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Abstract: Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349-51) has long been regarded as a secular celebration of humanity. Yet, his choice of title—a play on *hexameron*—frames his short story collection as a gloss on Genesis. In this essay, I argue that the author's reevaluation of scripture is an essential part of his vision of a post-plague society in which gender roles have been redefined. Boccaccio challenges traditional interpretations of the biblical account of humanity's creation and fall, in which Woman/Eve is primarily blamed for Original Sin and its consequences. He implies that such misogynistic readings have served to subjugate women, and thus offers an alternate version, a "new Genesis." Furthermore, he identifies women readers, previously excluded from the practice of biblical exegesis, as the rightful interpreters of humanity's new origin story.

Key words: pre-modern culture, plague, Bible, gender roles, reading

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The Redemption of Eve: The *Decameron* as New Genesis[1]

BRITTANY ASARO

While the *Decameron* has long been regarded as a secular celebration of all things temporal, recent scholarship has proposed that Boccaccio's worldview does not ignore Christian tradition, but rather reevaluates it.[2] In the *Decameron*, this reevaluation takes place in the rereading and even rewriting of Christian narratives. Both of these practices are implied by the work's title: as has been widely noted, *decameron* is a play on *hexameron* (plural: *hexamera*), the patristic genre of glosses on the biblical account of humanity's creation and fall.[3] Surprisingly, even with the nod to this genre in the *Decameron*'s title, Genesis has seldom been considered as the collection's *raison d'être*.[4] The *decameron-hexameron* link has instead been most often interpreted as a reference to the general notion of rebirth, corresponding to the formation of a new society after the plague that Boccaccio chooses as a backdrop for his tales. While this notion is certainly important in the *Decameron*, the parodic title suggests that Boccaccio's engagement with Genesis is not limited to a general meditation on the theme of regeneration, but involves a careful reevaluation of the sacred text.[5] In this essay, I examine allusions to the biblical Creation and Fall narratives in the *Decameron*'s frame story and propose that Boccaccio imagines his collection as a *hexameron*: that is, a gloss on Genesis. Furthermore, I argue that Boccaccio identifies women readers as the rightful interpreters of this gloss, and thus as the interpreters of the origin story of a new humanity that will emerge in the wake of the plague.

Boccaccio's gloss on Genesis is an essential part of the author's vision of a post-plague society in which gender roles have been redefined. Genesis is a natural arena for the reevaluation of gender dynamics, which feature prominently in the story of humanity's creation and fall. As Barbara Newman explains, the Fall narrative in Genesis was "the touchstone for all meditation on man and woman" for medieval Christians.[6] Leah DeVun has pointed out the "high stakes" of medieval Christian interpretations of the sexes in Genesis, noting not only that such interpretations "legitimated the doctrines of both marriage and patriarchy" but also that "political authority depended at least in part on the precedent of Eve's inferiority."[7] In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio challenges traditional interpretations of the biblical account of humanity's creation and fall, in which Woman/Eve is primarily blamed for Original Sin and its consequences. He implies that such misogynistic readings have served to subjugate women and offers an alternate version of the narrative to be interpreted by women readers. The *Decameron* is thus a "new Genesis" that consists of a rewriting as well as a rereading of the sacred text. In this project, women are elevated to central positions as authors and readers.[8]

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[1] I am very grateful to Allison Van Deventer for helping me bring structure and clarity to this essay.

[2] See, for example, Barsella, "Boccaccio and Humanism"; Cervigni, *Rewriting*; and Ruggiero, *Love and Sex*.

[3] Scholars have also widely noted that the term *decameron*, as a compound of the Greek words for "ten" (δέϰα) and "day" (ημέϱα), is a reference to the Classical tradition. Boccaccio is undoubtedly a "cultural mediator" who borrows from and syncretizes diverse literary and cultural forms, including the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, and courtly (see, for example, Armstrong et al., "Boccaccio as Cultural Mediator"). While it is my aim to offer a unique interpretation of the *Decameron* through the lens of a "new Genesis," I by no means argue that the biblical Creation and Fall narratives are Boccaccio's only reference point.

[4] This how Isana defines Boccaccio's statement of purpose in the *Proemio* ("Redefining *Dulce et utile*," 33).

[5] See Cardini, "Il «Decameron»"; Cervigni, *Rewriting*, 52-53; Gittes, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse,* 142-143; and Surdich, *Boccaccio*. Gittes provides a useful summary of scholarship on the relationship between the *Decameron* and the *hexamera* tradition (*Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, 141).

[6] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 89. See also Cristiano, "Evolution," 148.

[7] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 18.

[8] See Olson, "The Language of Women," 52.

This essay proceeds in four parts. In the first part, *Writing Genesis*, I argue that Boccaccio constructs alternative versions of the biblical Creation and Fall narratives in order to challenge the established distribution of power between the sexes. I show that Boccaccio constructs a parallel between the plague and the Fall that emphasizes men's role in humanity's downfall and legitimizes women's defiance of male authority. Both notions depart from the biblical narrative, in which Eve, by consuming the forbidden fruit and offering it to Adam, causes humanity's expulsion from Paradise, which in turn leads God to define Adam as Eve's master as a consequence of Original Sin. In the second part, *Eve as Author*, I examine how Boccaccio frames the formation of the "merry band" (lieta brigata) of storytellers—and the post-pandemic society that they symbolize—as a rewriting of Genesis from the pseudo-female perspective of his women characters, who emerge symbolically as primordial women and creator deities. In the third part, *Reading Genesis*, I demonstrate how Boccaccio's vision of a more gender equitable post-pandemic society is founded on the rejection of sexist interpretations of Genesis that disproportionally assign blame to Eve for the fall of humanity. I propose that Boccaccio presents the misogynistic reading of the Fall narrative as a tool that has historically been used to subjugate women. Finally, in the last section, *Eve as Reader*, I argue that Boccaccio offers the *Decameron* as an alternative *hexameron* to women readers, who have been excluded from the practice of biblical exegesis.

Writing Genesis

In the *Decameron*, through references to the medieval Christian conception of human history, Boccaccio characterizes the plague as a new Fall. Medieval theologians understood the timeline of humanity as divided into three eras—the first beginning with the Fall and the second beginning with the birth of Christ. As Guido Ruggiero notes, in Boccaccio's lifetime, the plague seemed to signal the dawn of a third age.[9] Indeed, Boccaccio implies a deep awareness of this tradition when he opens his account of the plague by locating it in relation to the birth of Christ: "Let me say, then, that one thousand, three hundred, and forty-eight years had passed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when the deadly plague arrived in the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of any in Italy" (Dico adunque che già erano gli anni della fruttifera incarnazione del Figliuolo di Dio al numero pervenuti di milletrecentoquarantotto, quando nella egregia città di Fiorenza, oltre a ogn'altra italica bellissima, pervenne la mortifera pestilenza).[10] Tobias Foster Gittes notes the "radical difference" implied by the antithetical pair "fruitfulness"/"deadliness" (fruttifera/mortifera) in this passage, associating the first adjective with "the dawn of a new age, that of Grace," and the second with "a birth of new age," one to which the *Decameron* looks forward.[11] If we are to understand the birth of Christ and the plague as signposts designating divisions in human history, then this passage, in citing two of them, naturally implies the third: the Fall. Boccaccio reinforces this logic with the very same fruitfulness/deadliness pair, which also reenacts the progression from Eve and Adam's partaking of the fruit in the center of Eden to the deadly consequences resulting from this act. Because the birth of Christ reversed the Fall, the plague is not only an anthesis to the birth of Christ, but also parallel to the Fall.

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[9] Ruggiero, *Love and Sex*, 204.

[10] Translation from Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Rebhorn, 5. All subsequent translations of the *Decameron* are taken from this edition. Original text from Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Branca, 9-10. All subsequent quotations from the *Decameron* are taken from this edition and will be identified by the number of the day, story, and line in parenthesis in the body of the text.

[11] Gittes, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, 148.

The fruitfulness/deadliness binary also anticipates an investigation of gender dynamics.[12] Boccaccio does not appear to accept traditional interpretations of Woman and Man in the Fall narrative: rather than casting woman as the cause of humanity's downfall, he emphasizes her role in the inception of each era of human history. He draws the reader's attention to the idea, already accepted within medieval Christian thought, that the second age began with a birth—that of the only being born of a woman whose conception did not include the participation of a human male.[13] Fecundity and gestation are connoted by the terms "fruitfulness" (fruttifera) as well as "incarnation" (incarnazione; literally, "in-fleshing").[14] This reframing of orthodox Christian thought that elevates women as life-bringers may be applied to the first age as well, widely recognized as having begun with the Fall. Such a logic implies that interpreters of sacred texts, by holding Eve responsible for the Fall, have inadvertently credited her with initiating the first age. Indeed, Boccaccio himself names Eve "mother of us all" (matre omnium) in his later work *De mulieribus claris* / *Famous Women*—a role, paradoxically, that she achieves only after eating the forbidden fruit.[15] It follows that the third age, the rebuilding of the world after the deadly plague, will also be ushered in—or better, birthed—by women.

Boccaccio's description of the plague's spread may also be read as a description of a Fall. He develops the association between women and birth/beginnings and introduces an association with men and death/endings by distancing women from the disease's origin and connecting men with its transmission. He writes: "It had begun some years before in the East, where it deprived countless beings of their lives before it headed to the West, spreading ever-greater misery as it moved relentlessly from place to place" (alquanti anni davanti nelle parti orientali incominciata, quelle d'inumerabile quantità de' viventi avendo private, senza ristare d'un luogo in uno altro continuandosi, verso l'Occidente miserabilmente s'era ampliata; 1.*Intro*.8).[16] Here, of course, Boccaccio is describing the literal progression of the mid-fourteenth-century bubonic plague epidemic from its likely source in central Asia westward to Europe and Africa. However, given the pervasive influence of gendered associations with the cardinal directions in the Middle Ages, it does not seem impossible that Boccaccio was also considering these associations when meditating upon the disease's spread. Medieval gender systems aligned the East with spirituality and masculinity and the West with carnality and femininity.[17] Boccaccio's account of the plague's East-to-West trajectory is thus gendered on a symbolic level. By emphasizing the maleness of the disease's origin and the femaleness of its destination, Boccaccio simultaneously identifies men with the source of humanity's downfall and distances women from it. This notion is especially radical given its contextualization within the Fall. The movement away from an easterly geographical point recalls the expulsion of Eden, "the garden in the East" (Gn 2:8). The path from spirituality (East) to carnality (West) also parallels a familiar shift from communion with to separation from the divine, from innocence to guilt, from immortality to death: in other words, a Fall. Boccaccio's repeated association of men with the plague's origins suggest that this is a Fall of Man—experienced by all humanity, but brought about by the actions of Adam's descendants.

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[12] In fact, the only other instance of the adjective *fruttifera* in the *Decameron* refers to the "fruitful trees" (albori fruttiferi; 6.*Concl.*22) in the Valley of Women (Valle delle Donne). This setting for the storytelling beginning on Day Seven is both itself a type of Eden and an arena of power grappling between the sexes, symbolized both by the interactions between the female and male storytellers and by the tales that they tell. See Asaro, "An Inside View," 227-233 and Filosa, "*Decameron* 7."

[13] On the other hand, Eve herself could be interpreted as the only being born of a man whose conception did not include the participation of a human female. DeVun has pointed out, "According to Genesis, Adam's body contained within it the rib that formed Eve; for some [ancient and medieval] readers, that meant that Adam's maleness was inherently joined with femaleness" (*The Shape of Sex*, 16). However, DeVun notes that by the late middle ages, androgyny—generally conflated with hermaphrodism—had taken on negative connotations, and interpretations of Genesis insisted on sexual difference (18). Boccaccio's allusions to fecundity and gestation in the *Decameron* are thus likely limited to females, and specifically Eve and Mary, the archetypal bearers of human life in Christian scripture.

[14] See also Mazzotta, *The World at Play*, 53 and Gittes, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, 148.

[15] Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 14-15.

[16] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 5.

[17] See Coon, "Somatic Styles," 467-468.

Boccaccio, however, does not have to rely on systems of gendered symbolism to showcase the analogies between men and deadliness, for these analogies manifest on the literal-historical plane as well. Naturally, Boccaccio had no knowledge of the complex, multi-organism dance between the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* and its various hosts (fleas, rats, and human beings) that had produced the bubonic plague pandemic. He was aware, however, of the contagiousness of the disease. When we read Boccaccio's description of the plague's unrestrained movement from East to West, we are simultaneously witness to the journey of the rampant, exclusively male enterprises that made such transmission possible. As Vittore Branca notes, "some years before in the East" indicates the year 1346, when plague-carrying ships from Syria landed in Sicily, from which point the disease spread rapidly throughout Italy and beyond.[18] In the previous decade, the disease had spread along trade routes in Asia, arriving finally in the Genoese-controlled city of Kaffa. In 1346, Kahn Jani Beg, backed by Venetian troops (the commercial competitors of the Genoese) attacked the city. After most of his army succumbed to the plague, the kahn catapulted the diseased bodies over the city walls, where infection spread easily in the crowded and unsanitary urban environment.[19] The plague was thus brought to Italy—and to the rest of Europe, as well as north Africa—by male bodies, as a consequence of their engagement in the distinctly male activities of trade, warfare, and urbanization. Although I acknowledge that a finessed understanding of the plague's causes and dissemination was not accessible to fourteenth-century humans, it does not seem impossible that Boccaccio, an acute observer of human behavior with a special interest in mercantile activity, intuited that men's aggressive pursuit of economic and political power was also the principal means of the plague's spread. After all, he describes masses of cadavers in common graves as being "stowed layer upon layer like merchandise in ships" (come si mettono le mercatantie nelle navi a suolo a suolo; 1.*Intro*.42).[20] Such imagery suggests the author's recognition that, along with material goods, death itself found passage in such vessels' hulls.

Even the efforts to mitigate the pandemic point to its being a consequence of male actions. As noted earlier, Boccaccio suggests that the plague is spread by men's activities. He also, however, proposes two possible causes for the plague, both supernatural: "heavenly bodies" (corpi superiori) or "God in his righteous anger" (giusta ira di Dio; 1.*Intro*.8).[21] However, the inherent contradiction in these "mutually exclusive alternatives," as Mazzotta describes them, suggests that Boccaccio does not univocally subscribe to the notion of the plague as a product of either cosmic or divine influence.[22] In fact, another layer of contradiction is the contrast between Boccaccio's (as I read it, ironic) hypothesizing about the disease's supernatural origins and his immediate, unambiguous enumeration of human—and specifically male—activities meant to contain it. We witness the implementation of various municipal measures, including sanitation efforts, attempts to self-quarantine, and public health education: "Vast quantities of refuse were removed from the city by officials charged with this function, the sick were not allowed inside the walls, and numerous instructions were disseminated for the preservation of health" (fu da molte immondizie purgata la città da oficiali sopra ciò ordinati e vietato l'entrarvi dentro a ciascuno infermo e molti consigli dati a conservazion della sanità; 1.*Intro*.9).[23] Granted, these phrases describe efforts to mitigate the disease, and they may merely emphasize the futility of human endeavors in the face of celestial omnipotence (whether of heavenly bodies or God). The same activities, however, also subtly point to the disease's dissemination, in which men play a prominent role. Waste is associated with urbanization, while the denial of access to the city evokes the urban space (and the male-constructed gates around it), along with the decidedly male notions of territory and even citizenship. "Instructions" (consigli) in fourteenth-century Florence—that is, public advice—would have been given, it may be assumed, by men. All of these efforts are organized at the direction of "officials" (oficiali), who are, of course, male. Thus, although Boccaccio's initial hypothesizing presents human beings (both men and women) as being either victims of indifferent cosmic forces or deserving recipients of divine punishment, in the details that follow, the author-narrator enumerates ways in which men are disproportionately responsible for spreading the disease.

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[18] Branca, *Tutte le Opere*, 982 n. 4.

[19] Stoller, "How the Plague Spread."

[20] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 11.

[21] Boccaccio, 5.

[22] Mazzotta, *The World at Play*, 18-19.

Men's responsibility in the plague's spread is also embedded in the narrator's tallying of fatalities at the conclusion of his account: the death of more than one hundred thousand human beings, attributed to "the cruelty of the heavens—and perhaps, in some measure, that of men, too" (la crudeltà del cielo, e forse in parte quella degli uomini; 1.*Intro*.47).[24] This statement may be interpreted as a revision of Boccaccio's proposal of the pandemic's supernatural origins at the Introduction's beginning. After scattering evidence of it throughout his description of the plague, even the narrator is forced to concede men's culpability—albeit with the ironic qualifier "perhaps" (forse). Moreover, the contrasting terms "human beings" (creature umane; literally "human creatures"), describing the plague's victims; and "men" (uomini), the performers of "cruelty" (crudeltà), implies men's violence against the rest of Creation.

Creation's response to male violence is prosperous independence. This response is illustrated in Boccaccio's description of the plague's devastation in the countryside. In this passage, we see "mankind's betrayal by nature"—to borrow an intriguing phrase from Michael Sherberg—as a response to mankind's betrayal *of* nature.[25] Boccaccio writes that farmers, having become "apathetic" (lascivi), are dismissive of the bounty offered to them by the natural world (non d'aiutare i futuri frutti delle bestie e delle terre; 1.*Intro*.44).[26] They drive out even those animals "who are so loyal to men" (fedelissimi agli uomini; 1.*Intro*.45), essentially leaving them for dead.[27] The response to this betrayal is striking; as their masters are "dying more like animals than human beings" (non come uomini ma quasi come bestie morieno; 1.*Intro*.43), the animals behave "as if they were rational beings" (quasi come razionali; 1.*Intro*.46), to the point of self-sufficiency, no longer having any need of a shepherd (senza alcuno correggimento di pastore si tornavano satolli; 1.*Intro*.46).[28] In fact, they not only survive but thrive, "eat[ing] well" (pasciuti erano bene; 1.*Intro*.46) thanks to another marker of man's failure: the neglect of his crops (le biade abbandonate erano; 1.*Intro*.45).[29] The repetition of masculine terms "men" (uomini) and "shepherd" (pastore) confirms that the animals are responding specifically to the treachery of men. The Genesis lens invites us to read this treachery as Adam's failure in his God-ordained vocation as custodian of animals (Gn 2:15).[30] Because he has abandoned his animals, in a manner of speaking, Adam has Creation's blood on his hands. In retribution, they demonstrate his obsolescence.

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[23] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 5.

[24] Boccaccio, 12.

[25] Sherberg, *A Governance of Friendship*, 32.

[26] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 12.

[27] Boccaccio, 12.

[28] Boccaccio, 12.

[29] Boccaccio, 12.

[30] Boccaccio himself also identifies the rebellion of animals against humans as a consequence of the Fall, in *De casibus virorum illustrium / The Downfall of the Famous* (4-5).

The justification for the animals' rebellion due to abandonment, as well as their prosperity in man's absence, prepares readers to consider these themes in a new setting, the Church of Santa Maria Novella, which is also characterized (at least at the beginning) by the absence of men. The episode with the animals appears shortly before the transition from the first section of the Introduction to Day One, in which Boccaccio describes the plague's devastation, to the second part, in which he depicts the formation of the band of storytellers, the *brigata*. In the church, the future leader of the *brigata*, Pampinea, rallies the other women to escape Florence to save their lives, citing their abandonment by their male relatives as justification. While the ladies' leaving Florence would be immoral in other circumstances, Pampinea demonstrates that the disloyalty of their protectors nullifies their obligation to stay in the city: "[I]f I am right, we will not be abandoning anyone here. Rather, we can truly say that we are the ones who have been abandoned" (Se io ben veggio, noi non abbandoniam persona, anzi ne possiamo con verità dire molto più tosto abbandonate; 1.*Intro*.69).[31] Men, then, have literally abandoned women in the chaos of the plague; but their behavior is also symbolic of Adam's failure to care for Eve, over whom he is master (Gn 3:16). The women's justifiable response to Adam's treachery is to recreate life in the absence of male authority. What is more, they do so with great success: the listener Filomena praises Pampinea's speech as "very well said" (ottimamente detto; 1.*Intro*.74), and the ladies make the logistical arrangements for their departure (avevan già più particularmente tra sé cominciato a trattar del modo; 1.*Intro*.73).[32] Free from the bounds of patriarchal society, the women finally have the opportunity to demonstrate their rationality and self-sufficiency in a way that is reminiscent of the neglected domestic animals.

As in any creation myth, disintegration—provoked in the *Decameron* by the plague, the Fall of Man—gives way to re-creation.[33] As we will see in the next section, this new world is one born of and led by women.

Eve as Author

Intertextual references in Pampinea's speech to the other women of the *brigata* suggest that this speech is essentially a retelling of Genesis from a female perspective (although of course we must recollect that the real author of her words is Boccaccio). She urges her companions to flee the city "lest [they] fall" (non cadessimo; 1.*Intro*.65) into the moral decay of the other Florentines.[34] The biblical reference in the term "fall" is reinforced by the language, appearing shortly afterward, borrowed from Adam's narration of the Fall in *Paradiso* 26.[35] Here Pampinea describes a new world in which the women may safeguard their psychological and physical wellbeing through the pursuit of pleasure, "without ever overstepping the bounds of reason in any way" (senza trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione; 1.*Intro*.65).[36] Giuseppe Mazzotta sees this allusion as foreshadowing the *brigata*'s impending move to the countryside, which he interprets as the "reverse [of] Adam's experience of the fall."[37] I propose another level of reversal in Pampinea's reference to *Paradiso*—that is, the reversal of the telling of the

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[31] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 14.

[32] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 17. For the way Pampinea's speech and the action it prompts highlight the ambiguity of Filomena's comment on men's superiority over women, see Asaro, "An Inside View," 225.

[33] See Gittes, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, 141.

[34] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 16.

[35] See Levenstein, "Out of Bounds," 319.

[36] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 16.

[37] Mazzotta, *The World at Play*, 42.

Fall narrative from a male to a female perspective. Mazzotta correctly identifies the passage in *Paradiso* as *Adam's* experience of the Fall. Adam is the only one of the two parents of humanity to tell his story to the pilgrim, which he does in detail in *Paradiso* 26. Eve, in contrast, is seen but not heard when she finally appears in *Paradiso* 32, kneeling at the Virgin's feet (vv. 4-6). Thus, by inserting language from the *Commedia* into Pampinea's proposal to recreate an earthly paradise without replicating Original Sin, Boccaccio seems to be challenging the tendency of Dante—and the literary tradition he represents—to silence Eve. Instead, he indicates his intention to rewrite Genesis from the female perspective of his character.

In fact, Pampinea's reference to the Fall is embedded in a reconstruction of the Creation narrative. Boccaccio introduces the scene at Santa Maria Novella by specifying that it occurs on a Tuesday morning, an obvious reference to the framework of days in Genesis's creation narrative.[38] He then emphasizes the mythological element of the setting by denying his own authorship, instead attributing the account to an anonymous but presumably authoritative source (sí come io poi da persona degna di fede sentii; 1.*Intro*.49).[39] In addition, although he insists that he has changed the ladies' names to protect them from gossip, by opting "to identify them by means of names that are either wholly, or partially, adapted to their characters" (per nomi alle qualità di ciascuna convenienti o in tutto o in parte intendo di nominarle; 1.*Intro*.51), Boccaccio underlines the allegorical quality of the players in this cosmogonic drama.[40] And just as the Creator speaks life into a world that was previously formless and empty (Gn 1:2), Pampinea's voice emerges *ex nihilo*: the church is empty (non essendovi quasi alcuna altra persona; 1.*Intro*.49) and her speech interrupts an extended silence (dopo alcuno spazio, tacendo l'altre, così Pampinea cominciò a parlare; 1.*Intro*.53).[41] The world that Pampinea describes is clearly a type of Eden, an idyllic landscape rich with flora and fauna, including, naturally, "thousands of kinds of trees" (d'alberi ben mille manière; 1.*Intro*.66).[42] Pampinea is thus cast as a creator deity—a divine gardener not unlike the Lord God in Genesis 2:9. Her words, in fact, have the power not only of description, but of generation, as can be seen in the reaction of her listeners: the ladies prepare for their pilgrimage to the new Eden "as though they were going to get right out of their seats and set off at once" (quasi, quindi levandosi da sedere, a mano a mano dovessero entrare in cammino; 1.*Intro*.73).[43]

Boccaccio's female characters speak a new world into existence, and this new world includes new definitions of the roles of and relationship between women and men. In the formless void of Santa Maria Novella, men are clearly brought into Creation by women to be companions.[44] In the microcosm of humanity represented by the *brigata*, women preexist men. Pampinea proposes a world in which she and the other six—Filomena, Neifile, Fiammetta, Elissa, Lauretta, and Emilia—are primordial women, occupying a young Earth that is still an exclusively female space (their only companions, Pampinea specifies, will be their maidservants).[45] In short, in another reversal of Genesis, Eve resides in Eden before the creation of Adam. However, just as Elohim observes that it is not good for man to be alone (Gn 2:18), Boccaccio envisions a more gender-equitable society that is not a single-gender world. Rather than the voice of God, the voices of Filomena and Elissa express the ladies' need to be accompanied by men.[46] Elissa, in fact, expresses her opinion through a reference to the biblical text: "'It is certainly true,' said Elissa, 'that man is the head of woman, and without a man to guide us, only rarely does anything we do accord us praise'" (Veramente gli uomini sono delle femine capo e senza l'ordine loro rade volte riesce alcuna nostra opera a laudevole fine; 1.*Intro*.76).[47] Scholars have widely recognized the reference to Saint Paul's description of marriage in his letter to the Ephesians. Mazzotta argues that Elissa's comment is, in essence, "a double mockery of the City and the Church."[48] I agree that Filomena's and Elissa's comments are ironic. Once again, Boccaccio uses orthodox Christian ideology to legitimize a radical vision for the new world: one in which men are not "heads" (capi), but companions, possessions, and even creations of women. Indeed, when Elissa follows her biblical reference with the question, "But how are we to get hold of these men?" (ma come possiam noi aver questi uomini?; 1.*Intro*.76), she slyly positions men as the objects of the verb *to have* (aver), of which the ladies are the subject.[49] Moreover, in the moment after Elissa finishes voicing her concern, the men who are to become the male members of the *brigata* enter the church "as if magically," in the words of Marilyn Migiel, "or by *deus ex machina*."[50] Considering our Genesis lens, we may more aptly call this *dea ex machina*, as the men seem to be conjured up by Elissa's speech.

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[38] For the correspondence of the days of the week in the Introduction to Day One and the biblical creation story, see Cervigni, *Rewriting*, 52-53.

[39] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 13.

[40] Boccaccio, 13.

[41] For the Church of Santa Maria as a symbol of the Garden of Eden, see Mazzotta, *The World at Play*, 53.

[42] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 16.

[43] Boccaccio, 17. In "An Inside View," I argue that Boccaccio offers readers a glimpse of this exclusively female Eden—and of an alternate version of the *Decameron*—in the Conclusion to Day 6, when the women visit the *Valle delle Donne* without the men (232). In other words, the text hints that had the women followed Pampinea's advice here in the Introduction to Day One, their destination may well have been this Edenic space designed for (and named after) them. Instead, as I will discuss soon, Filomena and Elissa remind the women of their need for male chaperones, putting their foray into the *Valle* on hold.

[44] Migiel also notes the subservient nature of the role of men, implied in this passage (*Rhetoric*, 25-26).

It could be argued that any possibility of authentic autonomy for the female characters of the *Decameron* is compromised by their status as the fictional representations of a male author. Marilyn Migiel, in fact, warns of the limitations of such perspectives as representations of woman's testimony.[51] At the same time, the lens of Genesis renders Pampinea's description of a new Eden, as well as Elissa's invocation of chaperones, a powerful performance of world-building. While they are ultimately creations of the author, in the universe of the *Decameron*, these women are also authors of Creation. The new Creation that they generate—presumably Boccaccio's vision for a post-pandemic society—centers on a reversal of the gender roles established in Genesis.

Reading Genesis

Boccaccio frames the *Decameron* within a reflection on how women are read and how women read, finding points of contact between his work and scripture. This is especially evident in the Author's Conclusion, in which Boccaccio continues the response to critics that he began in the Introduction to Day Four. Not only does his justification hinge on the value of the female reader's perspective, but he continually draws parallels between the reading of his vernacular short story collection and the proper practices of scriptural interpretation.

Boccaccio's only direct reference to Eve in the *Decameron* appears in the Author's Conclusion, where he advocates for her uncritical reception. In response to the claim that his tales are unsuitable for the virtuous women to whom they are dedicated, Boccaccio responds: "[My] pen should have as much latitude as that which is given to the brush of the painter who, without incurring any, or at least any just, censure […] makes Christ male and Eve female" (Alla mia penna non dee essere meno d'autorità conceduta che sia al pennello del dipintore, il quale senza alcuna riprensione, o almen giusta, […] fa Cristo maschio ed Eva femina; *Concl.*6).[52] Here Boccaccio elevates Eve's naked female form by establishing a parallel between it and the naked male form of Christ.[53] This radical notion of equivalency between the sexes—or at least between the artistic representations of their anatomies—is reinforced by Boccaccio's suggestion that it is already widely accepted (that is, given "latitude […] without […] censure") by hegemonic structures. The powers that be have already accepted Eve in the realm of visual arts, judging the expression of her femaleness and Christ's maleness equally. By establishing a parallel between "the brush of the painter" and his own pen, Boccaccio suggests the illogic, and the hypocrisy, of condemning Eve in the literary realm—particularly when such censure does not equally target a male counterpart (Adam, rather than Christ, in the case of Genesis). Moreover, Boccaccio's emphasis on bodily forms suggests that while a just reading of Eve is one that accepts her humanity,[54] the misreading of Eve is conversely rooted in the denial of her humanity.[55]

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[45] Gittes argues that Pampinea's observation that she and the other women of the *brigata* have been abandoned by their families (1.*Intro*.69) casts each of them as a "remnant" of humanity after universal cataclysm (*Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, 145-146).

[46] See Wallace, *Decameron*, 23.

[47] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 17.

[48] Mazzotta, *The World at Play,* 55.

[49] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 17. See also Asaro, "An Inside View," 226.

[50] Migiel, *Rhetoric*, 23.

[51] Migiel*,* 22.

The so-called 101st tale of the *Decameron*, embedded in the Introduction to Day Four, may be read as a counterexample to the brief *exemplum* on a proper reading of Eve examined above. It serves as a parable of "misogyny as misreading," to borrow an inventive phrase from Millicent Marcus: that is, how women are misread by those who ignore their humanity.[56] Moreover, the tale's allusions to Genesis suggests that Boccaccio is specifically commenting on how Eve has been misread by male interpreters of biblical texts. As in the Author's Conclusion, here Boccaccio responds to critics who have supposedly deemed his attention to ladies improper. He submits in his defense the so-called *novella delle papere*, whose general plot is as follows: Filippo Balducci, after the death of his wife, leaves the city of Florence to raise his son in a mountaintop cave, in isolation and in ignorance of worldly affairs. When the boy comes of age and accompanies his father to the city for the first time, he is fascinated above all else with some women passing by, and he asks his father what they are. The father replies, "Keep your eyes on the ground and don't look at them, for they are evil" (Figliuol mio, bassa gli occhi in terra, non le guatare, ch'elle son mala cosa; 4.*Intro.*21).[57] The son then asks what they are called. His father, not wanting to unnecessarily stoke his son's carnal desires, replies that they are called goslings (Il padre, per non destare nel concupiscibile appetito del giovane alcuno inchinevole disiderio men che utile, non le volle nominare per lo proprio nome, cioè femine, ma disse: 'Elle si chiamano papere'; 4.*Intro.*23).[58] When his son asks to have one, Baluducci replies, "Be quiet. They're evil" (taci: elle son mala cosa; 4.*Intro.*25).[59]

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[52] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 856.

[53] An exaltation of Eve's (and thus the female) body is also found in *De muliberibus claris / Famous Women* (Boccaccio, 14-15).

[54]

[55] Kriesel also notes that the discussion of genitalia in this passage is, in essence, a recognition of humanity (*Boccaccio's Corpus*, 315 n. 94). Interestingly, in his last work, *Il Corbaccio*, Boccaccio vilifies (rather than denies) Eve's humanity as well as links her "tainted corporeality" to her unilateral responsibility for Original Sin (Kriesel, 225). It is notable as well that while Eve's nudity in Eden is symbolic of her prelapsarian innocence, that of the crucified Christ is a reflection of his executioners' intention to his make his death humiliating. The passage in question from the *Decameron*, in fact, contains several allusions to male violence; besides Christ's crucifixion, Boccaccio mentions St. George killing the dragon and Michael killing the serpent. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this observation.

[56] Marcus, "Misogyny as Misreading."

[57] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 303.

[58] Boccaccio, 303.

[59] Boccaccio, 303.

Although Balducci's tale has been generally read as demonstrating the inescapabilty of natural desire, I propose that it is also a parable about reading, and specifically about reading—or more accurately, misreading—women.[60] The son looks to his father for guidance in interpreting the new world he sees. However, the father commands his son to keep his eyes on the ground, symbolically forbidding his son to read for himself, and imposes his own analysis. The inadequacy of Balducci's initial explanation, "they're evil," and thus his failure as a commentator, is underscored by his son's reaction: utter incomprehension, both of the language—"I don't understand what you are saying" (Io non so che voi vi dite)—and of the content—"or why they are evil" (né perché queste sieno mala cosa; 4.*Intro*.28).[61] The son then amends his inquiry, asking not what they are (che cosa quelle fossero; 4.*Intro*.19) but what they are called (O come si chiamano; 4.*Intro*.22).[62] That is, in response to his father's commentary, the son abandons his attempt to comprehend women's nature and focuses instead on lexical semantics. Here again the father fails his son and not only names women inaccurately, but, in defining them as animals, literally dehumanizes them.

Allusions to Genesis in the *novella delle papere* suggest that Boccaccio is commenting on the way Eve is read unjustly due to misogynistic glosses on the biblical text. As the son encounters women after having been raised in the exclusively male space of the cave (the female perspective, due to the death of the wife/mother, is conspicuously absent), he is being born into a new world, reminiscent of Adam's awakening in Eden. This symbolism is reinforced, as David Wallace has noted, by the act of naming objects, which evokes Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2.[63] I propose that the son's initial reaction to the women—delight and fascination—represents that of the uninfluenced reader. The father is also the son's spiritual leader, and thus represents both secular and ecclesiastic patriarchal authority: "He resolved to withdraw from the world in order to devote himself to the service of God, and to do the same thing with this little boy" (del tutto si dispose di non volere più essere al mondo, ma di darsi al servigio di Dio, e il simigliante fare del suo piccol figliuolo; 4.*Intro*.14).[64] When read in the context of the *Decameron* as a rewriting of Genesis, the Balducci allegory suggests that when these powers control the commentaries on biblical texts, women are cast as evil and less then human, as exemplified by Eve's reception in the medieval Christian tradition.[65]

In the Introduction to Day One, Boccaccio illustrates how women have also been victims of misogynistic misreading during the 'second Fall' of the plague, as they are judged by behaviors that are taken out of context. Boccaccio's narrator persona appears to be scandalized by women who, in seeking medical assistance, bare their body to a man even when unchaperoned. He posits this practice as the origin of the licentiousness in women of future generations:

> As a result of the abandonment of the sick by neighbors, friends, and family, and in light of the scarcity of servants, there arose a practice hardly ever heard of before, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how attractive or beautiful of noble, she did not object to having a man as one of her attendants, whether he was young or not. Indeed, if her infirmity made it

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[60] The first interpretation is supported by the Author's own commentary (4.*Intro*.30-31). Regarding the second, I appreciate the astute analysis of Best, who argues that the main theme of this *noveletta* is "not solely sexual; it is textual" ("*La peste e le papere*," 158).

[61] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 303.

[62] Boccaccio, 303.

[63] Wallace, *Decameron*, 50-51.

[64] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 302.

[65] The positioning of the Balducci tale is also significant in this regard: as Ruggiero has shown, the last tale of the previous day, that of Alibech and Rustico, "may also be reread as a wistful rewriting and reversal of the story of the Fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden" (*Love and Sex*, 142). Boccaccio's rereading and rewriting of Genesis is certainly at play within the *novelle* as well; however, in this essay, I will be limiting my analysis to the *Decameron*'s frame.

> necessary, she experienced no more shame in showing him every part of her body than she would have felt with a woman, which was the reason why those women who were cured were perhaps less chaste in the period that followed.[66]

Migiel has shown that the exclusion of any description of the woman's suffering from this passage is in essence a denial of her subjectivity.[67] Boccaccio, as the author, also uses references to time to underscore that the woman's plague experience is marginalized in the patriarchal worldview, represented here by his own narrator persona. Boccaccio bookends this episode with references to the past and the future: the practice was "hardly ever heard of before," and he suggests that it impacts women "in the period that followed." The woman's behavior is thus firmly anchored in the current context of the plague. And yet, while her actions are clearly *re*actions to extraordinary circumstances, the woman is held accountable for actions that occur beyond those circumstances.[68] Pampinea makes a similar distinction when she tries to persuade the other women to break with decorum and leave Florence unaccompanied by men. After giving voice to the horror of women's plague experience (an experience that is absent in the earlier episode), she emphasizes that their "present situation" (sì come noi siamo) allows them to transgress behavior codes while still remaining within "the bounds of reason" (senza trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione; 1.*Intro*.65).[69] As discussed above, Pampinea's biblical allusion here suggests that she is illustrating how the ladies may avoid symbolically replicating the Fall. Now we see that her argument hinges on the appreciation of circumstances. In other words, the women will avoid being judged as "new Eves" only if their actions are read within the context of their environment.

Boccaccio thus highlights the impossible standard of Original Sin, which in turn undermines the logic of Eve's disproportionate guilt. Interpretations of the biblical narrative that primarily blame Eve for the Fall consistently ignore the setting of her temptation. This is an error that Boccaccio seems to acknowledge in the Author's Conclusion, as he defends his stories against those who would deem them inappropriate:

> Moreover, it is perfectly clear that these stories were not told in a church, about whose affairs we should speak with the greatest reverence both in our hearts and in our words, although one can find many things in its sacred stories that go well beyond what you encounter in mine. […] Rather, they were told in gardens, places designed for pleasure, […] and at a time when it was acceptable for even the most virtuous to go about with their beaches on their heads if they though it would preserve their lives.[70]

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[66] Boccaccio, 9. E da questo essere abbandonati gl'infermi da' vicini, da' parenti e dagli amici e avere scarsità di serventi, discorse uno uso quasi davanti mai non udito: che niuna, quantunque leggiadra o bella o gentil donna fosse, infermando non curava d'avere a' suoi servigi uomo, qual che egli si fosse o giovane o altro, e a lui senza alcuna vergogna ogni parte del corpo aprire non altramenti che a una femina avrebbe fatto, solo che la necessità della sua infermità il richiedesse; il che in quelle che ne guerirono fu forse di minore onestà, nel tempo che succedette, cagione (1.*Intro*.29).

[67] See Migiel, *Rhetoric*, 20. Migiel repeatedly uses the word "transgression" in her analysis. Although perhaps not a deliberate reference to Original Sin, her word choice is nonetheless intriguing.

[68] It is nevertheless worth noting that the qualifiers "hardly" (quasi) and "forse" (perhaps) introduce a level of ambiguity in this passage.

[69] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 16.

[70] Boccaccio, 856. Appresso assai ben si può cognoscere queste cose non nella chiesa, delle cui cose e con animi e con vocaboli onestissimi si convien dire, quantunque nelle sue istorie d'altramenti fatte, che le scritte da me, si truovino assai; […] ma ne' giardini, in luogo di sollazzo, […] in tempo nel quale andar con le brache in capo per iscampo di sé era alli più onesti non disdicevole, dette sono (*Concl.*7).

Boccaccio's tales, then, must be interpreted according to their setting: "in gardens, places designed for pleasure."[71] And indeed, in the "sacred stories" mentioned in the passage, Eden is described as a "paradise of pleasure" (paradisum voluptatis; Gn 2:8, 15). Moreover, Eve eats of the forbidden fruit after she deduces that is an instrument of pleasure: both "pleasing to the eye" (pulchrum oculis) and "delightful to behold" (aspectuque delectabile; Gn 3:6). The context of Eve's actions seem to justify them—a concept reinforced by the author's reference, once again, to time. Just as the (in)appropriateness of the *Decameron*'s tales must be judged according to what was permitted "at a time" (that is, in the season of relaxed morality after the plague), the behavior of primordial woman must be interpreted with full consideration of the moment of the Fall. Readings of Genesis that blame Eve for the Fall, Boccaccio insinuates, do not recognize that she partakes of pleasure in a setting designed for this very purpose.

In fact, later in the Conclusion Boccaccio outlines the danger of misreading by establishing, once again, a parallel between his tales and scripture that daringly implies an equivalency in value:

> What books, what words, what letters are holier, worthier, more to be revered than those of the Holy Scriptures? And yet there have been many who, by interpreting them in a perverse manner, have led themselves and others to perdition. All things, in themselves, are good for some purpose, but if they are wrongly used, they will cause a great deal of harm. And I say the same thing about my tales.[72]

Conversely, if the tales are read by the right people and at the right time (se a que' tempi o a quelle persone si leggeranno, per cui e pe' quali state sono raccontate), not only will they avoid harmful misinterpretation, but they will reward readers with "profit and utility" (utilità e frutto; *Concl.*14).[73] The questions, then, are who Boccaccio's ideal readers are, what "the proper time" to read the tales is, and what gifts the *Decameron* has to offer.

Eve as Reader

Boccaccio redefines the roles of his writing, his readers, and himself as author by creating a radical analogy between each of these roles and the protagonists of the Fall narrative in Genesis. He begins the Author's Conclusion by addressing his female readers and asserting that he has accomplished what he had set out to do, as outlined "at the start of the present work" (nel principio della presente opera; *Concl.*1).[74] The "start" to which Boccaccio refers is, naturally, the Proem, in which he specifies that his audience consists of "delicate ladies" (dilicate donne; *Proemio* 13) who, in reading his tales, will "derive not only pleasure from the entertaining material they contain, but useful advice as well, for the stories will teach them how to recognize what they should avoid, and likewise, what they should pursue" (parimente diletto delle sollazzevoli cose in quelle mostrate e utile consiglio potranno pigliare, in quanto potranno cognoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare; *Proemio* 14.)[75]

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[71] The Author's Conclusion as a whole is an extended meditation on proper practices of reading. See Wallace, *Decameron*, 107.

[72] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 857. Quali libri, quali parole, quali lettere son più sante, più degne, più reverende, che quelle della divina Scrittura? E sí sono egli stati assai che, quelle perversamente intendendo, sé e altrui a perdizione hanno tratto. Ciascuna cosa in se medesima è buona a alcuna cosa, e male adoperata può essere nociva di molte; e così dico delle mie novelle (*Concl.*12-13).

[73] Boccaccio, 857.

[74] Boccaccio, 857.

[75] Boccaccio, 3.

As numerous scholars have noted, the most immediate source of Boccaccio's promise of pleasure and utility is Horace's definition of art as "sweet and useful" (dulce et utile).[76] While the influence of Horace is evident, I propose another source for this passage, heretofore (to my knowledge) unrecognized in Boccaccio studies, which seems justified by the many allusions to Genesis in the Decameron's frame: Boccaccio's promise of delight (diletto) and knowledge (cognoscere) also references Eve's partaking of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil after she observes that it is a delight to the eyes and desirable for gaining wisdom (Gn 3:6).[77] In fact, when we return to the rewards awaiting those who read rightly, as outlined in the Author's Conclusion, we see that the "useful advice" (utile consiglio) and "pleasure" (diletto) of the Proem have been transformed, respectively, into utility (utilità) and profit (frutto; *Concl.*14). Although the primary connotation of *frutto* in this case is "profit"—as reflected in Wayne Rebhorn's translation—a careful reader will also consider the alternative meaning of "fruit," as well as the fact that it takes the position occupied in the Proem by "pleasure." Boccaccio thus reinforces the idea of the *Decameron* as a fruit of knowledge and delight, much like the fruit that sits as at the center (literally and figuratively) of Genesis' Fall narrative.[78] It follows that, in offering his stories to women for their pleasure and knowledge, Boccaccio positions the *Decameron* itself as the forbidden fruit; himself, the author, as the snake; and his readers as Eve.

Boccaccio specifies that his readers are not women in general, but rather those who do not, in Sherberg's words, "subscribe to the patriarchal order."[79] His tales are intended "for those [women] who are in love, whereas for those who are not, they can just make do with their needles, their spindles, and their wool winders" (quelle che amano, per ciò che all'altre è assai l'ago e 'l fuso e l'arcolaio; *Proemio* 13).[80] The second group, as Teodolinda Barolini observes, is composed of women who are content in their subservience to their husbands, while the first group, as Sherberg notes, will, in reading Boccaccio's tales, learn how to deftly circumvent male authority.[81] In the Author's Conclusion, Boccaccio also excludes from his ideal audience those women who unquestioningly follow ecclesiastical hegemony, stating, "As for the lady who is forever saying her rosary or baking cakes and pies for her holy confessor, she can just leave them [the stories] be" (Chi ha a dir paternostri o a fare il migliaccio o la torta al suo divoto, lascile stare; *Concl.*15).[82] Boccaccio's intended readers, then, are women who are open to a unconventional understanding of women's role in society, one that will emerge from the reading of unorthodox texts (the tales of the *Decameron* itself). Moreover, the subversion of ecclesiastical authority suggests that this reading also involves an unorthodox interpretation of canonical—and more specifically, biblical—texts, and the status of women that these texts have historically defined.

Boccaccio offers delight and knowledge to these women readers for a purpose: "to some extent, to provide a remedy for the sins of Fortune, who has been more niggardly in providing support where there is less strength, as we see in the case of our delicate ladies (in parte per me s'amendi il peccato della fortuna, la quale dove meno era di forza, sì come noi nelle dilicate donne veggiamo, quivi più avara fu di sostegno; *Proemio* 13.)[83] There are two pairs of opposing terms describing the works of Fortune, each reflecting both advantage and disadvantage: "less"/"strength" (meno/forza) and "niggardly"/"support" (avara/sostegno). Together these terms recall Fortune's cyclical nature, understood by Boccaccio as a constant alternation of magnanimity and miserliness. Sherberg has shown that Boccaccio's notion of the wheel of fortune corresponds to the wheel that appears in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. In the *Decameron*, the wheel is gendered and emerges "as a reflection of social conventions: men sit at the top, women at the bottom."[84] The perpetual disadvantage at which women find themselves, however, signals a departure from Fortune's *modus operandi*, both as described by Boethius and as generally accepted in the medieval European imagination. The ever-changing nature of Fortune, as Simone Marchesi has noted, was ironically among the only stable elements of life in the medieval worldview.[85] By gendering her wheel, Boccaccio makes it his mission to make amends for the sin of Fortune simultaneously an endeavor to help women "sit at the top."

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[76] "Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci" (Horace, *Ars Poetica* v. 343). Hollander ("«Utilità» in Boccaccio's «Decameron»") and Isana ("Redefining *Dulce et utile*") both acknowledge *Ars Poetica* as Boccaccio's principal source but also examine how he expands upon the classical model.

[77] See also Gn 2:9, where all trees in Eden are described in this way.

[78] The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil sits "at the center of Eden" (in medio paradisi; Gn 2:9). In its other twelve instances in the *Decameron*, *frutto* connotes profit (8.9.13) as well as general consequences (1.8.3; 3.5.28; 10.10.61), love or sex (3.6.3; 9.2.5; 10.6.36; 10.7.46, 47), and even wisdom (8.2.5; 9.9.16). None of these refer to literal fruit. The same is not true, however, of the plural form *frutti*: of the seven appearances of the word in the *Decameron*, five refer to actual fruit (3.*Intro.*8; 10.5.20, 11, 12; 10.6.21). In the first of these cases, the fruit appears in the literal center of the Edenic garden of Day Three.

[79] Sherberg, *A Governance of Friendship*, 21.

[80] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 3.

[81] Barolini "L*e parole son femmine*," 443 n. 9; Sherberg, *A Governance of Friendship*, 21-22.

[82] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 857.

Of course, Boccaccio's choice of the term "sin" (peccato) to describe Fortune's offense against women—rather than another term devoid of religious connotations—underlines the correlation between this sin and the Sin; that is, Original Sin. In fact, in a syncretic invocation of Christian theology and Greco-Roman tradition, Boccaccio suggests in his *De casibus virorum illustrium / The Downfall of the Famous* that these sins are one and the same.[86] By reenacting the circumstances leading up to the Fall through his parallel "triangles of players," Boccaccio implicitly resets the timeline of human history to a moment prior to both Original Sin and the sin of Fortune. For Boccaccio's women readers, the prelapsarian context represents a restoration to their primal state, in which they were both companions (rather than subordinates) to men and interpreters of the world around them. Here, Eve is "companion of the man and immortal mistress of nature" (immortalem et rerum dominam atque [...] viri sociam)—as Boccaccio himself describes her in *De mulieribus claris / Famous Women*[87]—before, as a consequence of the Fall, man's promotion to "master" (dominabitur; Gn 3:16) and woman's demotion, so to speak, to the "delicate" (dilicati) and "needy" (bisognosi) creatures who appear throughout the Proem. Moreover, Eve in the Fall narrative is essentially a reader, as Claude Calame has observed in his analysis of Genesis 3: "The Woman is sensitive to the qualities of the tree. She is a reader."[88] Boccaccio implies that the time has come for women to take their rightful place as readers, and in doing so, they will overcome their confinement to the bottom of Fortune's wheel. Indeed, he concludes his collection with a confirmation of woman's autonomy as an interpreter of the written word: "And now I leave it up to every lady to say and think whatever she wishes" (E lasciando omai a ciascheduna e dire e credere come le pare; *Concl.*29).[89]

The *Decameron*, however, does not end here. Before he "bring[s] these remarks to an end" (por fine alle parole) as promised, Boccaccio appeals once more to his women readers, asking to be remembered by any who have benefitted from his stories (*Concl.*29).[90] The last line of the *Decameron* is a reminder of his book's (and, it follows, his own) role as "go-between" (galeotto).[91] Our exploration of echoes of Genesis in the *Decameron*'s frame story suggests that this figure is analogous to the original go-between: a *galeotto* between humanity and divinity, between immortality and death, between blissful ignorance and forbidden knowledge. This is none other than the *Inimico suadente homini* himself: and if Eve is essentially a reader, the serpent of Genesis is essentially a storyteller.[92] With his usual irony, Boccaccio slyly suggests that the serpent is an Enemy of Man in more ways than one—here he emerges as an Ally of Woman. And since woman has been heretofore excluded from reading her origin story, her ally will facilitate her interpretation of a new Genesis. This is a partnership from an unexpected place, and Boccaccio's vision for the world after the plague is certainly full of surprises. Through the *Decameron*, Boccaccio equips women to be interpreters of humanity's new origin story as well as determiners of their own role within the world that this story represents. He thus simultaneously elevates his women readers and vernacular literature—the "one hundred stories, or fables, or parables, or histories, or whatever you wish to call them" (cento novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie che dire le vogliamo; *Proemio* 13) that he dedicates to them—empowering the first by granting them access to the practice of exegesis, and the second by promoting them to the status of sacred scripture.[93]

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[83] Boccaccio, 3.

[84] Sherberg, "The *Laudevoli Consolazioni*," 131.

[85] Marchesi, "Boccaccio on Fortune," 247-248. Intriguingly, Marchesi bases his argument upon a work of Boccaccio dedicated to the downfall of men; that is, *De casibus virorum illustrium.*

[86] Boccaccio, *The Downfall of the Famous*, 1.

[87] Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 15.

[88] Calame, "The Creation of Eve."

[89] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 859.

[90] Boccaccio, 859.

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[91] Armstrong et al. note that by presenting his book (and thus himself) as a *galeotto*, Boccaccio also reminds readers of his function as a "go-between" of diverse literary traditions (4). And indeed, here we see how Boccaccio's use of a courtly term may be interpreted as a re-imagining of a Judeo-Christian figure, the serpent of Genesis.

[92] This is how the snake is described in the Introduction to *De casibus virorum illustrum / The Downfall of the Famous*. See also Tavard's description of the serpent of Genesis (*Woman in Christian Tradition*, 13).

[93] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 3.

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