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Giovanni Boccaccio's

The Decameron



*Translated by Mark Musa & Peter Bondanella
With an Introduction by Thomas G. Bergin*

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A SIGNET CLASSIC

AL LETTORE MALEVOLO

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Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,
Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classic, an imprint of New American Library, a division
of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Previously published in a Mentor edition.

First Signet Classic Printing, December 2002
10 9 8

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REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

The Library of Congress has catalogued the Mentor edition of this title as
follows: 82-81667

Printed in the United States of America

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Giovanni Boccaccio was born in Florence, Italy, in 1313, and he died there in 1375. His life thus coincided with the flowering of the early Renaissance and indeed his closest friend was Petrarch, the other towering literary figure of the period. During his lifetime, Boccaccio was a diplomat, businessman, and international traveler, as well as the creator of numerous works of prose and poetry. Of his achievements, *The Decameron*, completed sometime between 1350 and 1352, remains his lasting contribution—immensely popular from its original appearance to the present day—to world literature.

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Introduction: Presenting Giovanni Boccaccio

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO was born in 1313, the illegitimate son of an Italian merchant known as Boccaccino di Chelo, originally of Certaldo but living in Florence, and a woman as yet unidentified. The date is certified by a passage in a letter of Petrarch in which he reveals that he is nine years older than his disciple. Since it is known that Petrarch was born on July 30, 1304, it is tempting to put Boccaccio's birthdate at the same time nine years later; however, Petrarch's wording does not suggest any such precision. In the *Vision of Love* Boccaccio refers gratefully to his father's acknowledgment of paternity, but we have no firm evidence of any kind with regard to the place of birth or the identity of his mother. Boccaccino had frequent occasion to visit Paris on his business affairs, and Boccaccio in certain veiled "autobiographical" allusions in his early romances stated that he was born in Paris, the child of a Frenchwoman (in one case he speaks of her as of high degree). These allusions are full of inconsistencies and therefore suspect; the view of contemporary scholars is that the French mother is made of dream-stuff, shaped by the young storyteller to lend a romantic color to his early years; it is now generally believed that the woman or girl who gave birth to Boccaccino's love child was probably from Florence, perhaps from Certaldo, and that the historical accouchement took place in one of those centers—if not strictly on the banks of the Arno, yet a long way from the shores of the Seine.

Though born out of wedlock, Giovanni was not an unwelcome child. His father not only legitimized him (apparently some time before 1320) but took him into his house (in due course providing him with a step-mother and a half brother) and gave him a good practical education. In his old age Boccaccio complained of the utilitarian nature of his early studies, regretting that he had not had better preparation for the practice of poetry (that is, study of rhetoric and the classical au-

thors), but he might well have been grateful for the groundwork in "arismetica" which made it worth Boccaccio's while to take the lad with him when, in 1327, he left Florence and set up his office, under the aegis of the great banking house of the Bardi, in Naples, the busy and colorful capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Although banking was not to the taste of the youth (he later persuaded his father to let him enroll in the University of Naples as a student of canon law), it is clear that the Neapolitan years were both exciting and fruitful for the observant and responsive Boccaccio; they were probably the happiest years of his life. Naples was a truly cosmopolitan center in the time of the good king Robert, with sailors, merchants, and diplomats streaming in from all corners of the earth. It was a Court city too, thronging with an affluent nobility which delighted in pageantry, parades, and parties. Boccaccio's function in the service of his bank was, it would seem, of sufficient dignity to give him entrée to aristocratic circles; he had a useful mentor in the person of his fellow Florentine Niccolò d'Acciaiuoli, only slightly older than Boccaccio himself and destined, through his own talents and the benevolence of Catherine de Courtenay, Queen of Jerusalem and sister-in-law to King Robert, to play a major role in the affairs of the Kingdom.

Such connections no doubt gave our embryonic poet the run of the Royal Library, already famous for the richness of its holdings in both classical and vernacular letters. In the library he came to know and venerate such scholars as Paolo da Perugia and Andalò del Negro. In the university he studied at the feet of Dante's friend Cino da Pistoia, a contact that must have reinforced Boccaccio's all but congenital devotion to the author of the *Comedy*. In like manner his acquaintance with the Augustinian friend of Petrarch, Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, probably confirmed, if it did not initially inspire, the admiration Boccaccio had for the sage of Vaucluse. Among other figures significant for the young poet's future trajectory, the Calabrian monk Barlaam, "learned in things Greek," must be mentioned. He was responsible for Boccaccio's enthusiasm for Greek letters, which later led him to learn the lan-

guage and may explain the fanciful titles of such works as the *Filocolo* and the *Filostrato*.

It was in Naples, too, probably at about the time he enrolled in the university, that Boccaccio encountered the great love of his life. Even as on Good Friday of 1327 the vision of Laura had first captivated Petrarch, so in suspiciously similar fashion on Easter Saturday (the year is uncertain—perhaps as early as 1331 or as late as 1336) the sight of the glamorous Fiammetta (in the Church of San Lorenzo) won forever the heart of young Giovanni. So he tells us, very circumstantially, in the first book of his first major work, the *Filocolo*. However, on close scrutiny, “Fiammetta” seems to be made of the same synthetic substance as the poet’s French mother. Boccaccio would have her the illegitimate daughter of Robert of Naples and a lady of the house of Aquino—impressive connections indeed, but history seems to know nothing of her. The seductive princess is in all likelihood yet another creation of Boccaccio’s mood, no more “real” than Criseida, which is not to say that the young man’s heart may not have been stirred and his pen inspired by the sight of a “real live girl” (and not impossibly seen in San Lorenzo on an Easter Saturday), later given appropriate fictional adornment by her devoted swain. Certainly, real or synthetic, “Fiammetta” will linger long in Boccaccio’s heart. She is the *primum mobile* of the *Filocolo*, and she reappears in successive works of the canon: the *Teseida*, the *Vision of Love*, the *Comedy of the Florentine Nymphs*. She tells her own sad tale in the *Elegy of Madonna Fiammetta*; she is one of the storytellers in *The Decameron*, and the poet will give her permanent residence in the third heaven in the last sonnet he ever wrote.

Boccaccio’s first work, aside from a few sonnets of Petrarchan-Dantean inspiration, was an allegorical narrative in *terza rima* called *Diana’s Hunt*. Both in outline and in many details of the work, the inspiration of Dante is clearly visible; the conclusion, however, gives us a moral essentially glorifying sensual love. The *Hunt* was soon followed by the Fiammetta-inspired *Filocolo* to which we have alluded; it is a long, sometimes tedious account of the travails of the lovers Florio and Bian-

cofiore. With all its faults the *Filocolo* is a landmark in European letters: Thomas C. Chubb rightly called it "our first prose romance." The *Filostrato*, a poem with considerable resonance in literary annals, exploited in turn by Chaucer and Shakespeare, tells (in *ottava rima*) of the betrayal of the Trojan prince Troilus by the faithless Criseida. Since Fiammetta is not specifically mentioned in this work, some critics suspect that it may have preceded the *Filocolo*. The chronology of Boccaccio's earlier works is very uncertain; all we can say for sure is that all of the aforementioned items were begun and probably finished between 1331 and 1341, the year the poet left Naples. It seems likely too that the *Teseida* (intended to be an epic but turning out to be a chivalrous romance against a classical backdrop), written in *ottava rima*, was likewise begun in Naples but probably finished after the author's return to Tuscany—a return occasioned in all probability by his father's business reverses. (These were not happy times for Florentine bankers.) Sometime before the end of 1341 Boccaccio left Naples, accompanied, no doubt reluctantly, by his son.

Readjustment to life in Florence was difficult, both psychologically and on the practical level; Boccaccio seems to have lived at times on the brink of poverty. He never did solve, as Petrarch did so gracefully, the economic problem inherent in the pursuit of a literary career in the days before Gutenberg. He never attracted such generous patrons as the Colonna or the Visconti; for that matter he never had the support of such noble benefactors as Can Grande della Scala or Guido da Polenta, who provided so solicitously for Dante. He enjoyed briefly, in the mid-forties, the patronage of the Lords of Forlì and Ravenna, but neither connection endured. Gradually, as we shall see, the Commune of Florence came to recognize his talents and entrusted him with various commissions; yet even so, to the end of his life financial security eluded him.

The return to Tuscany was not without its effect on Boccaccio's Muse. After the *Teseida* the poet turned from chivalrous romance (material suited to an aristocratic court but not to the intellectual currents of Floren-

tine society) to the kind of didactic allegory which Dante (and other poets) had brought into the Tuscan tradition. The first of these, *The Comedy of the Florentine Nymphs*, is an elaborate allegory of the Virtues, narrated, like Dante's *Vita nuova*, in prose with periodic interpolations of verse passages. More complicated is the somewhat enigmatic *Vision of Love*, also told in *terza rima*, with numerous recognizable links to Dante's poem but with an ambiguous and disconcerting conclusion that makes the work a subversive parody of the *Comedy*. More appealing to readers of today are the two other works composed in the late forties: the prose first-person *Elegy* of Fiammetta, a very "modern" account of a hopeless obsession, and the tender and touching *Nymph of Fiesole*, an idyll in *ottava rima* of true classical artistry.

The year 1348, in which Boccaccio attained to that midpoint of life's journey of which Dante speaks, was also the year the Black Death came to Florence, and it is probable that Boccaccio witnessed its ravages at first-hand. It carried off about a third of the city's inhabitants, including Boccaccio's stepmother. The death of his father, less than a year later, left him in charge of his half brother; Boccaccio discharged this responsibility faithfully and even solicitously. The plague is exploited as the background for *The Decameron*; one may see in it as well a kind of aesthetic-moral basis for the action and color of the world portrayed in that masterpiece.

Critics believe that the writing of *The Decameron* was begun in 1348 and that the work was finished perhaps as early as 1350 and no later than 1352. It is tempting to think of it as being finished, at least in a first draft, before the memorable first meeting with Petrarch in 1350—more crucial for the direction of Boccaccio's intellectual life than the encounter with Fiammetta in Naples. Taking advantage of Petrarch's visit to Rome for the jubilee celebration of 1350, Boccaccio persuaded his hero to stop off at Florence on the way. The meeting was a joyous one for both writers. It was the beginning of a firm and enduring friendship, characterized by unflagging admiration on Boccaccio's part and sincere if occasionally somewhat patronizing affection on the part of the older scholar. For the years that remained to them,

both men would cultivate this friendship, corresponding frequently, meeting as often as the hazardous circumstances of their times permitted.

For better or for worse the meeting with Petrarch marked a change in Boccaccio's literary development. He had always admired the sage of Vaucluse not merely for the serene and Christian tenor of his life but as a quintessential poet. By poetry he did not so much mean the vernacular sonnets for Laura as the great Latin epic on which Petrarch was engaged and which, later, Boccaccio claimed he had seen. For both men of letters "poetry" was not mere rhyme-making, nor even imaginative creation, but rather moral indoctrination, under a "veil" of fiction, set forth with cunning rhetoric and saturated with classical erudition. What Boccaccio admired in his older friend was really the scholar and the humanist. In dutiful emulation he would henceforth abandon his creative romances (and with them the use of the vernacular) and turn to Latin compilations such as *The Fates of Illustrious Men* and *Concerning Famous Women* (overtly following Petrarch's example), or the pseudo-pastoral eclogues that make up the *Bucolicum Carmen* (modeled after those of the master), or the great encyclopedia of the *Genealogies of the Pagan Gods*. After *The Decameron*, with the exception of the atrabilious and one might say *ad hoc* item of the *Corbaccio*, we have no truly creative work from Boccaccio's pen, and save for that same *Corbaccio* and the works of Dante criticism, no further exercise in the vernacular. The poet yields to the scholar, erudition supplants fancy. A new piousness comes to replace the carefree spirit of youthful days; at some time in the late fifties Boccaccio took orders and his account of his terrified response to the dire warnings of a holy man who in 1362 bade him give up letters and think only of things eternal is evidence of his new spiritual orientation. Fortunately Petrarch reassured his disciple and persuaded him not to abandon his studies.

In the two decades that followed the meeting with Petrarch, Boccaccio's time was divided between service to the Commune of Florence and intense literary or scholarly activity. During these years he served his city as ambassador on a number of important missions—to

Ludwig of Bavaria in the Trentino (1351), to the Papal Court at Avignon (in 1354 and 1365), and to Pope Urban V, temporarily resident in Rome (1366). He also served at various times on the *condotta*, a department of the commune charged with disbursement of expenses for military operations.

In addition to his official missions he found time for a number of journeys for his own purposes. He visited Petrarch in Milan (1359), in Venice (1363), and in Padua (1367). He took three trips to Naples: in 1355 (it is not certain that he actually reached the city, but he spent a profitable time in the library of the abbey of Montecassino, guest of his school friend Zanobi da Strada), again in 1362, and finally in 1370. The visit to Petrarch in 1359 is of some significance in cultural history; it was on that occasion that Boccaccio made the acquaintance of the "wild man" Leontius Pilatus, from whom both he and Petrarch hoped to learn Greek. Boccaccio did—and furthermore persuaded the Commune of Florence to appoint Leontius to the chair of Greek in the university, the first such appointment since classical days and a milestone in the history of humanism. The journey to Naples in 1362 is noteworthy too: Boccaccio went on the invitation of Niccolò Acciaiuoli, Grand Seneschal of the Realm; he hoped to be named court "literatus," enjoying prestige and subsidies similar to those the Visconti had bestowed on Petrarch. Something went wrong: Acciaiuoli treated his guest shabbily and Boccaccio came back in a huff, permanently estranged from the friend of his youth. On his final visit to the city (1370) Boccaccio was well received; Queen Joan invited him to take up residence at the court, but the invitation came too late; the old scholar, ill and weary, chose to spend his last days in his native Certaldo.

Throughout these busy years the service of letters was not neglected. Most critics assign the date of 1355 to the composition of Boccaccio's last creative work, the misogynistic *Corbaccio*. In the fifties he drafted early versions of the *Life of Dante* (the definitive one is probably of 1363) and toiled manfully on the Latin works. *The Fates of Illustrious Men* was written at some time between 1355 and 1360; *Concerning Famous Women* was

finished in 1361; compilation of the *Genealogies* went on probably from 1350 to 1363, followed with revisions up to the scholar's last years. The *Bucolicum Carmen* was released with a covering letter in 1372. The *Decameron* was recopied and retouched in 1372 (in spite of the author's public repudiation of the work).

In the spring of 1371 Boccaccio returned from Naples to Certaldo. During the summer of 1372 he suffered a severe illness; nevertheless, in the fall of that year he began his series of public lectures on Dante's *Comedy* under the sponsorship of the Commune of Florence. The sessions continued until the spring of 1374, a year of great sadness for Boccaccio since that summer marked the death of his revered "preceptor" and dearest friend. A letter to Petrarch's son-in-law, dated November 3, 1374, is moving evidence of the depth of the writer's grief. Boccaccio's finest sonnet, "Now art thou risen, cherished lord of mine," envisions Laura and her lover united at last in the third heaven of Paradise. The disciple did not linger long after his master's departure; Boccaccio died on December 21, 1375.

The importance of Giovanni Boccaccio's contributions to the world of letters cannot be overestimated. The so-called "minor works" in the vernacular were almost without exception original and seminal; without the pioneering examples of such works as the *Filocolo*, the *Filostrato*, the *Teseida*, and *The Comedy of the Florentine Nymphs*, the shape of Italian literature (which had a powerful influence on other national literatures) would have been different; it is hard to think what course it might have taken. The learned Latin studies, particularly the *Genealogies*, were invaluable in the development and direction of the new humanism which would give shape and substance to the High Renaissance. Critics today, however, while readily recognizing the historical importance of both the early romances and the erudite *compendia*, exalt Boccaccio primarily as the author of *The Decameron*, a work which is neither romance nor scholarship but a joyous naturalistic creation, eloquent of its time and for all times. Appreciation of the masterpiece was late in coming, though its popularity was evidenced

even in its own day by the numerous imitations that followed its dissemination. Yet for centuries literary historians dismissed *The Decameron* with patronizing comment on its frivolous nature and reproach for the scandalous tone of some of the tales. At long last, in the tolerant climate of the nineteenth century, the Italian critic Francesco De Sanctis recognized *The Decameron* for what it truly is: in historical terms a token of the emancipation of western culture from the dogmatic rigidities of the Middle Ages; a proclamation of man's dignity and worth, *qua* man; and *sub specie aeternitatis*, a great Human Comedy, of scope and depth worthy to stand beside the *Divine Comedy* of Boccaccio's idol. Studies of *The Decameron* since the time of De Sanctis have reinforced his conclusions and sharpened our awareness of the magnitude of Boccaccio's achievement.

The comparison with the *Divine Comedy* is helpful. Both Dante and Boccaccio worked on large canvases; *The Decameron* portrays a world of vast dimensions; if we do not go to the depths of Hell or to the lofty Empyrean we yet survey all the known world from the Orient to the British Isles.

The cast of characters includes, to quote E. H. Wilkins, "kings, princes, princesses, ministers of state, knights, squires, abbots, abbesses, monks, nuns, priests, soldiers, doctors, lawyers, philosophers, pedants, students, painters, bankers, wine merchants, innkeepers, millers, bakers, coopers, usurers, troubadours, minstrels, peasants, servants, simpletons, pilgrims, misers, spendthrifts, sharpers, bullies, thieves, pirates, parasites, gluttons, drunkards, gamblers, police—and lovers of all sorts and kinds." If a work of relatively small compass (*The Decameron* is not an out-size book) can contain such a variety of human specimens, it is because Boccaccio knows the great secret of tactical selectivity. He does not elaborate on incidentals such as background; he is not one to linger on local color or poetic descriptions of town or country. Nor did he spend much time on psychological analysis of his characters. He sets them before us, lets them talk and act; personality is revealed by action: above all the story is the thing. This strategy, I think, makes *The Decameron* the most readable of all recognized masterpieces that

come readily to mind. The better stories—which is to say, the majority—have the irresistible appeal of a thriller; the narrative moves on at a fast pace and carries the reader with it.

If *The Decameron* ushers a new democracy into the world of letters (as Wilkins's catalogue suggests), it is no less notable for its current of almost revolutionary feminism. Neither angel nor temptress (as she had hitherto been compelled to be) the woman of *The Decameron* is as human as the man, no less aware of what she wants (and how to get it) than her male counterpart, ready to speak and act for herself—a *person*, in short, in her own right. In his Preface Boccaccio states that he is telling his stories with an audience of women in mind, particularly those who may be in need of some distraction from the pains of love. There is no good reason not to take him at his word, and it is apparent from the distribution of the storytellers or "frame characters" (seven women and three men) that the fair sex is going to have its say in the course of the house party. A census of the characters in the tales themselves shows, to be sure, that men are in the majority (it is still a man's world) but the female protagonists of many of the better stories collectively make a stronger impact than the male leads. We would not anticipate readers' discoveries in this area; we shall merely suggest that they ponder such case histories as those of Madam Beritola (II, 6), Ghismunda (IV, 2), Lisabetta (IV, 5) and—if they want to hear a true spokeswoman of "women's lib" *avant la lettre*, let them attend to saucy Filippa of Pisa (VI, 7). If there are in the Decameronian republic passive women like Alatiel and silly ones like Elena—well, they are outnumbered by the gullible and ineffectual males among their fellow citizens.

The actors on the Decameronian stage are not concerned much with eternal, transcendent values. In the sense that Dante or Milton can be called "inspirational," Boccaccio assuredly cannot. Yet the savor of his book is wholesome and *au fond* not without its own kind of inspiration. Having no didactic axe to grind—"Boccaccio doesn't want to teach anybody anything," to quote Umberto Bosco—the author reports serenely on what he

sees. His engaging depiction of a world full of pitfalls for a fallible humanity at the mercy of its own fragility and the caprices of fortune, yet withal a world where with good use of one's wits, common decency, and a sense of proportion a good life is quite possible, is somehow bracing and reassuring. Never mind about Heaven; this world, properly appreciated and if necessary manipulated, is not to be scorned. Indeed it can be vastly entertaining. *The Decameron*, to quote Wilkins again, is primarily "a book of laughter"—but neither frivolous nor (in spite of its reputation in more censorious times) bawdy laughter. For centuries readers, highly diverted and sometimes titillated by the inventive vivacity of the stories, have admired *The Decameron*; today, perhaps more than ever, we can appreciate its perceptions and its wise tolerance. *The Decameron* is a very modern book.

The new translation of Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella is remarkably faithful to the original in both letter and spirit. The collaborators are both scholars of Italian literature and experienced translators, at home in the literary idiom of fourteenth-century Italian and therefore well equipped to deal with the vocabulary and, what is more challenging, the stylistic nuances of Boccaccio's masterpiece. Their experience and their perceptive sensitivity enable them to present the reader with an English version which is smooth, graceful, and eminently readable. The manner, no less than the matter, of Boccaccio's swift-paced and buoyant narrative is very effectively conveyed. No doubt all great books are best read in the original, but the reader of this translation may be assured that he is, though in another tongue, truly reading *The Decameron*.

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Translators' Preface

PERHAPS most important to the translation of a medieval classic is the problem of proper diction. This involves several problems: first, to render into English approximately the same thing Boccaccio means to say in Italian (something which is by no means always crystal clear); second and even more important, to retain in the translation those qualities of the original text which made the work what it was in the fourteenth century. Any conscious attempt to introduce into Boccaccio's prose an archaic or anachronistic tone is the greatest mistake a translator of this century can make. *The Decameron* is no more like Victorian pseudomedieval English than Dante is like Milton or Virgil. Thous, thees, and hasts will never supply a medieval "flavor" to Boccaccio, because the authentic medieval flavor of *The Decameron* lies somewhere else—in precisely the contemporary and completely fresh tone of its language. This does not imply that a good English translation should lack eloquence or formal precision, but it does require a sensitivity to the many levels of style reflected in Boccaccio's prose.

Boccaccio's modern critics have demonstrated quite clearly the debt of *The Decameron* to the Ciceronian prose models of the rhetoricians. When Boccaccio feels the need for a more patterned or more eloquent level of discourse than is typical of normal conversation, he will turn to these complicated Latinate periods where subordinate clauses abound and a conscious effort is made to exploit the entire range of rhetorical devices for artistic effects. Some translators feel the need to break Boccaccio's lengthy and complicated period into as many as four shorter sentences, thus transforming this unique style into something terser and more conversational. While shorter sentences may be more appealing to the

general reader, we feel that great works of literature have earned the right to make certain demands upon their audience. One of the demands Boccaccio makes upon his reader *and* his translator arises precisely from his sometimes extremely complex sentence structure. But patterned prose and an elevated, solemn diction do not exhaust Boccaccio's range of styles, for his prose contains an infinite variety: colloquial expressions; familiar, conversational passages; puns on words (often obscene); patterns that connote clear or implied social or regional distinctions of speech. For the careful translator of *The Decameron*, such passages are always the most demanding, containing as they often do much of Boccaccio's matchless humor, wordplay, and linguistic innovation. The stories which are the easiest to understand are thus paradoxically the most difficult to translate into English. But the translator must also resist the temptation to tidy up Boccaccio's prose. When loose ends, apparently confusing *non sequiturs*, and puzzling passages are to be found in the original, these must be respected, and rendered in an appropriate manner in the translation, or—if absolutely necessary—explained in a footnote.

Up to this point, we have emphasized the translator's obligation to the author—capturing the essence of his linguistic innovation and retaining what is most peculiar of his personal style—or to his audience, avoiding outmoded archaisms or translator's language which bears no relationship to contemporary American English. But we also have an obligation to the scholarly image of Boccaccio and his *Decameron* as it is reflected in the best of contemporary research. In many instances, scholarship resolves the vexing dilemmas the text poses to the translator and may illuminate his way. But even more crucial than individual points of erudition is the more general image of Boccaccio in today's critical literature: a good contemporary version of *The Decameron* in English must make of Boccaccio's classic work not merely a naughty collection of risqué tales or even only a mercantile epic, for *The Decameron* is an open-ended, multifaceted, highly challenging, and ambivalent book, composed by a master narrator who is in constant control of all the marvelous