Masetto vecchio, padre e ricco, senza aver fatica di nutricare i figliuoli o spesa di quegli, per lo suo avvedimento avendo saputo la sua giovanezza bene adoperare, donde con una scure in collo partito s’era se ne tornò, affermando che così trattava Cristo chi gli poneva le corna sopra ’l cappello. (3.1.43)
```

Masetto uses an extraordinarily blasphemous expression that proclaims Christ to be a cuckold. I would argue that this is the most blasphemous moment in the text. Filostrato’s
novella triggers a mixed reaction of embarrassment and laughter from the female members of the brigata: “erano alcuna volta un poco le donne arrossate e alcuna altra se n’avevan riso” (3.2.2). We are left wondering if Masetto’s blasphemy elicits the former or the latter. With his play on words, Masetto uses a known idiomatic expression that softens the severity of his sinful words because laughter has a disarming effect. If it were simply a blasphemy with no comedic resonance, the effect would be more jarring. Here, the text walks the line between immoral and artful language.

Lastly, the author himself is the artificer of all within the text which makes its blasphemous subject matter difficult to pin down. Boccaccio’s authorship is veiled by layers of protagonists, storytellers, and narratives which distances him from the transgressions held within his text. This is one of the reasons for which critics continue to battle with Boccaccio’s ambiguous stance on morality. The author’s conclusion to the work provides the audience’s most unobstructed glimpse into the author’s textual absence/presence. Is he a “Boccadoro” with “la migliore e la più dolce” (10.Concl.27) tongue or a “Boccaccio” who uses words that are “non assai convenienti né a dire né a ascoltare a oneste donne” (10.Concl.3)? If we are to take his defense literally, his position on this question is quite clear. Words are not evil in and of themselves. They have a reciprocal function between speaker and listener in which they can be interpreted maliciously, whether formulated in a church, a school of philosophers, or a garden. The beautifully written and well-reasoned defense of his “onesti vocaboli” (10.Concl.3) is adorned with several rhetorical tools such as metaphor, irony, allusion, and analogy, to name a few. I would make the case that the way the words are arranged matters as much as the theoretical argument. Boccaccio’s final defense of his language is not just about
what is said, but how it is said. According to the author, words that are masterfully crafted provide their creator greater ethical leeway.

Can we make some sense of Boccaccio’s view of taking the Lord’s name in vain in the *Decameron*? All three levels of the work engage the second commandment in some way. What arises from our investigation is that blasphemers go unpunished for their transgression. Here, we should recall the actual words of the commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for he shall not be unpunished that taketh his name upon a vain thing” (Deut. 5: 11). In the Middle Ages, blasphemy was a very serious offense with grave consequences for those who were found guilty of this sin. To recapitulate, Ciappelletto, a professional blasphemer is rewarded with worship and veneration as a saint, although the Burgundian congregation is admonished for their blasphemy. A virtuous man guilty of taking the Lord’s name in vain uses scripture to reprimand his hypocritical accuser. When Della Casa’s treatment of Currado’s blasphemy is juxtaposed with Boccaccio’s, it reveals less deference for the sin at the time of the *Decameron*, a text that is later censured and relegated to the *Index of Prohibited Books*. Also, Chichibio saves himself with his wit as his use of rhetoric surpasses his master’s weak command of language who must resort to blasphemy to get his point across. On the contrary, Calandrino, an unsophisticated fool, who worries about swearing on the name of God is punished instead of his deceivers. Male narrators like Dioneo and Filostrato flirt with the line of irreverent language through their characters, though always under the semblance of comedy. Lastly, Boccaccio exonerates himself with an emphatic self-defense that excuses his irreverent language in the text’s conclusion. It is evident, then, that Boccaccio is not particularly concerned with the severity of the sin of irreverent
language. Moreover, each example that we investigated demonstrates a certain verbal ability on the part of the blasphemer. When Boccaccio flirts with the line of blasphemous speech, it is ornamented with artful language. Therefore, he who is most apt at forging words has the most latitude in the use of irreverent language. If Boccaccio’s pen is equal to the “pennello del dipintore,” (10.Concl.6) it is his skillful brushstrokes that afford him the linguistic liberty of his “mala lingua e velenosa” (10.Concl.25).

2.2 Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness against Thy Neighbor

non loqueris contra proximum tuum falsum testimonium

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
-Exodus 20: 16

Honesty and dishonesty are recurrent motifs throughout Boccaccio’s Decameron. Many of the novellas that make up the ten days hinge on the ability of their articulate characters to wield words. Plotlines that celebrate the ability to weave a false story permeate the text. Critics like Almansi\textsuperscript{61} question the relationship between deception and storytelling in the text. Through storytelling, and metaliterary reflection on storytelling, Boccaccio exposes ethical dilemmas inherent to the act of lying. I maintain that, like other Judeo-Christian ethics, Boccaccio directly engages the same dilemmas that biblical commentators contemplated regarding lying. For instance, commentators debated about how severe of a lie it is when a lie is spoken for the purpose of entertainment. To gain

\textsuperscript{61} See The Writer as Liar.
more insight into Boccaccio’s position on lying in the text, I investigate the Eighth Day of the *Decameron* by way of the eighth commandment which prohibits bearing false witness. The text portrays characters with the ability to fabricate lies quickly and creatively in a positive light, whereas naiveté is portrayed as a greater sin. I argue that the text minimizes the seriousness of bearing false witness and that its novellas prove to be considerably lenient regarding falsity, especially when it is linked to art, ingenuity, and creativity.

Notably, the number eight has a specific relevance to the long tradition of theological debate on the eighth commandment. In his two influential commentaries on lying, *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium*, Augustine outlines eight types of lies. According to Augustine, the worst type of lie is intentionally harmful (*perniciosum*): 1) Lies about religious doctrine 2) Lies which harm and benefit no one 3) lies which harm some people and benefit others. Then, there are lies spoken for someone’s benefit (*officiosum*: 4) lies to help someone gain money 5) lies to save someone’s life 6) lies to save someone’s chastity. Last, and least harmful, there are joking lies (*iocosum*: 7) lying out of desire and 8) lies meant to please by smooth talk. This categorization provides the framework with which the canonical commentary on the eighth commandment is examined in the Middle Ages. As the authority on the eighth commandment, Augustine offers a robust blueprint to address such a widespread motif as lying in the *Decameron*.

In the *Decameron*, lying is portrayed as an art, and art is paramount to the text’s entire ethos. Augustine addresses the question of the relation between lies and art in his commentaries and maintains that figurative and fictional language by writers like Horace
and Aesop cannot be considered lies, just as the figurative language of Holy Scripture cannot be (161). Augustine states:

mendacium est quippe falsa signification cum uoluntate falendi. non est autem falsa signification, ubi, esti aliud ex alio significatur, uerum est tamen quod significatur, si recte intellegatur. (Contra mendacium XII.26)

For, a lie is a false signification told with desire to deceive. But, that is not a false signification where, even though one this is signified by another, that which is signified is nevertheless true if rightly understood. (Augustine 160)

His position is clear; figurative language, in biblical or secular writing cannot be considered a lie because there is an underlying truth concealed beneath the surface-level falseness of the text. Boccaccio’s position in the Decameron is in accordance with Augustine’s. This means that not only is lying an art, art is lying, but the message hidden within the surface of the lies is where the truth resides. Truth, then, is embedded in fiction. Those who cannot see past the superficial layer of lies will never penetrate the truth. Instead, only the informed reader who does not believe those surface level lies will reach the truth that lies beneath. Boccaccio’s philosophy on fiction is later articulated lucidly in the Genealogia deorum gentilium but is first on display in the deceitful novellas of the Decameron.

To begin, it is necessary to scrutinize the depiction of the two most renowned liars of the Decameron, Ciappelletto and Cipolla. Critics have analyzed these two deceivers in tandem. Ciappelletto’s role as a notary and professional deceiver should not be understated in the Middle Ages where swearing oaths was so fundamental to maintain

---

62 See Koelb’s “Aristotle, Boccaccio, and the Problem of the Incredible.”
63 For example, Marcus draws attention to Ciappelletto’s and Cipolla’s similar names, nature, and use of rhetoric. She identifies 6.10 as 1.1’s “companion piece—together they constitute a revelation of the storyteller’s art at its most powerful and perverse” (Marcus 66). See Mazzotta’s, Fido’s, and Almansi’s take on the same subject.
societal order. The eighth commandment is one of the most glossed commandments by medieval commentators precisely because oaths were regarded as the glue that tenuously held society together. Ciappelletto’s transformation from a notary who swears falsely for others, to a saint who is sworn upon by others, takes place strictly on a verbal level. The first two paragraphs that describe Ciappelletto’s wicked ways underscore his primary vice, dishonesty:

Era questo Ciappelletto di questa vita: egli, essendo notaio, avea grandissima vergogna quando uno de’ suoi strumenti, come che pochi ne facesse, fosse altro che falso trovato; de’ quali tanti avrebbe fatti di quanti fosse stato richiesto, e quegli più volentieri in dono che alcuno altro grandemente salariato. Testimonianze false con sommo diletto diceva, richiesto e non richiesto; e dandosi a quei tempi in Francia a’ saramenti grandissima fede, non curandosi fargli falsi, tante quistioni malvagamente vincea a quante a giurare di dire il vero sopra la sua fede era chiamato. (1.1.10-11, emphasis mine)

To begin the long list of his sins, the first sentence highlights Ciappelletto’s propensity for falsity with a poetic tone: “come che pochi ne facesse, fosse altro che falso trovato.” In the second sentence, the key terms “testimonianze false” and “fargli falsi” stand in direct opposition to “giurare di dire il vero sopra la sua fede.” Additionally, an alliterative f-sound stresses Ciappelletto’s quintessential falsità and lack of fede. In these first two sentences, Ciappelletto’s predilection for bearing false witness stands prominently above his other serious immoralities, like sowing familial discord, homicide, and blasphemy. In fact, the two sentences that emphasize Ciappelletto’s pure joy and personal identification as a liar are the longest of the description that specifies his many sins. Ciappelletto’s

---

64 Aquinas tells us in his commentary on the Ten Commandments, “For there can be no lasting society unless men believe one another” (10).
65 “Again, there is a constant reversal of professional ethics: the notary, whose job is to vouch for the truth, in fact becomes a guarantor for falsehood” (Almansi 36).
voluntary and personal satisfaction with his role as falsifier demonstrates that, of all his ills, he is first and foremost a liar.

Like Panfilo’s third-person description of Ciappelletto’s deceptive ways, the twofaced notary’s actions reveal much about his principal sin. Ciappelletto’s wholly fabricated confession makes up the core of 1.1. Confession, a verbal act, above all else demands contrite honesty. In the beginning of the confession scene Ciappelletto’s devout friar first reminds us, in accordance with the church’s position on the eighth commandment, “ché il vero dicendo né in confessione né in altro atto si peccò giammai” (1.1.38). Thereafter, the trusting friar guides the confession with leading questions, although it is Ciappelletto who is truly in control:

Allora disse il frate: «Or mi di’, figliuol mio, che benedetto sie tu da Dio: hai tu mai testimonianza niuna falsa detta contra alcuno o detto male d’altrui o tolte dell’altrui cose senza piacere di colui di cui sono?»

«Mai messer sì,» rispose ser Ciappelletto «che io ho detto male d’altrui; per ciò che io ebbi già un mio vicino che, al maggior torto del mondo, non faceva altro che batter la moglie, sì che io dissi una volta male di lui alli parenti della moglie, sì gran pietà mi venne di quella cattivella, la quale egli, ogni volta che bevuto avea troppo, conciava come Dio vel dica» (1.1.52-53)

When asked if he ever bore false witness against his neighbor, Ciappelletto’s mendacious response touches on a controversial topic that was a genuine concern of Decalogue commentators. Theologians theorized about the circumstances under which bearing false witness could be considered just. It is worth noting that the medieval conception of the eighth commandment included speaking ill of one’s neighbor or injuring his or her good name through words. Augustine goes into depth on this subject and affirms that one may bear false witness for the sake of others (officiosum), even though lies should be avoided

---

66 See Marchesi’s “Fiction with Fiction: Decameron” for a study on the order with which the confessor questions Ciappelletto. He argues that the confessor’s questions are based on Dante’s organization of sins, not a canonical source like the Decalogue or other penitential handbooks.
at all costs. The exquisite paradox, though, is that Ciappelletto’s willingness to break the eighth commandment for the benefit of his supposed neighbor’s wife is a boldfaced lie. Here, the text draws attention to a controversial moral issue embedded in the eighth commandment as he simultaneously undermines it. The saintly friar who faithfully believes Ciappelletto’s words on his deathbed falls victim to a masterful verbal performance. As we have seen, the Decameron does not condemn taking advantage of those who are willing to believe, but conversely reprimands those who believe without some healthy skepticism. Lastly, Ciappelletto’s grand deception does not end with his death as his innocent confessor unknowingly spreads lies while he praises Ciappelletto’s ways with his sermon to the Burgundians. Once again, this was an issue that Decalogue commentators debated regarding the eighth commandment. For instance, Augustine maintained that the unwitting dissemination of untruths is not considered a lie. The text plays in these interstitial areas of morality and immorality where theological debate flourished.

Like Ciappelletto, Frate Cipolla’s main responsibility is to attest to and spread the truth (the Truth in Cipolla’s case). Although Ciappelletto is perhaps the worst man to ever live, according to Augustine, Cipolla’s dishonest sermon to the Certaldan laity is actually more devious than Ciappelletto’s lies. Augustine is most firm when he states that the worst type of lie is one from a cleric about dogma. Cipolla, the great inventor of words, recounts his fictitious journey: “Io capitai … in Truffia e in Buffia, paesi molto abitati e con gran popoli; e di quindi pervenni in terra di Menzogna, dove molti de’ nostri

---

67 “Therefore, one who is presenting, discussing, or preaching on eternal matters, or even one who is narrating or explaining temporal affairs pertaining to the establishment of religion and piety, may, on occasion, conceal such items as seem worthy of concealment, but he may never lie about them and, hence, may never conceal them by a falsehood” (Augustine 78).
frati e d’altrre religioni trovai assai” (6.10.39). With a wink to the reader, the friar weaves some truth into his duplicitous story. In a both self-referential and condemning manner, Cipolla points out the multitude of clergymen he found “in terra di Menzogna.” One cannot help but compare Cipolla’s knowingly false sermon to the unknowingly false sermon of Ciappelletto’s confessor in 1.1. The friar in 1.1. comes across as a fool that is blinded by faith while Cipolla is admired as a skilled rhetorician, like “Tulio medesimo o forse Quintiliano” (6.10.7) for lying about religion, the worst type of lie. Almansi affirms that, “Clearly Boccaccio has a more than sneaking admiration for Cepperello, as he has for the other great spinner of yarns in the Decameron, Frate Cipolla” (27). Therefore, the two most magnificent liars in the text are cast in a positive light despite the gross verbal sins that they commit.

Cipolla’s tale (6.10) foreshadows Day Eight, which is one of the most dishonest days of the Decameron and, thus, is a helpful tool when evaluating how the text portrays lies. Day Eight is full of contradictions as the novellas of this day employ verisimilar elements such as contemporary and historical Florentine characters and settings, thereby adding credibility to these tales that are full of deceit. Not only do the main characters of these novellas lie incessantly, the audience must suspend reality to accept the incredible pranks that they pull. Even Lauretta’s choice of theme for Day Eight, the beffa, is rooted in the eighth commandment that prohibits falsum testimonium. Beffa by nature is based on deceit, as the trick or joke cannot be carried out without dissimulation in either word or action, or both. The intent of the pranks and lies of Day Eight, not always but often,

---

68 Marcus points out how Cipolla looks ahead to the beffe of Day Eight when he alludes to Maso del Saggio who is the one to initiate the chain of practical jokes when he inspires Calandrino’s quest for the heliotrope (66).
are for the sole purpose to have fun and elicit laughter. Augustine explains that lies said for the purpose of entertainment (*iocosum*) are the least harmful type of lie.

To examine the canonical question of playful lies, an investigation into the three most prominent liars of Day Eight proves useful. The foremost liars of the day are undoubtedly Maso del Saggio, Bruno, and Buffalmacco, who lie for the purpose of enjoyment and are each characterized by their unique joy for life. These three characters demand attention not only for their repeated presence in four of the ten novellas of Day Eight, but because their lies cause undue harm to others for the sake of entertainment (8.3, 8.5, 8.6, and 8.9). Maso, Bruno, and Buffalmacco’s mendacious ways are best viewed in 8.3 when they trick Calandrino into believing in the heliotrope’s power of invisibility. First, the narrator Elissa emphasizes and qualifies the veracity of her tale as she introduces it as a “novelletta non men vera che piacevole” (8.3.3), even though Calandrino’s belief that he is invisible is so farfetched. The tale begins in the church of San Giovanni as Maso initiates the ruse when he witnesses Calandrino captivated by the paintings above the altar. Already the setting, a church where truth is sacred, is a problematic backdrop for Maso’s mischievous lies. At the start of her narration, Elissa makes a point of underlining Maso’s playfulness and his blatant intention to deceive: “un giovane di maravigliosa piacevolezza in ciascuna cosa che far voleva … il quale, udendo alcune cose della semplicità di Calandrino, propose di voler prender diletto de’ fatti suoi col fargli alcuna beffa o fargli credere alcuna nuova cosa” (8.3.5). Maso’s motivation for the prank is unmistakably for his own amusement⁶⁹ and we know that in his famous

---

⁶⁹ “Interest emin inter mentientem atque mendacem. Nam mentiens est etiam qui mentitur inuitus; mendax uero amat mentiri atque habitat animo in delectation mentiendi … isti ab illo genere, in quo mendaces posuimus, hoc different, quod illos mentiri delectate gaudentes de ipsa fallacia” (*De mendacio* XI.18).
definition of a lie Augustine highlights intent as the definitive factor that shifts false language into the realm of sin. For Augustine, a lie is a false expression made with the voice with intention of deceiving. Maso’s “intenzione” (8.3.6) and what he “intendeva” (8.3.7) is indeed playful, yet, as we will see, it transforms into something more damaging.

Later, Bruno and Buffalmacco take the beffa beyond its original realm of playfulness to a malicious and therefore, sinful level. A loquacious merchant can certainly fool a simpleton, but it takes two artists to take the hilarity to another level. Like Maso, the two artists are linguistically superior to Calandrino, although the trick reaches its apex through a more embellished visual performance. Bruno and Buffalmacco alter Calandrino’s reality with their theatrical performance of a childlike game of “Calandrino dove è” (8.3.41) as they pretend that he has disappeared. The two artisans paint reality as they deem fit through a dishonest verbal and physical performance. As they walk back into town from the Mugnone to Porta San Gallo, the two friends hurl stones at Calandrino, who maintains his silence while under assault: “il vennero lapidando” (8.3.48). Contrary to Jesus’ claim that he who is without sin should cast the first stone, the hypocritical friends chastise Calandrino for his dishonesty. The turning point, then, occurs as Bruno and Buffalmacco’s performance leads to the brutal beating of Calandrino’s innocent wife, Monna Tessa. Calandrino’s ferocious beating is the moment when the joke becomes cruel. Bruno and Buffalmacco’s whimsical lies cause Monna Tessa to sustain an unwarranted “fiera battitura” (8.3.53). Therefore, Maso’s lies about Bengodi and the heliotrope’s “gran virtù” (8.3.20) start off as forgivable lies (iocosum),

“There is a distinction between a person who tells lies and a liar. The former is one who tells a lie unwillingly, while the liar loves to lie and passes his time in the joy of lying … the latter take delight in lying, rejoicing in the falsehood itself” (Augustine 79).
but in the hands of two artists transform into lies that cause harm and benefit others \((\text{perniciosum})\).

As seen with the lying artists or artful liars, Bruno and Buffalmacco, the text associates art with lying (and lying with art). This raises the question: how does the text situate the relationship between art and lying? “Arte” and various forms of the word turn up periodically on Day Eight. The many beffe of Day Eight are not only viewed as a type of art form,\(^7\) they are also openly referred to as art. In the longest novella of the \textit{Decameron}, 8.7, another type of artist, a scholar unleashes his artfully conceived and executed lies as revenge for a widow who deceives him. In 8.7, Pampinea introduces the beffa and controbeffa between Elena and Rinieri with a warning against taking too much pleasure in tricking others: “Carissime donne, spesse volte avviene che l’arte è dall’arte schernita, e per ciò è poco senno il dilettarsi di schernire altrui” (8.7.3). And a few tales later, Dioneo presents a controbeffa between Iancofiore, the “maggior maestra di beffare” (8.10.3) and Salabaetto in 8.10. Dioneo calls attention to the same nexus between art, lies, and beffa as he begins his tale with the literary device of repetition: “Graziose donne, manifesta cosa è tanto più l’arti piacere quanto più sottile artefice è per quelle artifiosamente beffato” (8.10.3). In these two examples, and throughout Day Eight, \textit{arte} is closely associated with beffa, lie, and skill. The text portrays all art forms like the paintings in the church of San Giovanni, the \textit{brigata’s} stories, and even Bruno and Buffalmacco’s lies as commendable. It can be concluded, then, that the text regards lying as an art, especially when carried out with skill, where it is unequivocally cast in a positive light.

\(^{7}\) See Picone “Arte della beffa.”
What lessons do we take from the instances of lying in the *Decameron*, and especially in the novellas of Day Eight? First, Ciappelletto and Cipolla unabashedly break the eighth commandment and are quite skilled in doing so. In fact, Frate Cipolla lies about church doctrine which, according to theologians, is the absolute worst type of lie. Incidentally, on Day Eight Panfilo plainly urges the audience to be cautious of trusting the clergy: “potrete per frutto cogliere che a’ preti non sia sempre ogni cosa da credere” (8.2.5). Despite their grand immoralities, both Ciappelletto and Cipolla are revered for their verbal prowess and ability to lie with skill. Moreover, their audiences who are willing to believe without any disbelief (Ciappelletto’s confessor and the Burgundians) are victimized and shielded from the truth. Likewise, playful liars like Maso, Bruno, and Buffalmacco victimize Calandrino, another believer who is unequipped to look beyond the surface of lies. In addition, when two painters in 8.3 apply their artistic skill to Maso’s lies, the story flourishes. Thus, according to the text, when lying reaches the level of an art, it is not sinful but to be admired as a talent. Disbelief is rewarded in the *Decameron*, while belief is criticized. This point is most evident on Day Eight with gullible characters like Calandrino. It is also evident elsewhere in the text with naïve characters like Ciappelletto’s confessor on Day One, Felice on Day Three, and Alibech on Day Four. Those who disbelieve will arrive at a greater truth unlike those who believe without questioning. In Boccaccio’s text, as society falls into the utter chaos produced by the plague, lying is not so wicked. On the contrary, in the face of the end of civilization, artful words prevail and Boccaccio is the ultimate artificer.

In the Middle Ages there is exegetical overlap between the second commandment, taking the Lord’s name in vain and the eighth commandment, bearing false witness.
Blasphemy and lying are the only commandments in which word and deed collide.

Boccaccio, who values words above deeds, demonstrates admiration, not condemnation, for those who use words in ways in which Augustine would label dishonest. Like taking the Lord’s name in vain, bearing false witness is not terribly immoral in the *Decameron*.

When we examine the two commandments that prohibit immoral speech in the *Decameron*, we see that Boccaccio’s text promotes dishonest speech over honest speech. The key factor that allows for these commandments to be broken is the degree of artfulness of the immoral words. According to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, when speech is art, it cannot be dishonest.
CHAPTER 3

DEED
3.1 Thou Shalt Not Kill

non occides

Thou shalt not kill.
-Exodus 20: 13

Death in the *Decameron* becomes a literary construct that can be manipulated and controlled. Boccaccio and the *brigata* reclaim power through storytelling and they narrate tales that incorporate many deaths. The plague chooses its victims randomly and, as a result, life’s frailty is never far from the minds of the *brigata*. Given the number of casualties at the height of the plague in 1348, Boccaccio’s portrayal of death in the *Decameron* is telling. Surrounded by death, the ten storytellers, who seek respite from incessant mourning in Florence, do not necessarily avoid the topic of death. Quite the opposite, the members of the *brigata* recount the death of at least eighty individuals, not including countless anonymous characters (Usher 626). The storytellers counterbalance the powerlessness that they experience from the plague’s wrath with the ability to manipulate death and violence in their stories, and Boccaccio’s most violent novellas explore the ethical nature of violence, whether against others or oneself. Certain novellas based on violent death question the justifiability of murder and its underlying emotion, anger.

To better understand the representation of violence in the *Decameron*, I analyze the relationship between the fifth commandment, which forbids murder, and the fifth day of the *Decameron*. The novellas of Day Five problematize the ethics affirmed by the fifth commandment. I analyze murder and violence in 5.1, 5.6, and 5.8, and I argue that while
the Black Death decimates and devalues life, Boccaccio’s text questions righteous murder and righteous anger.

Medieval theologians point out that the sanctity of life underlies the fifth commandment’s prohibition of murder because ending life causes injury to God who bestows life to humans as a gift. In the Middle Ages the fifth commandment denounced murder, suicide, wrath, violence against others, and even extended to violence against one’s own possessions (prodigality). Instances of the fifth commandment, then, are plentiful in the Decameron. When we think of murder in the Decameron, we immediately look to the tragic stories told during the reign of Filostrato on the “aspra giornata” (4.Concl.3), Day Four. Day Four injects the most ruthless and gruesome murders into the text. For example, Ghismonda poisons herself after Tancredi executes Guiscardo in 4.1, Lisabetta decapitates Lorenzo’s corpse after he was murdered by Lisabetta’s brothers in 4.5, and Guiglielmo Rossiglione feeds Guiglielmo Guardastagno’s heart to his wife who commits suicide in 4.9. Day Four’s tragic tales contemplate extreme instances of homicide, yet Day Five, counterintuitively based on the theme of amori felici, presents violence even more consistently than Day Four, a day in which tragedy does not always derive from violence. In fact, the members of the brigata share their distaste for Filostrato’s morbid theme of Day Four, for which he apologizes and later amends with his humorous story on Day Five. If on Day Four society murders love, love triumphs over murder on Day Five with stories that mirror circumstances in Day Four but end joyously.

---

71 This, of course, is Dante’s view as well.
Since it repeatedly features violence, particularly murder,\textsuperscript{72} I maintain that the fifth day provides the most comprehensive context to analyze the fifth commandment.

At first glance Fiammetta’s theme of “happily ever after” on Day Five does not appear as the most fitting way to investigate violence in the text, but a closer look proves the contrary. In response to Filostrato’s previous theme on Day Four, Fiammetta solicits novellas in which love prevails over misfortunes and calamities. These calamities and misfortunes are frequently comprised of violent perils. Furthermore, Day Five occurs on martedì, the day named after the God of war who is known for his warrior nature, Marte. Mars symbolizes war, specifically war that ends in security and peace, like all ten novellas of Day Five. Besides that, both the setting and the selection of characters on Day Five install violence as a leitmotif. Many novellas on this day take place in forests, known as places of adventure and misfortune with knights and noblemen often as the main characters. Moreover, violence is not only a recurrent theme on Day Five, but Day Five exhibits some form of the fifth commandment in all ten of its novellas: Cimone cuts down multiple men in 5.1; Gostanza fails to commit suicide in 5.2; Pietro is nearly strung up at the same time Agnolella avoids a thrust of a lance in 5.3; Lizio requires Ricciardo to marry his daughter instead of taking his rightful retribution of putting him to death in 5.4; Giannole and Minghino are imprisoned for their violent swordfight in 5.5; Federico II releases Gianni di Procida and Restituta after condemning them to be burned at the stake in 5.6; Amerigo changes his mind about hanging Pietro and putting his daughter Violante to death in 5.7; Nastagio witnesses Guido degli Anastagi who is punished for committing suicide and must dismember the woman he loved for eternity in 5.8; Federigo degli

\textsuperscript{72} Sherberg also points out the violence of Day Five with his analysis of 5.1 and 5.8 in his article “The Patriarch’s Pleasure and the Frametale Crisis: Decameron IV-V.”
Alberighi sacrifices his beloved falcon due to his prodigal ways in 5.9; and Ercolano threatens to kill his adulterous wife with a knife in 5.10. The issues of murder, suicide, condemnation to death, and ire imbue the novellas of Day Five. Day Five is particularly equipped with the characters, circumstances, and settings to investigate the moral implications of the fifth commandment.

Out of the Ten Commandments, the fifth commandment is one of the less controversial precepts because it forbids murder and suicide, which run in complete opposition to the natural human instinct to preserve life. Therefore, the fifth commandment’s immorality is undeniable as Aquinas refers to it as: “Inter alia autem maius malum quod possit fieri proximo, est occidere eum” (Et nota, quod expectamus requiem de tribus: de labore praesentis vitae, de tentationum concussione, et de Diaboli servitute.). "The greatest evil that can be done to one’s neighbor” (Thomas 39).

However, exegetical commentary on the fifth commandment pays considerable amount of attention to the implicit interpretation of this commandment. Theologians like Bonaventure and Aquinas agree that the fifth commandment denounces anger and, even worse, hatred. If left unchecked by reason, these emotions lead to the violent deeds that this precept forbids. In fact, Lauretta elaborates on the danger inherent to the vice of ire as she introduces her novella on Day Four:

Giovani donne, si come voi apertamente potete conoscere, ogni vizio può in gravissima noia tornar di colui che l’usa e molte volte d’altrui. E tra gli altri che con più abandonate redine ne’ nostri pericoli ne trasporta, mi pare che l’ira sia quello; la quale niuna altra cosa è che un movimento subito e inconsiderato, da sentita tristizia sospinto, il quale, ogni ragion cacciata e gli occhi della mente avendo di tenebre offuscati, in ferventissimo furore accende l’anima nostra. (4.3.4)
Lauretta closely follows the scholastic commentary that theologians like Bonaventure and Aquinas provide about the fifth commandment when she defines ire and warns against its potential danger. Lauretta’s warning about ire on Day Four foreshadows the novellas of Day Five which take up these questions of murder and righteous anger.

Long before Day Five, the first novella of the Decameron addresses the concept of righteous ire. Ciappelletto, who continues to function as a key figure in the text for all Ten Commandments, unrepentantly transgresses the fifth commandment. As Panfilo outlines Ciappelletto’s vices, he underscores that the evil notary breaks the fifth commandment with alacrity: “Invitato a unoomicidio o a qualunque altra rea cosa, senza negarlo mai, volenterosamente v’andava, e più volte a fediere e a uccidere uomini con le proprie mani si ritrovò volentieri” (1.1.13). Although it seems to be pure enjoyment, not anger, that compels Ciappelletto to commit assault and homicide, the concept of appropriate ire comes up later in his confession when the friar asks him if he loses his temper often. Ciappelletto falsely confesses that he becomes angry constantly since he witnesses so many men “fare le sconce cose, non servare i comandamenti di Dio, non temere i suoi giudicii” (1.1.48). The friar compliments Ciappelletto for his righteous anger and continues his line of questioning:

Disse allora il frate: «Figliuol mio, cotesta è buona ira, né io per me te ne saprei penitenza impartire, ma per alcun caso avrebbei l’ira potuto inducere a fare alcuno omicidio o a dire villania a persona o a fare alcuna altra ingiuria?».

A cui ser Ciappelletto rispose: «Oimè, messere, o voi mi parete uomo di Dio: come dite voi coteste parole? o s’io avessi avuto pure un pensieruzzo di fare qualunque s’è l’una delle cose che voi dite, credete voi che io creda che Idio m’avesse tanto sostenuto? Coteste son cose da farle gli scherani e i rei uomini, de’ quali qualunque ora io n’ho mai veduto alcuno, sempre ho detto: “Va’, che Idio ti converta”» (1.1.50-51)
In accordance with Aquinas, the friar makes a distinction between “buona ira” and ire that leads to the injury of another. As Aquinas argues, righteous anger is acceptable and not considered a sin because even Jesus lost his temper. Of course, Ciappelletto deflects the friar’s serious line of questioning on sinful ire with a series of interrogatives and linguistic choices like “pure un pensieruzzo” that strengthen his mendacious performance. Consequently, the friar, well versed in church doctrine, overlooks Ciappelletto’s violation of the fifth commandment while he applauds him for his righteous ire. This scene plants the seed in the mind of the reader early on that ire can be appropriate or sinful, depending on the circumstances. What is more, the friar’s ineptitude shows how important it is to wholly comprehend the nuances of those circumstances.

The notion of morally acceptable ire is displayed in the text’s first novella, but it is addressed more broadly in the tales of Day Five. With Day Five, the text questions the circumstances under which it is justifiable to commit murder and focuses on the motivating emotion of anger. The first novella of Day Five uses the topos of ennobling love as its background, but its language asks if it is justifiable to murder to obtain the object of one’s desire. Panfilo initiates his story in 5.1 by carrying forward the theme of love’s power from Day Four. 5.1 is set in the exotic eastern Mediterranean of Cyprus, Rhodes, and Crete, far removed from the Florentine brigata at an unknown time in antiquity. The tale begins by following a typical motif of the Dolce Stil Novo in which the elevating power of love promotes Cimone from a coarse rustic to a refined gentleman. Although the tale begins in a beautiful forest where Cimone falls madly in love with Efigenia, the plot diverges from this narrative to show that Cimone never truly sheds his
base nature. Cimone, more in line with his unrefined nature than his attractive outward appearance, savagely murders numerous men in cold blood in pursuit of Efigenia. While Cimone resembles a gentleman on the surface, Panfilo’s language reveals him to be more animal than man. Panfilo presents Cimone early in the novella: “con la voce grossa e deforme e con modi più convenienti a bestia che a uomo, quasi per ischerno da tutti era chiamato Cimone, il che nella lor lingua sonava quanto nella nostra ‘bestione’” (5.1.4). Cimone’s real name is Galeso, but he is given a nickname that suits his lack of nobility. Despite his supposed transformation into a proper gentleman, he demands to continue to be known by Cimone as Efigenia first referred to him. His transformation is artificial since he is only referred to as Cimone throughout the tale and never reclaims his original noble name of Galeso.

In addition to his nickname of “bestione,” references to his animalistic nature are abundant. First, he is referred to as a ram: “considerando che amor l’avessе di montone fatto tornare uno uomo” (5.1.23). This association with animalistic behavior returns later in the tale when Cimone slays the men from Rhodes aboard their ship as if they are sheep: “fiero come un leone, sanza altro seguito d’alcuno aspettare, sopra la nave de’ rodiani saltò, quasi tutti per niente gli avesse; e spronandolo amore, con maravigliosa forza fra’ nemici con un coltello in man si mise e or questo e or quello ferendo quasi pecore gli abbattea” (5.1.28). Cimone, fierce and merciless as a lion, disposes of his adversaries as if they are worthless in pursuit of his conquest, Efigenia. Later, when Cimone’s accomplice Lisimaco asks for his help to abduct Cassandrea and Efigenia a second time, Lisimaco calls him an “insensato animale” (5.1.56). Subsequently, Cimone
murders the two betrothed brothers Pasimunda and Ormisda “animosamente” (5.1.67) by nearly severing their heads in half with a vicious strike of his sword.

The animalization of Cimone goes even further as Efigenia is referred to four times as prey: “né vaghezza di preda” (5.1.30); “Cimone adunque, più che altro uomo contento dell’acquisto di così cara preda” (5.1.35); “guadagnata preda” (5.1.56); and “goda della preda” (5.1.58). Clearly, Cimone is never elevated by love as his actions remain low like a beast or a predator. Contrary to its early language reminiscent of the Dolce Stil Novo, this novella misplaces the power of love because it leads to abduction and animalistic murder. Motivated by his blinding love for Efigenia, Cimone cuts down many men. Therefore, this novella does not portray the use of violence for the sake of love in a positive light at all. Instead, its language contradicts what looks to be a typical story of ennobling love and creates questions about the circumstances under which one has the right to resort to violence. In his speech to his adversaries as he captures Efigenia, Cimone makes it clear that love, not hatred, generates his barbaric violence:

Giovani uomini, né vaghezza di preda né odio che io abbia contra di voi mi fece partir di Cipri a dovervi in mezzo mare con armata mano assalire. Quel che mi mosse è a me grandissima cosa a avere acquistata e a voi è assai leggera a concederli con pace: e ciò è Efigenia, da me sopra ogni altra cosa amata, la quale non potendo io avere dal padre di lei come amico e con pace, da voi come nemico e con l’armi m’ha costretto amore a acquistarla. (5.1.30-31)

In no uncertain terms, the sin of hatred does not invoke Cimone’s savagery but, unexpectedly, his love results in murder and death, not salvation. Murder caused by hatred is certainly sinful, but murder caused by love is perhaps a greater evil. With his novella, Panfilo illustrates the potential violent side of love which is quite incongruent with the meaning of his name in Greek which means “all-loving.” Panfilo asks his
listeners to take a deeper look into the nature of violence and to consider the negative consequences of love.

In a novella that starts off by praising love’s ability to ennoble a crude provincial, the conclusion of 5.1 tells another story. Although Day Five mandates happy endings, the happy ending of this tale is one-sided. Cimone’s actions do not match those of someone who follows the rules of courtly love. Efigenia never reciprocates his love and serves as prey for Cimone. Far from a willing lover, Efigenia has no dialogue in the novella and is characterized exclusively by her continual cries after both abductions. Moreover, the novella’s conclusion describes the happiness of the two abductors, Cimone and Lisimaco, with no mention of Efigenia’s and Cassandrea’s emotional states: “lieti della loro rapina goderono … Cimone con Efigenia lieto si tornò in Cipri e Lisimaco similmente con Cassandrea ritornò in Rodi; e ciascun lietamente con la sua visse lungamente contento nella sua terra” (5.1.70). The happy ending here is an exclusively masculine one where the adjectives “lieti,” “lieto,” and “contento” and adverb “lietamente” refer only to Cimone and Lisimaco. In the wake of Cimone’s barbaric conquest the house is left full of “sangue, di romore e di pianto e di tristizia” (5.1.69). These concluding remarks seem more appropriate for the tragedy of Day Four than the “lieto fine” of Day Five. While 5.1 superficially draws attention to the motif of love’s capacity to ennoble, Panfilo alternatively demonstrates that the forces of love, although powerful, do not justify murder.

Later in Day Five, love and ire are the principal reasons for the threat of murder that takes place in 5.6. In this novella when the King of Sicily Federico II discovers

---

73 In the next novella, 5.7, Amerigo nearly murders his daughter and her lover due to his unrestrained ire. He too is persuaded to allow love to prevail in the end.
young lovers Gianni di Procida and Restituta lying naked together after Restituta had been abducted and offered to the king as a gift, King Federico condemns them both to death. King Federico has the authority to condemn them to be burned at the stake, but, at the last moment, a reasonable man, Ruggieri, whom the king trusts, convinces him to reward youthful love instead of punishing it. Love sparks the king’s ire, but his ire is ultimately moderated by reason, embodied by Ruggieri. Ruggieri has the privileged position to objectively consider the situation while the king is blinded by his anger. In fact, it is Ruggieri who identifies the main cause for Gianni and Restituta’s unfortunate circumstances: “Amore e l’ira del re” (5.6.32). In this novella, like in 5.1, love incites violence. However, this time, reason stems the tide of violence and tempers the emotion of anger, which can be sinful if left unchecked.

To address the nature of ire, this novella symbolically adopts fire to represent both the passion of love and the passion of anger. When King Federico is about to discover the young lovers, a torch, representative of his passionate love for Restituta, precedes him:

con un gran doppiere acceso innanzi se n’entrò: e sopra il letto guardando, lei insieme con Gianni ignudi e abbracciati vide dormire. Di che egli di subito si turbò fieramente e in tanta ira montò, senza dire alcuna cosa, che a poco si tenne che quivi con un coltello che allato avea amenduni non gli uccise. Poi, estimando vilissima cosa essere a qualunque uom si fosse, non che a un re, due ignudi uccidere dormendo, si ritenne e pensò di volergli in publico e di fuoco far morire. (5.6.22-23)

Upon his discovery, the king’s inflamed passion transforms into his burning anger towards Gianni and Restituta. The king must temper his unhinged ire to refrain from killing the couple with his own hands at that moment. Pampinea’s narration repeats and insists on both the king’s irate emotional state and the fiery method in which Gianni and Restituta will be put to death:
Partissi adunque il re turbato della camera e comandò che i due amanti, così ignudi come erano, fosser presi e legati e, come giorno chiaro fosse, fossero menati a Palermo e in su la piazza legati a un palo con le reni l’uno all’altro volte e infino a ora di terza tenuti, acciò che da tutti potessero esser veduti: e appresso fossero arsi si come avean meritato. E così detto se ne tornò in Palermo nella sua camera assai cruccioso. (5.6.25).

And again two paragraphs later: “Essi furono, secondo il comandamento del re, menati in Palermo e legati a un palo nella piazza, e davanti agli occhi loro fu la stipa e ’l fuoco apparecchiata per dovergli ardere all’ora comandata dal re” (5.6.27). The symbolic use of fire emphasizes that passionate emotions like love and anger can be quite dangerous if not controlled. The king’s fiery anger is eventually extinguished, but only thanks to the intervention of Ruggieri, “uomo di valore inestimabile” (5.6.30). After he inquires about the couple’s perilous circumstances, Ruggieri persuades the king to allow reason to guide his decision-making: “E io voglio che tu li conosca, acciò che tu vegghi quanto discretamente tu ti lasci agli’impeti dell’ira trasportare” (5.6.38). Immediately, the king alters his stance entirely. Where similar instances of youthful love would have been punished on Day Four, on Day Five the king spares and rewards Gianni and Restituta. In addition, neither Pampinea nor the female members of the brigata commend the king for his compassionate change of heart. The narration does not praise the king in any way, nor does it refer to him as magnanimous, which is typical of other monarchs in the Decameron. Rather, the brigata is only concerned about the lives of Gianni and Restituta: “Le donne, le quali tutte temendo stavan sospese a udire se i due amanti fossero arsi, udendogli scampati, lodando Idio tutte si rallegrarono” (5.7.2). This novella unequivocally portrays the dangers inherent to the sin of ire and the need for reason to guide passionate emotions like anger, which can lead to unjustifiable violence.
A particularly violent novella in which love incites violence is 5.8. In this novella the severity and brutality of the fifth commandment is placed before the eyes of the reader. In 5.8 Filomena narrates the tale of Nastagio degli Onesti and begins this tale with the clear objective to dissuade women from cruelty (5.8.3). Her tale functions like an *exemplum* because it concludes with an overt moral that encourages women to be “più arrendevoli a’ piaceri degli uomini” (5.8.44). As an *exemplum*, 5.8 is less about plot development and more about the description of a detailed scene of violence for the reader. To demonstrate this, the tale’s lengthy rubric does not afford any narrative suspense, but it thoroughly provides the entire plot to the reader upfront:

Nastagio degli Onesti, amando una de’ Traversari, spende le sue ricchezze senza essere amato; vassene pregato da’ suoi a Chiassi; quivi vede cacciare a un cavaliere una giovane e ucciderla e divorarla da due cani; invita i parenti suoi e quella donna amata da lui a un desinare, la quale vede questa medesima giovane sbranare e temendo di simile avvenimento prende per marito Nastagio. (5.8.1)

Essentially, this novella places its key murder scene before the eyes of its multiple audiences to influence their behavior and is less concerned about narrative twists. The tale employs its central scene, a ruthless murder that spans from paragraph 13 to 31, as a deterrent to female callousness with its elaborate portrayal of Guido degli Anastagi’s punishment of the Traversari woman who did not reciprocate his love in life. Filomena depicts a horrifying scene for her listeners with a long descriptive narration.

To take the ruthlessness of the murder scene further, Filomena adopts the language of Dante in her description. The novella’s Dantesque overtones are numerous and unmistakable. To begin with, 5.8 takes place in Dante’s final resting place of Ravenna and Dante refers to the Anastagi and Traversari families in *Purgatory* 14. Indeed, the novella alludes to the *Divine Comedy*, but it points largely to *Inferno*. Its
central murder scene conjures up imagery of the seventh circle of Hell, violence. More specifically, the tale’s “dolorosa fugga” (5.8.25) recalls *Inferno* 13 in the wood of the suicides and the *caccia infernal* in which vicious black hounds ravage the fleeing sinners who are violent against themselves and their possessions. Also, Nastagio, like the souls in *Inferno* 13, is guilty of the sin of prodigality: “Perseverando adunque il giovane e nello amare e nello spendere smisuratamente” (5.8.9). The scene displays the two condemned souls who suffer a sinister *contrapasso*. Nastagio, followed by friends, family and the Traversari family, witnesses Guido slicing open the young lady and feeding her heart to hounds. The menacing murder is marked by bestial symbolism as Guido dissects her with a “guisa d’un cane rabbioso” (5.8.29). In this novella, the text evokes Dante’s conception of morality to address the issue of murder. Unlike the *Divine Comedy*, the *Decameron* sets this eternal punishment on a temporal stage where action can still be taken by Nastagio and the multiple layers of audience.

This novella addresses another type of murder on the fifth day that is forbidden by the fifth commandment, suicide. As we have seen, 5.8 functions as a straightforward *exemplum* that condemns hatred, but it also condemns the sin of suicide. When we compare the fate of the tale’s two parallel main characters, Nastagio degli Onesti and Guido degli Anastagi, the novella’s moral lesson about suicide becomes clear. Nastagio, who “per dolore più volte dopo essersi doluto gli venne in disidero d’uccidersi” (5.8.7), does not go through with his suicide. Meanwhile, Guido’s cautionary fate comes as the

---

74 As others have suggested, the *Decameron*’s structure is a progressive and constructive one that generally moves from vice towards virtue. The tragedy of Day 4 is overturned by triumph of Day 5. Ghismonda’s somber suicide in 4.1 is overturned by Gostanza’s unsuccessful suicide attempt in 5.2. In a mirroring situation, disapproving parents hinder the love of both female protagonists, but the Roman ideal with which Ghismonda takes her life in 4.1 is rejected in 5.2 as God intervenes and prevents Gostanza’s suicide.
direct result of his suicide: “io un di con questo stocco, il quale tu mi vedi in mano, come disperato m’uccisi, e sono alle pene eternali dannato … di seguitarla come mortal nemica, non come amata donna; e quante volte io la giungo, tante con questo stocco, col quale io uccisi me, uccido lei” (5.8.21-24). Love induces Guido to break the fifth commandment and commit suicide while Nastagio rejects the model of Guido. Nastagio, on the verge of suicide, cunningly uses the model of Guido to change the trajectory of his own temporal and eternal life. Essentially, divine providence punishes Guido for his suicide, whereas it commends Nastagio for his cunning self-preservation because, unlike Guido, he ultimately reaps the benefits of love and marriage.

In the end, the young lady that Nastagio loves, remaining nameless like the woman who suffers the divine punishment, agrees to marry Nastagio out of fear. Her hatred, the fundamental issue of the fifth commandment, transforms into love as a result of the cruel punishment that she witnesses: “avendo l’odio in amor tramutato” (5.8.41). Unlike the two novellas that we have examined on Day Five, violence transforms hate into love in 5.8. Uncharacteristically, the women of the brigata do not react to this novella as Filomena, the queen, passes immediately to the next storyteller. This silence encourages the reader to make a judgment on this novella in place of the female members of the brigata. In such a potent novella where violence generates love with a controversial moral like women should be more obedient to men, the reader is compelled to reflect on its violent circumstances.

In a time of discord and death, Boccaccio’s text does not avoid morbid topics like violence and murder. Rather, the text investigates these elements of the fifth commandment closely on the fifth day of the Decameron. Day Five of the Decameron
exhibits novellas that take up the main issues of the fifth commandment: violence, suicide, murder, anger, and hatred. The scenarios on this day force the reader to reflect on the justifiability of ire and violence. In short, Cimone appears to be praised for his adventurous actions taken for love, but a closer reading of the language of the novella tells another story and demonstrates that his animalistic violence is unjustifiable. In 5.6, love leads to violence again and causes Federico II to condemn two youths to death, but reason guides his decision-making and extinguishes his unmitigated ire. Finally, the cruel display of violence in 5.8 transforms hatred into love as the woman who did not reciprocate Nastagio’s love decides to marry him out of fear for her own violent demise. Boccaccio’s ethical framework continues to use religious dilemmas as the basis of many of his narratives. As the plague cleanses society, the text questions the right of humans to take life, a right that theologians maintain is reserved for God alone. In addition, the text forces the reader to reflect on the nature of violence and the emotion that produces it, anger.

3.2 Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery

non moechaberis
Thou shalt not commit adultery.
-Exodus 20: 14

The Decameron continues to pose questions about the justifiability of certain deeds that the Ten Commandments firmly prohibit. Like the fifth commandment that prohibits murder, the sixth commandment unambiguously prohibits one specific deed,
adultery. The *Decameron* does what it does best, it illustrates circumstances in which laws like the sixth commandment can be questioned. In the Middle Ages, adultery was understood as more than extramarital relations. Augustine defines adultery as “all unlawful use of those parts” (“*omnis illicitus usus membrorum*”) (Smith 136). Biblical commentators routinely cite Augustine’s definition when they discuss adultery and they extend their interpretation of this sin to all immodest behavior like sex with a priest, sex with one’s spouse at unapproved times, or even sex between two free people (*fornicatio simplex*), to name a few. However, biblical commentators agree that the gravest type of adultery breaks the vows and the bonds of family. The *Decameron*, then, not only touches on the sixth commandment, but it employs adultery as an integral motif to the work’s overall structure. Beyond the large number of novellas in which priests and nuns break the sixth commandment, the *Decameron* devotes an entire day to the topic of adultery, particularly adultery within the confines of marriage. All ten novellas of Day Seven incorporate marital infidelity, but they do not always portray it as a negative act; on occasion, adultery is portrayed as a righteous one. The text is not subtle in taking issue with this law and Day Seven of the *Decameron* makes this quite clear.

The sixth commandment, like no other, highlights the subjugated role of women in the Middle Ages. As Brundage explains: “Although theologians maintained that extramarital sex was as sinful for a man as for a woman, canon law treated adultery primarily as a female offense and only occasionally punished men for violations of their marriage vows” (42). Day Seven of the *Decameron* evens the gender playing field and responds to the constraints that the sixth commandment imposes on women by empowering them. Where Christian morality situates women as victims in marriage, Day
Seven grants them adultery as an arm for self-defense. To investigate the righteousness of women who commit adultery as a form of self-defense, first, I refer to the theological interpretation of the sixth commandment which is specifically directed at women. Then, I analyze three novellas on a notably feminine day, Day Seven, that defy conventional Christian law and commend, not condemn, women who commit adultery to save themselves: 7.4, 7.5, and 7.10.

To begin, it is useful to understand the way in which medieval theologians understood the sixth commandment. Theologians emphasize that adultery is fundamentally a gender issue and ground their exegesis in the philosophy that women are weak and sexual beings, while men are strong and rational beings. This notion was engrained in Western intellectual culture since antiquity. Aquinas demonstrates this misogynistic viewpoint in his commentary on the sixth commandment. As he discusses the sin of adultery, Aquinas first addresses wives and openly judges women more severely than men: “Sed prius dicendum est de uxoris adulterio, quia maius peccatum videtur committere” (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 8). “We shall consider first the adultery of the wife, since in this seems to lie the greater sin” (Thomas 51). He methodically explains that the three grave sins that women commit when they break this commandment are sacrilege, treachery, and theft. By contrast, his remarks on men’s infidelity only highlight men’s authority and superior position to women. Whether a proto-feminist or not, Boccaccio as a progressive thinker openly questions the sixth commandment’s promotion of gender inequality within legal marriage throughout his

75 Aquinas maintains: “Secundo ex viri fortitudine; quia propria passio mulierum est concupiscencia” (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 8). “…adultery is a sin because strength is a special quality of the man, while the passion proper to the woman is concupiscence” (Thomas 53).
text. As the Decameron progresses and evaluates the laws that guide society, Boccaccio offers Day Seven to rebalance the power disparity in favor of women by granting them the weapon of adultery.

Day Seven permits women to take revenge for their mistreatment in marriage and, appropriately, is the most feminine day of the Decameron. Not only are the novellas of this day populated with so many female main characters, but the brigata spends Day Seven recounting stories in “la Valle delle Donne” (6.Concl.18) after the women of the brigata visit this secluded and harmonious location. Elissa invites her female companions to the Valle delle donne and states that it is a place “dove io non credo che mai alcuna fosse di voi” (6.Concl.18). The female members of the brigata represent the very women who are in danger of eventually falling victim to an inequitable marriage and, therefore, they will go to where they have never been before on Day Seven, through a day of storytelling where women reclaim marital power by way of adultery. And as Elissa claims, “io non dubito punto che quando vi sarete non siate contentissime d’esservi state” (6.Concl.18). Moreover, the seven women of the brigata symbolically prepare themselves for the sexually charged topics to come on Day Seven at the Valle delle donne where they undress and bathe in the picturesque location’s crystalline lake. This purification scene sets the stage for quite a radical argument on Day Seven, that women should be permitted to commit adultery because they suffer an unjust role in marriage.

In addition to such strong female connotations of the setting of Day Seven, the day’s theme is not only distinctly feminine, but it focuses on wives who betray their husbands. The theme of Day Seven materializes from “cosa che ancora adivenuta non v’era” (6.Intro.4), a noisy argument about female promiscuousness between two servants,
Licisca and Tindaro. When asked to explain the disturbance, Licisca seizes the superior role immediately, like the female characters of Day Seven, as she cuts Tindaro off before he can make his case: “Vedi bestia d’uom che ardisce, là dove io sia, a parlare prima di me!” (6.Intro.7). Dioneo settles the dispute and sides with Licisca’s female point of view when he too labels Tindaro “una bestia.” Dioneo’s approval of the woman, Licisca, and castigation of the man, Tindaro, foreshadows the way in which the brigata will unanimously commend the wives who commit adultery and reproach their husbands on Day Seven.

Dioneo, the king of Day Seven, chooses his theme as a result of Licisca’s remarks that “delle maritate so io ben quante e quali beffe elle fanno a’ mariti” (6.Intro.10). Licisca and Tindaro boisterously break into the narration and inaugurate a theme that breaks the rules of both church and civil society: “beffe le quali o per amore o per salvamento di loro le donne hanno già fatte a’ lor mariti, senza essersene essi o avveduti o no” (6.Concl.6). This risqué topic comes from the rule breaker himself, Dioneo, who ironically breaks his own rule on Day Seven when he tells a story that does not adhere faithfully to his own decree. The beffe on Day Seven, though, do not resemble the tricks that are characteristic of Day Eight, which function principally as entertainment for the tricksters, like the novellas of Calandrino. In each novella of Day Seven, except the last, the beffe that women play on their husbands, which are no less cunning or humorous than those of Day Eight, always serve as means to carry out an illicit affair. With the uniquely feminine subject matter of Day Seven, the text formulates a rather modern argument and critique of the sixth commandment.
Day Seven promotes adultery as one of the few options available to a medieval woman to respond to the mistreatment of a jealous husband. Three novellas on Day Seven (7.4, 7.5, and 7.8) contend that afflicted wives should use infidelity to seek vengeance on their jealous husbands. In 7.5, a female member of the brigata makes this very argument with her commentary and her novella. Fiammetta, an assertive member of the brigata who tends to tell stories of bold female characters, prefaces her novella with an eloquent argument in favor of a woman’s right to commit adultery against her husband. With her introductory remarks to 7.5, Fiammetta elaborates the notion that wives should be allowed to commit adultery:

Fiammetta commences her bold argument with the vocative employed by the narrator in his conclusion to the work: “Nobilissime giovani” (Concl.1). This expression ties Fiammetta’s argument closely to the narrator’s authoritative voice and grants Fiammetta’s claim a greater level of gravitas. Fiammetta argues that women may commit
adultery against their husbands when their life is in danger. She calls on the authority of religious laws and civil laws to bolster her argument. Fiammetta, and, thereby the author, directly challenges “i componitori delle leggi” (7.5.3). According to Fiammetta’s reasoning, not only do jealous husbands restrict their young wives’ liberty, but “i gelosi sono insidiatori della vita delle giovani donne e diligentissimi cercatori della lor morte” (7.5.3). Fiammetta selects terms based on life and death to make such a revolutionary argument. The text unequivocally maintains that transgression of the sixth commandment can be a righteous deed, if it is an act of self-defense.

The men and women of the brigata further reinforce this radical stance on adultery. After listening to Fiammetta’s initial remarks and her novella that punishes a jealous husband, not just the women, the entire brigata exhibits a resounding and unanimous reaction: “Maravigliosamente era piaciuta a tutti la novella della Fiammetta, affermando ciascuno ottimamente la donna aver fatto e quel che si convenia al bestiale uomo” (7.6.2). Like the earlier argument between Tindaro and Licisca, male members of the brigata agree with men being associated with beasts and women being commended. Through Fiammetta’s passionate argument and the reaction of her male and female listeners, the text insists on the controversial claim that an adulterous woman should be pardoned in an unfair marriage.

In the very beginning of the text, Fiammetta’s argument is prefigured by the most authoritative member of the seven women of the brigata, Pampinea. The question of transgressing moral laws for the sake of self-defense appears in the text’s first direct discourse when in the Introduction Pampinea pleads with her female companions to flee outside the city walls for their own safety. She makes her case in Santa Maria Novella
where the seven women sit “quasi in cerchio” (1.Intro.52), just as they will position
themselves each of the ten days while they tell stories. Pampinea, the eldest of the
completely female group, draws on natural law when she proposes that the group depart
from Florence to the countryside:

Donne mie care, voi potete, così come io, molte volte avere udito che a niuna
persona fa ingiuria chi onestamente usa la sua ragione. Natural ragione è, di
ciascuno che ci nasce, la sua vita quanto può aiutare e conservare e difendere: e
concedesi questo tanto, che alcuna volta è già addivenuto che, per guardar quella,
senza colpa alcuna si sono uccisi degli uomini. E se questo concedono le leggi,
nelle sollecitudini delle quali è il ben vivere d’ogni mortale, quanto
maggiormente, senza offesa d’alcuno, è a noi e a qualunque altro onesto alla
conservazione della nostra vita prendere quegli rimedii che noi possiamo?
(1.Intro.53-54)

Contrary to the misogynistic literary stereotypes of the time, Pampinea, precisely like
Fiammetta later, uses reason instead of emotion to persuade her companions to leave the
city. Her extensive discourse takes place within the highly Christian ambience of the
Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella as the seven women’s “paternostri”
(1.Intro.52) give way to philosophy and “natural ragione” (1.Intro.53). Like much of the
Decameron, the conversation begins with ritualistic piety, but reason takes over the
discussion from there. Pampinea cites Aquinas and canon law, who maintains that one
may resist force with force and, in accordance with natural law, she argues that it is
human nature to preserve one’s life at all costs. She asserts that if the law allows a sin as
reprehensible as murder for self-preservation, then surely the young women reserve the
right to take action and leave the confines of the city “alla conservazione della nostra
vita” (1.Intro.54). Pampinea’s rational words, the first spoken by a character in the text,
reveal that the preservation of temporal life is the driving force behind the brigata’s
exodus. This motivation, then, innate to humanity, is the driving force of the text. Later in
the text on Day Seven, Fiammetta follows Pampinea’s line of reasoning very closely when she makes a parallel argument for adultery. From the beginning, the text underscores self-defense as human instinct which is the foundation of Fiammetta’s claim that the sixth commandment can be transgressed in extenuating circumstances.

The novella that sparks Fiammetta’s remarks in favor of a woman’s right to break the sixth commandment, too, reinforces this radical claim. In 7.4, Ghita, a young and beautiful woman, reflects on her unjust marriage and actively makes the decision to commit adultery against her husband Tofano to punish him for his unreasonable jealousy. Unlike Tofano, who cannot coherently defend his unfounded jealousy, Ghita’s decision to betray her husband is completely coherent and well-reasoned. As we have seen with Pampinea and Fiammetta, a gender role reversal continues in this novella because Ghita is known for her unusual capacity to reason. In fact, before Ghita’s betrayal, the narration spends a considerable amount of time focused on her “cognitive and reasoning processes” (Migiel 79). Ghita’s intellect, a prized attribute in the Decameron, contrasts greatly with Tofano’s incoherence and ultimately saves her from dire consequences that would come from a public revelation of her infidelity.

This novella is based on a gender role reversal that reworks the marital power dynamics and elevates Ghita from the inferior to the superior role. In fact, with this novella, Boccaccio revises and inverts a story that was well-known in the Middle Ages with various sources like Pietro Alfonso’s Disciplina clericalis, the Libro dei sette savi, and other fabliaux. The story was “addotta come exemplum della malizia femminile” and traditionally known for its “natura profondamente misogina” (Alfano 1058). Lauretta and the Decameron, instead, rewrite the story as an exemplum of “malizia maschile” and
empower Ghita with the righteous arm of adultery to defend herself. The text does not use the stereotypical terms that refer to a woman’s promiscuous nature like in its sources; rather it highlights the wickedness of the man, Tofano. Throughout the novella Lauretta, the narrator, continually characterizes Tofano with monikers that refer to his villainy and she chooses the same language that Licisca used to denigrate Tindaro earlier on Day Six: “quella bestia” (7.4.13), “questo reo uomo” (7.4.24), and “Tofano bestia” (7.4.25).

In 7.4 Boccaccio not only rewrites a known story with a feminist twist, he makes good on a promise to his audience in the Proem of the work. In the Proem, the author acknowledges that the purpose of his work is to bring pleasure to women who are relegated to the domestic space and that he will do his part to amend the inequity of nature: “Adunque, acciò che in parte per me s’ammendi il peccato della fortuna” (Proem.13). In 7.4 Tofano pretends to be drunk to discover Ghita’s illicit rendezvous and locks her out of the home upon her return. However, Tofano’s attempt to cleverly catch Ghita in the act is frustrated by Ghita’s sharper intellect. Finding herself locked out of the domestic space, Ghita uses her intellect and quick-thinking to reverse the roles. Ghita tricks Tofano into swapping positions so that he is locked outside and risks losing face in front of the entire neighborhood. In doing so, Ghita casts Tofano out of the domestic space and seizes power as she reclaims the internal space. Medieval society dictates that men have the privilege to roam freely outside of the home and the opportunity to “andare a torno, udire e veder molte cose, uccellare, cacciare, pescare, cavalcare, giuicare o mercatare” (Proem.12). For Tofano the external space is no longer a safe space, but a place where he is quite vulnerable. In this moment Ghita, Lauretta, and Boccaccio, amend “il peccato della fortuna.” Ghita makes this clear as she exclaims to the whole
neighborhood that she will “ammendare” her own unfortunate situation: “non potendo più sofferire, ne gli ho voluta fare questa vergogna di serrarlo fuor di casa per vedere se egli se ne ammenderà” (7.4.24). Indeed, the novella amends Ghita’s unfair situation because after “tante busse” (7.4.29) from his relatives, Tofano reunites with his wife and allows her to do as she pleases, under the condition that he is unaware of it. It is important to note that this novella amends the inequity, but the marriage is not broken, just tilted back in favor of Ghita. Therefore, Ghita’s righteous act of adultery maintains and improves the social bond of marriage.

To conclude the most adulterous day of the Decameron, the text specifically questions the solemnity of the sin of adultery. In the final novella of the day, Dioneo departs somewhat from his own rule, since another storyteller had already recounted the tale he wanted to tell. Although it is not a novella in which a wife plays a trick on her husband, the novella’s central theme is adultery. Dioneo spends some time asking pardon for breaking his own rules and belabors the point by repeating it twice as he prefaces the tale. However, he spends no time concerned that his novella breaks and challenges the divine rule that forbids adultery. In 7.10 Dioneo recounts the story of two Sienese friends, Tingoccio and Meuccio, who promise each other that whoever predeceases the other, will tell him how punishments are administered in the afterlife. Subsequently, Tingoccio and Meuccio lust after Monna Mita, the mother of Tingoccio’s godchild. Tingoccio consummates his affair with Monna Mita, falls sick, and dies three days later, an ironic reference to the afterlife: “trovando Tingoccio nelle possessioni della comare il terren dolce, tanto vangò e tanto lavorò, che una infermità ne gli sopravvenne; la quale dopo alquanti di si l’aggravò forte, che, non potendola sostenere, trapassò di questa vita”
At this point the narration shifts from descriptive prose to vibrant dialogue when Tingoccio, as promised, appears to Meuccio and clears up all his curiosities concerning divine punishments. Tingoccio relates his experience to Meuccio and explains that while he was in the fire suffering for another sin, he feared that he would receive an even greater punishment for sleeping with his godchild’s mother, Mita. A fellow soul who was suffering for the same unnamed sin of which Tingoccio was guilty laughs at his concern and exclaims, “Va’, sciocco, non dubitare, ché di qua non si tiene ragione alcuna delle comari” (7.10.28)! With Tingoccio’s firsthand experience, Dioneo takes his audience to the afterlife to learn that adultery is not a particularly grievous sin and that no punishment exists for committing adultery with the mother of one’s godchild. As we have seen before, the text holds temporal life in greater esteem than eternal life. This time, the text permits greater liberty to the living who engage in adulterous acts.

Arguing that adultery is not the gravest sin, Dioneo narrates this story with close attention to a storyteller’s main currency, language. Dioneo selects “due giovani popolari” (7.10.8) from Siena and adopts their language to poke fun at the severity of adultery, or at least how the learned clergy “alle chiese e alle prediche” (7.10.9) characterize it. For instance, when Tingoccio suddenly appears to his friend Meuccio from the afterlife, Meuccio asks him if he was condemned to Hell: “poi il domandò se egli era perduto. Al quale Tingoccio rispose: «Perdute son le cose che non si ritruovano: e come sare’ io in mei chi se io fossi perduto?» (7.10.19-20). Dioneo turns typical ecclesiastical language like “perduto” used to discuss the afterlife on its head through the lingo of two simple Sienese friends. Throughout the novella Dioneo uses his linguistic dexterity to create a lighter tone by repurposing weighty religious terms and concepts.
Furthermore, Dioneo, like any good storyteller, adds layers of meaning to his tale when he alludes to ideas that were discussed among the group earlier. In the final paragraph of the novella Dioneo alludes to Frate Rinaldo from 7.3, a novella with a digressive diatribe against the clergy and their wicked ways:

Meuccio, avendo udito che di là niuna ragion si teneva delle comari, cominciò a far beffe della sua sciocchezza, per ciò che già parecchie n’avea risparmiate; per che, lasciata andar la sua ignoranza, in ciò per innanzi divenne savio. Le quali cose se frate Rinaldo avesse sapute, non gli sarebbe stato bisogno d’andar silogizzando quando convertì a’ suoi piaceri la sua buona comare. (7.10.30)

Dioneo compares Meuccio, who is now “savio,” to the clergyman Frate Rinaldo who is ignorant of the theological secrets that Meuccio now possesses. Meuccio, a simple man from Siena, exceeds Frate Rinaldo in theological knowledge and expertise about infernal punishments. With this comparison, Dioneo warns to be skeptical of the clergy who are not as in touch with the spiritual truth as a layman from Siena. Thus, with his characteristic levity, Dioneo demonstrates that adultery is not as severe of a sin as the clergy would have the laity believe. With his final novella of the day, Boccaccio puts an exclamation point on Day Seven and the question of adultery.

The Decameron is full of unfaithful wives. On Day Seven, all ten novellas tell of unfaithful wives, whether their infidelity is uncovered by their husband or not. Nevertheless, there are very few broken marriages despite the copiousness of marital betrayals (Bonadeo 295). Bonadeo states that adultery in the Decameron “often helps to solve some of the problems of the protagonists’ existence, such as freeing wives from unbearable husbands” (296). The text presents adultery in quite a positive light on Day Seven because it alters unfair realities without the consequence of destroying marriage, which was known for its important social function in the Middle Ages. According to the
text, the act of adultery is not the great offense evangelized by biblical commentators and the clergy. Rather, on Day Seven adultery is a utilitarian tool that women possess to react to an unfair marriage. Seemingly powerless, the wives of Day Seven assert themselves and forge a more equitable life. As we have seen, Fiammetta and Pampinea make poignant theoretical arguments in favor of woman breaking social and ethical norms in self-defense. Also, suffering from her husband’s jealousy, Ghita refuses to be confined to the domestic space, and she commits adultery to rebalance her marital inequity. Lastly, Tingoccio sends a message from the afterlife to the living that professes an alternative view of the strict ecclesiastical understanding of the sixth commandment.

What allows Boccaccio to make such a radical argument for his time? The plague is the great equalizer because it levels social distinctions and does not discriminate against its victims. Whether male or female, whether permitted by society to walk the streets or forced to be “il piú del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse” (Proem.10), the plague takes its casualties. In the face of this tumult, Boccaccio’s daring stance is based on empathy and compassion where equality reigns supreme. This compassion opposes the rigorous ethics that the Ten Commandments represent and moves towards a more empathetic viewpoint.

The fifth and sixth commandments are not based on word, but on deed. Violence and adultery are actions and decisions that the Ten Commandments outright prohibit. The text contemplates if preservation of temporal life outweighs eternal life. Day Five and

76 Usher points to the brigata as evidence for Boccaccio’s compassionate viewpoint: “The brigata’s reactions to this literary representation of experience vary but, for all the eclecticism of their responses, one emotion in particular characterizes the narrators’ attitude, and that is compassion, alluded to in seventeen cases. It is, after all, the key word in the opening sentence of the Proem, ‘Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti’. Along with other human bonds, it has been weakened during the plague, and the novelle with a tragic theme would seem to be Boccaccio’s way of exercising and reaffirming this forgotten virtue” (631).
Day Seven of the *Decameron* ask if it is a righteous decision to break these decrees from God. The violence and anger of Day Five and the adultery of Day Seven beg ethical questions such as: When is it justifiable to commit murder or adultery? What is righteous anger or righteous adultery? The text develops these ideas for the reader and forces the reader to make his or her own judgment on these questions. In doing so, the text encourages critical reading and critical reflection. In its post-plague society, the *Decameron* promotes this type of critical thinking in a new era of decision-making.
CHAPTER 4

DESIRE
4.1 Thou Shalt Not Steal

non furtum facies

Thou shalt not steal.
-Exodus 20: 15

According to church teachings, desire, although completely natural, is categorized as sinful when it exceeds its natural limits. The second, ninth, and tenth commandments occur when unrestrained desire for the possessions of others goes beyond sensible moderation. These divine laws outlaw theft and coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor. The concept of desire, whether natural or sinful, plays an important role in the Decameron which is a text that takes a step away from the medieval mentality that man is unable to re-orient Fortune and divine providence and moves towards the pre-humanistic and pre-renaissance values that celebrate man’s ingenuity. The text coincides with the rise of commerce and European capitalism, which is best represented by its countless characters that belong to the merchant class. Branca famously labels the Decameron as “l’epopea dei mercatanti,” when he points out that Boccaccio had a profound knowledge of merchant’s manners, language, and social atmosphere. Boccaccio’s firsthand experience with merchants and bankers adds a certain authenticity to his one hundred stories, of which more than half involve the merchant class (Branca 135). In these novellas, Boccaccio reveals how the mercantile ethos is founded on acquisition of what one finds valuable. In Boccaccio’s gritty world of traders, the object of value may be riches, rank, or women. Desire and greed motivate the Decameron’s mercantile characters. Kristina Olson maintains that Boccaccio takes Dante’s lead when he ties the
sin of avarice to the clergy and to the merchant class. She argues that Boccaccio’s
novellas that illustrate the greed of the clergy function as an invective against clerics,
while the novellas that illustrate the greed of the merchant class function as an
admonition for merchants who are particularly susceptible to this sin. I agree with
Olson on this point and I argue that the author is concerned about the growing merchant
class’s greed and its potential repercussions on society. However, I focus on the seventh
commandment that prohibits larceny and its relation to Day Two of the Decameron.

On Day Two, the author punishes or rewards certain merchants for their theft and
and on this day, Branca’s notion of the “ragione di mercatura” conflicts with the seventh
commandment “thou shalt not steal.” These greedy merchants are not deterred by the
seventh commandment that prohibits appropriation of another’s goods and threatens
severe punishment for the transgression of this law. Instead, they revel in illicit means to
acquire what they desire. I analyze Day Two and the way in which the text treats theft
and its underlying sin, greed. I consider acts of theft by merchants in the novellas of Day
Two, with special attention given to Landolfo in 2.4 and Andreuccio in 2.5.

Augustine officially defines the seventh commandment as unlawful appropriation
of another person’s goods (omnis illicita usurpatio rei alienae) (Smith 140).
Chronologically closer to Boccaccio, Bonaventure (1217-1274) emphasizes greed as the
underlying sin of this commandment as he maintains that theft takes place when
another’s goods are taken out of desire (ex cupiditate). Mercantile transactions were rife
with this sin. When Bonaventure provides a synopsis of the seventh commandment, he
pays special attention to the merchant class:

---

77 See Olson, Chapter 3: The Ethical (and Dantean) Framework of the Decameron: The Avarice of Clerics and Merchants in Courtesy Lost: Dante, Boccaccio, and the Literature of History.
Si vero fiat contrectatio rei alienae per circumventionem, hoc potest fieri cum pactione adiuncta, et hoc tripliciter: aut cum pactione fraudulenta, aut iniqua, aut profana. Primo modo contingit in negotiationibus, et hoc fit tripliciter, scilicet aut in pondere, aut in numero, aut in mensura; et de hoc rarissime evadunt mercatores. Si autem fiat cum pactione iniqua, sic est usura, in qua id quod venditur, est commune, scilicet tempus. Si autem fiat cum pactione profana, in qua venditur proprium Dei, sic est simonia. (Collatio VI.18)

If the taking of things belonging to another is done by fraud, this can involve an agreement in one of three ways. It can be done with an agreement that is either fraudulent, sinful, or sacrilegious. The first way happens in business and can be done in one of three ways: in weight, or in number, or in measure. Merchants rarely escape committing this sin. If it is done by a sinful agreement it is called usury, in which that which is sold is public, namely time. If it is done by a sacrilegious agreement, in which things belonging to God are sold, it is called simony. (91)

Bonaventure explicitly calls out merchants and condemns nearly all merchants as thieves a century before Boccaccio writes his mercantile epic. As he does so often, Boccaccio reflects this ethical reality to his readers and questions it by situating so many of the Decameron’s incidents of theft at the hands of the merchant class. In the Decameron, Boccaccio portrays one positive characteristic for which the merchant class was known, ingenuity, while he criticizes another, their propensity for greed.

This duality is no clearer than on Day Two of the Decameron, where the merchants make their triumphant entrance and undeniable presence known in all novellas except 2.8 (Branca 150). Even though the theme of Day Two is more nuanced, it is conventionally understood as “fortuna” (Quondam 281). Fortune dominates the novellas and the characters of Day Two. Fully immersed in the world of commerce, the characters of Day Two are subject to the will of Fortune, which grants and denies objects of great value like florins, precious jewels, rings, garments, social status, or even the most beautiful woman ever seen (Alatiel). However, Fortune and its vicissitudes are rivaled by another unrestrained force, cupidity. Day Two epitomizes the mercantile ethic since its
characters are plagued by greed and desire for the objects that they value. To satisfy their
desire to acquire, the unscrupulous merchants of Day Two do not hesitate to steal.

If Fortune is the declared theme of Day Two, then theft is its undeclared theme.
Decalogue commentators, like Aquinas, make a distinction between two types of theft,
*rapina* and *furtum*. *Rapina* involves seizing possession of another’s goods through means
of force while *furtum* is carried out covertly. These two types of theft occur frequently on
the second day of the *Decameron*. Theft through force and violence (*rapina*) is the most
recurrent type of theft on Day Two. For example, thieves rob Rinaldo of everything he
has while he travels, including the clothes from his back in 2.2. Also, piracy, based on
violent appropriation of property, appears on many occasions on Day Two. In 2.4
Landolfo practices piracy and eventually loses everything to competing Genoese pirates.
Again, Genoese pirates turn up briefly as abductors in 2.6. In the following novella, 2.7,
several Christian admirers violently abduct the exotic Alatiel. Later, another professional
pirate, Paganino, kidnaps and retains Bartolomea in the final novella of the day. Aside
from rapine, theft through covert means (*furto*) is the preferred method of larceny in
Andreuccio’s novella, which revolves around different acts of theft. Likewise, to win a
bet among merchants, Ambruogiuolo stealthily steals Zinevra’s apparel in 2.9. Lastly, in
2.3 Alessandro and his uncles regain their fortune through usury, regarded as theft by
theologians. Boccaccio, well-versed in commercial activity of the time, makes a strong
statement about the mercantile class with such a wide array of instances of theft. The text
clearly identifies the seventh commandment as the merchant class’s main vice on Day
Two.
With so many examples of theft on Day Two, consequences for these thieves are as various as the types of robbery. Day Two is a particularly optimistic day as Filomena requests novellas based on characters “chi, da diverse cose infestato, sia oltre alla speranza riuscito a lieto fine” (1.Concl.11). The “lieto fine” here always culminates with the main character obtaining what he values most. This theme manifests in novellas that openly reward or punish its many thieving characters. In the Middle Ages the consequences for breaking the seventh commandment were rather severe. Aquinas explains that this sin is particularly dangerous: “Scias insuper, quod talis non solum suam amittit animam, sed etiam filiorum, quia illi tenentur reddere” (S.Th. De decem praeceptis, a. 9). “… a thief may lose not only his own soul, but also the souls of his children, since they, too, are bound to make restitution” (Thomas 63). The temporal punishment was no less severe since those convicted of theft could be hanged, in addition to restitution of the losses. Bearing in mind the possibility of such harsh consequences, the text presents inconsistent outcomes for the thieves of Day Two where some are rewarded, while others are punished.

Indeed, some characters on Day Two pay the highest price for their theft. In the first novella of the day, the author makes his readers aware of the grave consequences one could suffer for committing larceny. Martellino narrowly escapes the gallows when falsely accused of being a “tagliaborse” (2.1.22). A mere accusation of theft alone lands Martellino in a hearing with a judge who must be persuaded to not hang him for the theft that he did not commit. From the very first novella of Day Two, the inherent danger of breaking the seventh commandment is clear to the reader. In this case, Martellino is spared since he did not actually commit theft. However, the bandits who rob Rinaldo in
2.2 and Ambruogiulo who steals from Zinevra in 2.9 are not as fortunate as Martellino. In the concluding lines of their respective novellas, the three bandits and Ambruogiulo are put to an emphatic death because of their crimes. After Rinaldo receives restitution for his losses, “i tre masnadieri il di seguente andaro a dare de’ calci a rovaio” (2.2.42). In an even more striking manner, the text punishes Ambruogiulo with a demise reminiscent of a Dantesque penalty:

Ambruogiulo il di medesimo che legato fu al palo e unto di mele, con sua grandissima angoscia dalle mosche e dalle vespe e da’ tafani, de’ quali quel paese è copioso molto, fu non solamente ucciso ma infino all’ossa divorato: le quali bianche rimase e a’ nervi appiccicate, poi lungo tempo, senza esser mosse, della sua malvagità fecero a chiunque le vide testimonianza. E così rimase lo ‘ngannatore a piè dello ‘ngannato. (2.9.75)

These emblematic penalties reinforce the notion that transgression of the seventh commandment was, in fact, a serious infraction. The text makes it clear that the primary sin of the mercantile class, greed, should not be allowed to go unchecked.

With the severe consequences well established for the reader, some thieves are exonerated while others are rewarded in the text. In 2.4 Landolfo’s greed is restrained and then, rewarded, though only after a process of purgation. Landolfo steals in this novella due to his primary flaw, greed. Landolfo’s desire to accumulate riches perpetuates the story. From the outset Lauretta, the narrator, formally introduces her listeners to Landolfo with a brief profile that focuses on his riches and lust for more: “Ravello, nella quale, come che oggi v’abbia di ricchi uomini, ve n’ebbe già uno il quale fu ricchissimo, chiamato Landolfo Rufolo; al quale non bastando la sua ricchezza, disiderando di radoppiarla, venne presso che fatto di perder con tutta quella se stesso” (2.4.5). From the beginning the audience understands that Landolfo’s excessive greediness nearly costs him his life, yet his evolution as a character affords him, in the end, what he values most,
wealth. First, Landolfo loses his entire fortune when he attempts to double it through commercial means. Completely ruined and utterly distraught about returning home without any money, Landolfo turns to outright theft to recuperate his losses. After a year of piracy, he not only recovers his lost fortune, he doubles it as he initially desired. This is the point in which Landolfo’s evolution begins: “gastigato dal primo dolore della perdita, conoscendo che egli aveva assai, per non incappar nel secondo a se medesimo dimostrò quello che aveva, senza voler più, dovergli bastare: e per ciò si dispose di tornarsi con esso a casa sua” (2.4.11). Landolfo begins to moderate his cupidity, yet he still must convince himself to be content with the amount he accumulated.

Just as he starts to temper his greed, Landolfo loses his fortune a second time to Genoese pirates and is in despair again over his material losses. As Fortune will have it, the ship on which he is held captive is buffeted by a stormy wind and is ultimately shipwrecked. In danger of drowning, Landolfo is still drowning in sin because he has not yet completely altered his mentality. Still clinging on to his avaricious ways as he clings to a piece of the wreckage, he prefers to die rather than return home impoverished. Finally, when he is truly faced with death, the money-hungry merchant changes his mind and hopes for God’s intervention to save him from drowning. No sooner does he have a change of heart, than he is plunged beneath the waves but surfaces again: “andò sotto l’onde e ritornò suso” (2.4.20). Landolfo’s purification continues as the sacramental scene leads to his salvation. He is physically and spiritually saved by the chest that he embraces day and night “senza mangiare” (2.4.21). Moreover, as he adheres himself to the chest, Landolfo’s body is positioned like the avaricious souls in Purgatory XIX who are immobile face down. Like the avaricious souls of Purgatory, Landolfo repents for not
looking up towards God in life and being too preoccupied with material goods on earth. After paying for his transgression with the shipwreck, Landolfo is rewarded with both his renewed life and the precious stones inside the chest. Consequently, he ultimately reaches contentment with his possessions “senza più voler mercatare” (2.4.30). He even shows a certain degree of _caritas_ by recompensing the “buona femina” (2.4.25) who aids in his recovery and his compatriots who dress him in his new attire. However, it is not a traditional Christian _caritas_, but a mercantile _caritas_; that is to say, Landolfo’s payment is a mere transaction for a service. Lauretta reminds us of this with the language of commerce in the concluding line of the novella: “mandò una buona quantità di denari, per merito del servigio ricevuto” (2.4.30). In the end, Landolfo is still a merchant, but after he purges his sins of theft and greed, now he is a merchant who pays honestly for a service rendered.

Like Landolfo, Andreuccio does not suffer the ultimate consequence for his greed and theft. He too undergoes a purgation process, but his is condensed into a single night. Like Landolfo, Andreuccio is a merchant whose primary preoccupation is money. In fact, Landolfo’s precious stones incite Fiammetta to tell her story with the following tale in 2.5. Andreuccio, “più cupido che consigliato,” (2.5.64) journeys from Perugia to Naples with 500 florins to buy horses for his horse-trading business, though his journey is not one of a pilgrim like Dante, but one of a merchant looking to make money. First, he descends into the Malpertugio neighborhood of Naples, a sort of living Hell, where he suffers the first of “tre gravi accidenti” (2.5.1). Here, Andreuccio falls into a symbolic Hell from on high: “se n’andò quindi giuso: e di tanto l’amò Idio, che niuno male si fece nella caduta, quantunque alquanto cadesse da alto, ma tutto della bruttura, della quale il
luogo era pieno, s’imbrattò” (2.5.38). Sullied by sin, Andreuccio ascends from his fall to undergo his second misadventure. This time he washes away his sins while trapped in the bottom of a well. Once his sins are cleansed in the well, Andreuccio’s third and final calamity concludes with his resurrection from a tomb where, if found, “si come ladro dovere essere appiccato” (2.5.80). In the unlikely event of life arising from a tomb during the Plague, Andreuccio emerges from the tomb and is saved. Nonetheless, he is neither Dante nor Jesus where his salvation is that of a merchant, an investment in a ruby ring worth about 500 florins. Andreuccio, then, repents through his figurative and literal ups-and-downs as he travels down into Hell, up through to purgation, and finally emerges from the oltretomba saved. Like Landolfo before, Andreuccio escapes the severe punishment reserved for thieves through a symbolic process of absolution.

During the unrest of the plague, Day Two of the Decameron begins to reinstate some order to a society void of it. Day Two is the first day in which the ten storytellers follow a guiding theme. As order begins to return, Day Two demonstrates how the merchant’s “ragion di mercatura” could progress too far to the detriment of society and its moral laws that hold it together. Boccaccio criticizes the stratum of society that he knew so well with Day Two, a day so saturated in mercantile cupidity. On this day, he hangs unrepentant thieves like Rinaldo’s bandits and Ambruogiulo, while he pardons rapacious merchants like Landolfo and Andreuccio who symbolically cleanse themselves of their greed. During the plague, mercantile cupidity begins to spread beyond the realm of merchants to other classes evidenced by “l’avaria de’ serventi” (I.Intro.28). Boccaccio views cupidity as a plague, a contagious illness not of the body but of the
mind. As mercantile avarice spreads and contaminates like the plague, Boccaccio aims to contain it and keep it where it belongs, among the sly merchants who are willing to bend the rule of law to acquire what they desire.

4.2 Thou Shalt Not Covet

non concupisces domum proximi tui nec desiderabis uxorem eius non servum non ancillam non bovem non asinum nec omnia quae illius sunt

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house; neither shalt thou desire his wife, nor his servant, nor his handmaid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is his.
-Exodus 20: 17

As we have seen, the Decameron portrays its rising mercantile class as one founded on concupiscence and acquisition of possessions through ingenuity. This ethos runs contrary to the ninth and tenth commandments that prohibit coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor. The remedy to the expanding merchant class’s main vice, according to Aristotle’s Ethics (Book IV), would be the virtue of liberality. The antidote, then, to the contagion of cupidity for a rising mercantile society notorious for its concupiscence is liberality and its closely related, but not the same, Christian notion of caritas (agape in Greek). Day Ten of the Decameron takes up these very ideas as it is completely based on the theme of magnificenza and, on the surface, appears to be a utopia that extols

---

78 Olson comments on how Boccaccio refers to greed as a plague in the Esposizioni and that this idea is already present in the Decameron: “Similarly, Boccaccio first glosses avarice as the plague of the church (as Dante explicitly addresses it in Inferno 7), and then expands on such a definition in terms of the merchant class for his Florentine audience. Again, a discussion of avarice, for Boccaccio, originates with the church but ends with an admonition to the merchant class” (123).
munificence and reprimands covetousness. Cervigni argues that Boccaccio composes Day Ten to overturn and make amends for the wickedness that the brigata narrates in the previous ninety novellas through its ten acts of magnificenza. However, Day Ten’s lauded acts of largesse are not so straightforward, rather they are full of contradictions. Cahill, Hollander, and Migiel disagree with Cervigni’s reading since they contend that the novellas of Day Ten are too ambiguous for the traditional interpretation of Day Ten as the ultimate moral heightening and ascension. Cahill and Hollander argue in particular that Day Ten continues to probe the issue of posited law, not resolve it, while Migiel is more interested in “the rhetorical strategies that encourage readers to view protagonists as generous rather than self-serving” (131). Like Cahill, Hollander, and Migiel, I read the final day of the Decameron not as a moral crescendo but as another example of Boccaccio’s insistence on questioning the prevailing ethics of his time, in this case, liberality. I maintain that Day Ten indeed recognizes liberality or caritas as the antidote to society’s growing concupiscence; however, the novellas of Day Ten go further by questioning what constitutes proper caritas. I apply the ninth and tenth commandments, which prohibit coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor, to the tenth day.

First, it is necessary to provide some background on the ninth and tenth commandments in the Middle Ages. Biblical commentators tend to follow Augustine’s

---


80 “That is because I fully agree with Hollander and Cahill that, time and again, the characters of Day 10 reveal character weaknesses that make us wonder whether they are as truly noble of spirit as they are touted to be. The same individuals who perform deeds labelled noble can (in my view, as in Hollander and Cahill’s) be self-interested, self-promoting, manipulative, foolhardy, power-mongering” (Migiel 138).

81 Cervigni provides the most comprehensive explanation of the confusion that comes with the terms liberality, magnificence, and magnanimity: “liberality, called also magnificence, together with magnanimity, a virtue most often associated, confused or fused with magnificence, even though, strictly speaking, magnificence, as we shall see shortly, concerns the proper use of one’s wealth, while magnanimity deals with the habit of one’s spirit which prompts the individual to behave honorably” (420).
division of the Decalogue. In scripture, there is just one sentence that prohibits concupiscence while Augustine takes the step to split concupiscence into the ninth and tenth commandments. Ironically, the biblical commentators who follow Augustine’s division treat the ninth and tenth commandments as one instead of two when they discuss this sin. Coveting or *concupiscentia* is famously difficult to define because it resides in the liminal space between deed and thought. As biblical commentators discuss the nature of concupiscence, they forbid excessive desire for that which one should not have. Church fathers identify man’s covetous nature as natural and boundless, especially if it is not regulated by reason. Proposed by Augustine and later reinforced by Aquinas, the ninth and tenth commandments fundamentally prohibit acting on one’s desire for something that he or she should not have. While these two commandments prohibit coveting other’s possessions, they simultaneously urge one towards *caritas*, the love of God and of one’s neighbor. The final and tenth day of the *Decameron* is founded on the interplay of desire and generosity, two concepts that are central to these two commandments. Although the novellas of Day Ten are known for their acts of generosity, these novellas hinge on the desire of their protagonists. To further understand the role that concupiscence plays on Day Ten, I analyze the representation of desire and its relation to generosity in select novellas of Day Ten, and I examine the *brigata’s* intervening remarks on these notions.

Day Ten is composed of ten magnificent acts of generosity, but an attentive reader recognizes that these acts may not be as generous as they appear on the surface. In fact, on Day Ten, concupiscence of a main character often outweighs his or her generosity. Day Ten narrates many generous acts, even though a desire for possessions plays an
indispensable role in the plot development of each novella. For example, characters covet glory and reputation in the first three novellas 10.1, 10.2, and 10.3. In 10.1 Ruggieri, a Tuscan knight, is discontent with the mule that he receives for his valiant service to the King of Spain because he sees the extravagant treasures that other knights receive for their service. Though Ruggieri desires greater gifts, it is the recognition of the King that he covets the most. Next, in 10.2 Ghino di Tacco makes a generous gesture when he nurses the Abbot of Cluny back to health, although his charitable act is only superficially liberal, calculated to obtain a truce with his enemy, Pope Boniface. Subsequently, in 10.3 Mithridanes wages a war of generosity with Nathan because they both covet the fame that comes with a magnanimous reputation. Consistent with the tenth commandment, practically all of the other novellas of Day Ten are based on coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor, in particular one’s wife. Ferrante has pointed out that the female characters of Day Ten are primarily possessions to be coveted by men: “Women, whose function, we were taught on the first day, is to inspire men to good action, and to value the love of good men, have little importance on the last day except as the objects of men’s desires” (604). Women function as possessions to be coveted in 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, and 10.8 (in 10.7 Lisa covets Peter D’Aragona, a married man who is of much higher social rank). These novellas provoke much debate among the women of the brigata, even though the full extent of the impassioned exchanges is largely left to the reader’s imagination. This reticence stokes the curiosity of the reader while it promotes the controversial nature of these topics. As we have seen, Day Ten is composed of more than one-dimensional novellas that simply celebrate liberality. It is also largely based on its characters’ desire for what they should not have.
The fourth novella of Day Ten showcases a magnificent act of generosity that is laden with ambiguity. In 10.4 Boccaccio rewrites the thirteenth “questione d’amore” from his earlier work *Filocolo*. Lauretta introduces this novella with the very theme of coveting possessions as she highlights the lengths to which one will go “per potere la cosa amata possedere” (10.4.4). Lauretta opens her novella with this alliterative and poetic tone that enhances the novella’s backdrop of courtly love which is set in the “nobilissima città” (10.4.5) of Bologna, home of the innovator of the *Dolce Stil Novo*, Guido Guinizelli. Lauretta tells the story of Gentile Carisendi, a noble knight who enters the tomb of the woman he loves, Catalina, and discovers that she is alive as he kisses and caresses what he believes to be her corpse. He, then, restores Catalina and her child to her husband Niccoluccio at a banquet that allows Gentile to not only avoid the scandal of taking another man’s wife from her tomb, but creates harmony between the Carisendi and the Caccianemico, two noble families. Critics have drawn attention to the ambiguous intentions of the character of Gentile and his ulterior motives as he returns Catalina to Niccoluccio in such an extravagant and public manner.82 A closer examination of this novella demonstrates that Gentile may not be as noble as his name suggests.

First, the entire sequence of events that culminates in Gentile’s great act of generosity is spawned by his desire for another man’s wife. Lauretta tells us how Gentile is overcome by his indomitable desire while encased in Catalina’s tomb, which resides in a church. In a sacred place like a church, Gentile commits an act that verges on necrophilia: “Ma sì come noi veggiamo l’appetito degl’uomini a niun termine star

Lauretta chooses the word “appetito,” so often used not only throughout the text, but especially on Day Ten, as denoting irresistible carnal desire. Gentile touches her breast, and, ironically, his desire to possess Catalina saves her life: “Vinto adunque da questo appetito le mise la mano in seno” (10.4.11). Gentile’s desire is never reprimanded in the text, on the contrary, the brigata unanimously lauds Gentile’s actions. In the end, Lauretta praises Gentile with her final words of the novella: “Il quale giovane e ardente … non solo temperò onestamente il suo fuoco, ma liberalmente quello che egli solleva con tutto il pensier disiderare e cercare di rubare, avendolo, restituì” (10.4.48). This begs the question: If you covet something, seize it and return it to its rightful owner, does this make you generous or magnanimous? As with the other novellas of Day Ten, the text poses this philosophical question concerning the nature of generosity without providing an overt solution.

Beyond Gentile’s unrestrained desire leading to questionable deeds, Catalina proves to be only a possession throughout the novella. Initially, the text presents Catalina as the typical donna angelicata in keeping with the overtones of courtly love. Yet, Lauretta’s narration progressively reduces Catalina to a mere object. This reduction process can be seen by tracing the way in which Lauretta refers to Catalina from the beginning of the tale until its end. There is a notable literary slippage that begins when Lauretta names Catalina and characterizes her as a salvific woman reminiscent of

---

83 “This nobleman’s sense of honor moves him to perform a calculated deed whose ultimate end is as cold and sterile as the tomb from which it is born. This dual perspective reflects the different points of view of the idealistic narrator and the more perceptive author. If from Lauretta’s point of view this novella is an exemplum of true nobility, of carnal love giving way to spiritual love, etc., from Boccaccio’s point of view Gentile’s deed is too ambiguous to be truly noble” (Grossvogel 243).
Beatrice: “una gentil donna chiamata madonna Catalina” (10.4.5.). Just prior to the tomb scene, Catalina becomes “madonna Catalina” (10.4.8). After Gentile discovers that she is alive in the tomb, she is twice addressed as “Madonna” (10.4.17&20) and, therefore, continues to obtain the essence of the troubadour tradition of *midons*. Immediately after Catalina accepts Gentile’s proposed “guiderdone,” the text shifts and refers to her as “the woman”: “La donna, conoscendosi al cavaliere obligata, e che la donna …” (10.4.21). By the time the banquet arrives, Gentile completes the reification process when he refers to Catalina as a thing: “io voglio onorar voi alle persesca, mostrandovi la più cara cosa che io abbia nel mondo o che io debbia aver mai” (10.4.25). Furthermore, from that point on Catalina does not speak throughout the remainder of the narration: “bella cosa è questa vostra, ma ella ne par mutola” (10.4.34). Here, the use of the possessive adjective “vostra” emphasizes her reduction to no more than a mere object to be possessed. Thus, to complete his magnificent act of generosity, Gentile completely reduces Catalina’s agency.

Although the novella employs the lexicon of courtly love, the narration points more to the values of commerce. In addition to being transformed into an object, Catalina is ultimately exchanged between the hands of two men as property or merchandise. For example, Gentile presents Catalina to his guests at the banquet as if she were valuable merchandise: “Signori, questa è quella cosa che io ho più cara e intendo d’averre che alcun’altra” (10.4.31). With terms like “con ispesa,” (10.4.26) Gentile likens Catalina to merchandise that attains value according to its usefulness to others: “la quale da’ suoi poco avuta cara, e così come vile e non più utile, nel mezzo della strada gittata, da me fu ricolta” (10.4.38). Gentile’s insistence on monetary value contrasts strongly with the
chivalrous value of great generosity that is presumed to be the main message of the novella. Instead, Gentile exploits courtly ideals like the “guiderdone” and transforms it into a profitable mercantile transaction. In name Gentile represents the values of courtly love, but beneath the surface, he reasons like a merchant. Gentile, “un cavaliere, per vertù e per nobiltà di sangue ragguardevole assai” (10.4.5), wears the mask of a noble knight, but thinks more like a businessman who acquires what he desires. If Gentile were following the edicts of Christian caritas, he would have simply returned Catalina immediately without such pomp and circumstance. Rather, Gentile’s public gift allows him to circumvent the scandal of his desirous acts. This novella highlights the subtlety innate in an act of generosity, which, according to Christian teaching, is to be carried out without reward for oneself.

After provocative novellas like those featuring Gentile in 10.4 and Ansaldo in 10.5 that elicit much debate among the ten narrators, there is a shift to an unambiguous story where wrongful desire is restrained as it should be. In 10.6 Fiammetta recounts how King Carlo, “vergognandosi del suo folle pensiero” (10.6.1), justly halts his covetous impulse to abduct the daughters of his hospitable host, Neri degli Uberti, a Ghibelline and therefore an adversary. The magnanimous king simply ceases his “folle pensiero” and his desire to go beyond the limits of what is right. As Fiammetta introduces her novella, she makes a unique shift and changes her story so that it will provoke less disagreement among the narrators:

Splendide donne, io fui sempre in opinione che nelle brigate, come la nostra è, si dovesse si largamente ragionare, che la troppa strettezza della intenzion delle cose dette non fosse altrui materia di disputare: il che molto più si conviene nelle scuole tra gli studenti che tra noi, le quali appena alla rocca e al fuso bastiamo. E per ciò io, che in animo alcuna cosa dubbia forse avea, veggendovi per le già
dette alla mischia, quella lascerò stare e una ne dirò, non mica d’uomo di poco affare ma d’un valoroso re. (10.6.3-4).

Fiammetta changes course and opts for a story that plainly displays how to restrain desire through reason. Fiammetta claims that more thorough analysis of questions like desire and generosity belong with scholars, not a group of “splendide donne” (10.6.3).

Paradoxically, Day Ten is fundamentally based on the brigata’s investigation of this thorny question. Bearing in mind this novella’s simplicity, the other debatable stories of magnificent generosity appear even more controversial.

Given its simple narrative design, 10.6 shifts attention away from plot development and, instead, examines the specifics of desire. This novella deals with temptation as a process and primarily focuses on narrating the king’s growing intrigue with Neri’s two beautiful fifteen-year-old daughters until he is finally overcome by his desire. The bulk of the novella concentrates on the crescendo scene in Neri’s garden where the king closely observes the nearly nude bodies of “Ginevra la bella” (10.6.35) and “Isotta la bionda” (10.6.35). This scene is marked with symbolic language that amplifies the king’s concupiscence. First, the King is drawn to Neri’s “dilettevole giardino” (10.6.6). His desire to witness beauty leads him there: “re Carlo … dove udita la bellezza del giardino di messer Neri disiderò di vederlo” (10.6.7). Upon the arrival of the two girls in the garden, the king’s voyeuristic pleasure is explicitly mentioned in a rather lengthy description that details the girls’ bodies as they catch the fish in the pond for dinner: “con grandissimo piacere del re che ciò attentamente guardava” (10.6.15) and “di che il re aveva maraviglioso piacere” (10.6.16). The preparation of the drinks and the food that Neri provides for his guest adds to the extensive temptation scene. As the flame to cook the fresh fish is ignited, so is the king’s passion: “Uno de’ famigliari di messer
Neri prestamente quivi accese il fuoco” (10.6.13). Neri essentially offers his daughters to the king as if they are sumptuous drinks that he places before the king’s palate: “molto cara o dilettevol vivanda avendol messer Neri ordinato, fu messo davanti al re” (10.6.16). In addition, the overtones of the Garden of Eden and the fish remind the reader of the serpent that tempts Adam and Eve. Also, to conclude the dinner the two girls bring “due grandissimi piattelli d’argento in mano pieni di varii frutti,” (10.6.21) which alludes further to the forbidden fruit from the Book of Genesis. Fiammetta’s less controversial novella articulates the king’s temptation in great detail as a progressive process.

After such a prolonged and indulgent scene, the novella is resolved quite swiftly. The king’s advisor promptly reasons with him and convinces him to tame his impure thoughts: “vincete voi medesimo e questo appetito raffrenate” (10.6.32). Count Guido’s words strike the king with enough potency to prevent thought from leading to deed. King Carlo conquers “il suo fiero appetito” (10.6.35) and marries the two girls off to rich barons despite how hard he finds it to allow another to possess what he most desires: “quantunque duro gli fosse il fare altrui possessor di quello che egli sommamente per sé disiderava” (10.6.34). Reason, represented by the king’s trusted advisor Count Guido, tempers the king’s sinful desire to possess what he should not. Unlike so many before, in this novella desire remains in the realm of thought and does not cross over into deed.

Finally, Christian caritas takes center stage in the very last novella of the work. After so many iterations of flawed generosity, 10.10 proposes the purest type of caritas. Dioneo presents his final novella, 10.10, as a sort of counterexample of magnificence: “non cosa magnifica ma una matta bestialità” (10.10.3). Dioneo’s preface is nuanced because his novella indeed presents an example of grand munificence that is typical of
the aristocratic class. Not unlike Gentile’s public donation of Catalina, Gualtieri very
publicly reveals to Griselda that her children are alive and reinstates her as his wife.
While Gualtieri’s ostentatious restoration of Griselda’s children is a flashier generosity in
line with the higher classes that were known for spectacles of largesse, Griselda embodies
true caritas with her self-sacrificial generosity. Cervigni agrees that “Ultimately, Griselda
is indeed the most liberal, magnificent, and magnanimous character of Day Ten and the
entire Decameron” (Cervigni 448). Griselda embodies true caritas because she does not
make one decision in self-interest, even though her extreme submissiveness verges on the
masochistic. For example, she does not offer her children to be murdered so that she can
later be praised for her obedience and patience. The ulterior motives that we see in the
generosity of other characters on Day Ten like Nathan, Mittradanes, and Gentile is not
seen in Griselda. Griselda remains steadfast and guided by agape, a love that is twofold,
for God and one’s neighbor. Griselda unmistakably represents the supreme example of
munificence, but the text still does not come out and claim that this is the proper form of
generosity to which all should aspire. On the contrary, the brigata argues about the
righteousness of Griselda’s choices until the bitter end: “La novella di Dioneo, era finita,
e assai le donne, chi d’una parte e chi d’altra tirando, chi biasimando una cosa, un’altra
intorno a essa lodandone, n’avevano favellato” (10.Concl.1). In the frame story of Day
Ten, the narrators actively discuss how they view generosity which also encourages the
reader to take a position on the subject.

Outside of the novellas, the brigata’s many interventions add insight into the
text’s representation of generosity. Throughout Day Ten the brigata engages in
theoretical reflections on the nature of generosity and its counterpart, desire. On this day,
more than any other, the narrators offer personal judgements about the actions of their characters and the characters of other novellas. While the ten youths debate the nuances of generosity, they even go as far as compete in lively competition to outshine their peers by telling stories that articulate comparatively greater acts of generosity. Alfano highlights this aspect of Day Ten: “La logica del superamento insita nell’atto del donare … è peraltro fatta propria dai component della brigata, i quali s’impegnano in una sorta di gara di eccellenza tra le imprese che raccontano, soffermandosi sia nel campo propriamente sociale sia nel campo delle azioni d’amore” (1467). This intellectual exchange between the members of the *brigata* creates a hierarchy of generosity and demonstrates a broad concern for what constitutes generosity.

Panfilo is the first to comment on the nature of generosity as he takes the reigns on Day Ten and imposes the theme of *magnificenza* to decisively conclude the final day of the *Decameron*. The king of Day Ten introduces his theme in the following way:

> di chi liberalmente o vero magnificamente alcuna cosa operasse intorno a’ fatti d’amore o d’altra cosa. Queste cose e dicendo e udendo senza dubbio gli animi vostri ben disposti a valorosamente adoperare accnderà: ché la vita nostra, che altro che breve esser non puote nel mortal corpo, si perpetuerà nella laudevole fama; il che ciascuno che al ventre solamente, a guisa che le bestie fanno, non serve, dee non solamente desiderare ma con ogni studio cercare e operare. (9.Concl.4-6)

In addition to explaining the theme of the day to his fellow narrators, Panfilo goes on to underscore the importance of the value of magnificence. Panfilo draws particular attention to the incentives for those who are munificent. He explains that those who follow this ideal by all possible means will be rewarded with “laudevole fama” that endures beyond mortal life. In fact, Aristotle conceives of munificence or magnificence as a special kind of liberality with a specifically public-spirited motive. In other words,
this value involves generosity that innately is meant to be seen by others. For instance, Migiel characterizes Gentile’s great act of munificence in the following way: “There is emphasis on munificence as a public act, one that can be witnessed and affirmed as such by internal audiences” (133). According to Christian doctrine, this is problematic because salvation is the ultimate recompense in the afterlife. Furthermore, the concept of caritas proposes that the incentive for one’s liberality should be selflessness, not notoriety. Christian caritas departs from Aristotelian munificence in the expectation of receiving something in return for one’s generosity, like praise or notoriety. In fact, the true altruism that Christian caritas requests is hard to come by on Day Ten, aside from Griselda.

Throughout the course of Day Ten the brigata continues to link liberality to notoriety. In the first novella of the day, Neifile refers to the virtue of munificence in this vein. She opens the storytelling of the day with a simile that posits munificence as superior to all other virtues: “magnificenzia … la quale, come il sole è di tutto il cielo bellezza e ornamento, è chiarezza e lume di ciascun’altra virtù” (10.1.2). With her word choice, Neifile insists on the ornamental and visual aspect of “magnificenzia.” Her simile highlights the sun’s power to outshine and be seen above everything else in the sky. Again, a narrator characterizes munificence by its ostentatious and ornamental value. Later, in 10.9 Panfilo too speaks about being generous for the sake of receiving something in return: “acciò che per le cose che nella mia novella udirete, se pienamente l’amicizia d’alcuno non si può per li nostri vizii acquistare, almeno diletto prendiamo del servire, sperando che quando che sia di ciò merito ci debba seguire” (10.9.4). Panfilo

---

84 “Rimanda poi al finale del libro (decima giornata) la generosità che sopravanza la liberalità praticata da privati cittadini, cioè la Magnificenza, auspicabile nei grandi sovrani e lodata da Aristotele come la virtù che «adorna» tutte le altre perché le «aumenta» . . . [la magnanimità pare essere una sorta di ornamento di tutte le virtù.” (Kirkham 262-263).
prefaces his story by encouraging his listeners to take delight in being of service to others, but he adds that there may be some sort of recompense as a result. This, again, is not the selfless service and generosity that Griselda displays but a type of generosity that expects some sort of benefit in return. As we have seen, most characters of Day Ten expect or demand some sort of recompense for their generosity, whether it be fame, reputation, or riches.

It is clear that Day Ten does not wholly praise the ideal of liberality, but rather functions as an in-depth study of the concept of generosity with its many iterations. Day Ten proves that liberality is rather complex and comes in many forms. The novellas of Day Ten run the entire gamut of generosity from more cunning and self-serving actors like Ghino, Mithridanes, and Gentile to the most extreme like Griselda. In 10.6, King Carlo is an example of the moment in which desire takes seed and demonstrates how desire should be restrained. Additionally, the brigata is especially interested in the notion of generosity and they carry out spirited debates that scrutinize the magnificent novellas that they hear. The author remains silent on liberality, but as usual, he presents the reader with conflicting views of what it means to be generous. Consequently, the reader is forced to bear witness to these dilemmas, sift through them, and to take a position.

The seventh, ninth, and tenth commandments aim to restrain human desire. Day Two shows that the cupidity of Boccaccio’s contemporary merchant class was a growing concern that could threaten societal harmony. Filomena concurs with this concern as she critiques the cupidity of contemporary society during her ode to friendship in her novella on Day Ten: “Li cui sacratissimi effetti oggi radissime volte si veggiono in due, colpa e vergogna della misera cupidigia de’ mortali” (10.8.112). Although dangerous, the text
maintains that cupidity and concupiscence are natural human impulses. Even the *onesta brigata* must fend off this inclination: “secondo il mio giudicio, noi onestamente abbiam fatto, per ciò che, se io ho saputo ben riguardare, quantunque liete novelle e forse attrattive a concupiscenzia dette ci sieno” (10.Concl.4). To counteract man’s desire, whether for goods or for the flesh, the text offers generosity. The cupidity of Day Two seems to be counterbalanced by the generosity of Day Ten. Day Ten certainly promotes generosity as the proper response to greed, but at the same time, the text offers a multifaceted look into what it means to be generous by highlighting its many intricacies.
Conclusion

The *Decameron* begins with Ciappelletto, who breaks all Ten Commandments and then becomes a saint, and closes with patient Griselda, who obeys all Ten Commandments and then endures the consequences. As some critics have asserted, this could suggest a moral heightening from vice to virtue for the ten youths and their plague society. But this interpretation may be too neat and tidy, especially as the text shows that humanity is anything but neat and tidy. Although the text begins with the most evil man and ends with the most virtuous woman, it is the evil one who is canonized while the virtuous one suffers horrific trials and tribulations. I suggest that Boccaccio does not offer a simple recipe for spiritual ascension, but rather presents the entire gamut of human choices from Ciappelletto to Griselda and leaves the moral message somewhere in the middle, to be determined.

My dissertation has shed light on where and how the text uses specifically Christian ethics for so much of its moral discourse. We have seen that the main tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments, pervade in the *Decameron*, despite its so often being labeled as “secular.” The *Decameron* is secular, yes, in that it can never be mistaken for a biblical or exegetical work. However, it is not a work devoid of religiosity. One of the main functions of religion is to install a moral code in its followers from a didactic standpoint. If we view the *Decameron* in this light, it is an extremely religious text. As we have seen, the *Decameron*’s new moral code rarely agrees with the fundamental ethics that the Ten Commandments promote. Instead, it revels in the weaknesses and failings that stringent laws like the Decalogue that attempt
to rein in society. Boccaccio’s ten days at once agree with, critique, modify, or question these ten tenets that were fundamental to the very foundation of Western society.

In this study, I proposed the Ten Commandments as an original tool to address the text’s polemical depiction of ethical laws, particularly divine laws. Initially, I set out to simplify the complex nature of the work’s moral message with this approach. My analysis of the Decalogue in the Decameron, however, has problematized the moral dimension of the text even further. We have seen that there are no easy predetermined solutions to Boccaccio’s stance on morality. The author is aware of the moral complexities that humanity faces in its everyday social interactions. A time of crisis, like the plague, provides Boccaccio the opportunity to rethink these morals because society and its governing ethics are destroyed and need to be reconstructed. His text shows that it is our responsibility to question the justness of prevailing laws. In the Conclusion, the narrator emphasizes that the only true constant in life is change: “Confesso nondimeno le cose di questo mondo non avere stabilità alcuna ma sempre essere in mutamento” (10.Concl.27). Fixed and rigid laws, then, need to be reevaluated, reconsidered, and changed to adapt to ever-evolving times. For Boccaccio, the plague is an accelerant that facilitates a reconsideration of prevailing laws, like the Ten Commandments.

What have we learned about the moral message of the Decameron? After a close analysis of Christian ethics in four chapters Observance, Word, Deed, and Desire, some rules emerge:

1. Thou shalt avoid hypocrisy
2. Thou shalt not be overly dogmatic or excessively stringent
3. Thou shalt not be naïve and uninformed
4. Thou shalt not restrict human nature

5. Language cannot be wicked, if elevated to the level of art

6. Adultery and violence shall be permitted, if in the name of self-defense

7. Not just generosity, the right kind of generosity, remedies greed

These “Boccaccian” Commandments stipulate divine laws. The text’s moral code does not favor excess in one direction or the other, as we see from those citizens that chose “una mezzana via” (I.Intro.24) as their response to the apocalyptic reality that the plague inaugurated. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* promotes a middle road and a healthy skepticism of excesses when it assesses moral law. In an extreme time like the Black Death, Boccaccio takes a moderate view of rules and regulations, which, paradoxically, is a radical act in itself because it defies the governing dogma of his time.

These “Boccaccian” Commandments take shape through reflection, discussion, and compassion. Wary of blind faith, Boccaccio places faith in the qualities of man. His text requests a human response to a divine sentence like the plague. As a witness to the disintegration of society’s social fabric, Boccaccio promotes our greatest assets as people: rationality, reason, and compassion. In a time of existential crisis, he turns to humanity, as evidenced by the first words of his text. The *Decameron*’s incipit avows that “Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti” (Proem.2). This view, based on humanity’s propensity for compassion, reflects the moral transition of Christianity from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. Boccaccio’s view of morality in the text supplants the rigidity of Mosaic Law and the Ten Commandments with the new state of grace that is professed by Jesus’ Greatest Commandment:

And one of them, a doctor of the law, asked him, tempting him: Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said to him: Thou shalt love the Lord
thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets. (Matthew 22: 35-40)

The Greatest Commandment ushers in a more compassionate view that champions the Golden Rule and eclipses the unforgiving dictates of the Ten Commandments, which aim to steer and control individual behavior. As I have demonstrated in this study, Boccaccio reinforces the Christian law of love as he privileges breaking many moral and social rules through love. Boccaccio’s focus on compassion is revealed throughout the text, from the incipit to the very nature of the brigata, who are particularly empathetic listeners, to the novellas analyzed in this study.85 Boccaccio’s moral message, then, values the individual’s moral decision-making, as everyone should choose to treat others as he or she wishes to be treated regardless of external laws.

It is undeniable that the moral message of the work will continue to foster debate. After such a broad investigation into the role that Judeo-Christian ethics play in the economy of the text’s morality, it has opened other lines of inquiry: What type of influence does the Old Testament and the New Testament have on the Decameron? What impact do exegetical works have on the text? Besides Christian law, what other types of law are at play in the Decameron, given Boccaccio’s background in canon law?

85 Other critics like Ferrante and Barolini refer to this idea: “Boccaccio does not renounce this world for the after-life. He believes in natural impulses and deplores institutions and conventions that deny them, but without rejecting Christian morality. He would have the impulses restrained by reason and virtue and directed towards good … We find here an ethical code of social responsibility and personal virtue, and its informing principle is love” (Ferrante 226). “Generosity is generated by compassion; this compassion, which motivates the author in his Proem at one end of the book and the characters of Day X at the other, is not only the social glue which holds together the fabric of human society, which literally humanizes that society, but is also the textual glue linking several levels of the Decameron” (Barolini 521-522).
Additionally, what can it tell us about how fiction contributes to the development of one’s moral code?

Finally, my dissertation examines a text from the 14th century that is still relevant to our modern society. As I write this conclusion, we are collectively experiencing a true global pandemic. During the Coronavirus crisis, the inimitable voice of one of the *tre corone* could not be any more timely. As a vital eyewitness to the collapse of society during a global pandemic in 1348, Boccaccio reexamines and reevaluates what constitutes right and wrong. Boccaccio’s text tells us that in times like these we should look inward and explore human decision-making and the morals/ethics that guide these decisions. The words ‘morals’ and ‘ethics’ are often used synonymously, but a distinction should be made. Morals are self-imposed rules that one chooses to live by, while ethics are principles that are imposed from an outside source. One’s moral code may differ from the ethics preached by religion, normalized by society, or mandated by politics. In the wake of the COVID-19 paradigm shift, the lasting effects on daily life and the repercussions from a political, social, and economic standpoint remain to be seen. During his time of moral upheaval, Boccaccio offered his text as a declaration that we should collectively consider the relationship between individual moral choices and societal ethics, reflect on them, think critically, engage in dialogue, focus on compassion, and ultimately, make change where needed. If we apply Boccaccio’s teaching, then we should have faith in our greatest virtues as humans, reason and compassion, when we take on the moral dilemmas created by today’s pandemic. Now, more than ever, we see that Boccaccio’s perceptive articulation of moral dilemmas is ageless.


Augustine. _Treatises on Various Subjects_. Fathers of the Church, 1952.


Bonaventure, Saint. *Collegium S. Bonaventurae (Rome. Doctoris seraphici S. Bonaventurae ... Opera omnia)*. Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) : Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882. *Internet Archive*,


*Decameron Web. Brigata.*

---. *Brigata.*


---. *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron.* University of Toronto Press, 2015.


---. *Ethics of Retribution in the Decameron and the Late Medieval Italian Novella: Beyond the Circle.* Mellen University Press, 1993.


---. La scena conviviale e la sua funzione nel mondo del Boccaccio. Olschki, 1983.


*Thomas de Aquino, Collationes in Decem Praeceptis.*


