

## Article

# How *Novelle* May Have Shaped Visual Imaginations

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**Abstract:** Artists figure fairly frequently in *novelle*, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may have taken more than a passing interest in the genre. Although much scholarly effort has been dedicated to the task of exploring how Horace's adage "*ut pictura poësis*" affected the course of the visual arts during the Italian Renaissance and vast scholarly effort has been assigned to the study of Boccaccio's literary efforts (much more so than the efforts of his successors), relatively little effort has been spent on the dauntingly interdisciplinary task of estimating how the development of prose literary imagination may have affected habits of perception and may also have augmented the project of integrating quotidian observations into pictorial compositions. In contrast to these issues of "realism", the essay also addresses questions of how the literary conventions of *novelle*, although they may have been created in deliberate defiance of current social norms, may eventually have helped to shift those norms. More specifically, the gender norms of the *novelle* offer intriguing precedents for characterizations that we find in the visual arts, from Botticelli to Leonardo to Michelangelo, ones that rarely match what we know of societal expectations of the day. The argument, though necessarily speculative, is addressed as much to the question of how readers and viewers might have had their thinking shaped by their combined aesthetic experiences as by the more traditional question of identifying artists' sources. Did theorizing about style, or simply thinking about what made for vividness or impressiveness, shift readily between the verbal and the visual, and perhaps more easily then than now? Can we create a history of art that seeks evidence from the whole literary record rather than consistently prioritizing poetry and the "poetic"?

**Keywords:** Auerbach; Bandello; Boccaccio; Botticelli; Brunelleschi; Castiglione; Giotto; Leonardo; Michelangelo; realism; gender; love

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It is a feeling thing, to be a painter of things: cause every thing, even an imagined or gone thing or creature or person has essence: paint a rose or a coin or a duck or a brick and you'll feel it as sure as if a coin had a mouth and told you what it was like to be a coin, as if a rose told you first-hand what petals are, their softness and wetness held in a pellicle of colour thinner and more feeling than an eyelid, as if a duck told you about the combined wet and underdry of its feathers, a brick about the rough kiss of its skin. [1]

Renaissance painting has often been conceptualized as a sister art to poetry, often amidst appeals to the authority of Horace, specifically his injunction *ut pictura poësis*.<sup>1</sup> Our task here is to consider whether Renaissance painting ought not also be considered a sibling art to prose. In ancient Greece and Rome, poetry defined nearly the whole extent of literature; during the fourteenth century, by contrast, literary vernacular prose began to flourish. Sometimes prose and poetry developed in

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on this subject is vast, but see, inter alia, [2]. See also this author's entry for "poesia" in the *Grove Dictionary of Art*.

tandem, as was the case in Jacopo Sannazaro's version of vernacular pastoral at the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup> However, in the much earlier *novelle* of Giovanni Boccaccio and his followers, of Franco Sacchetti and then in the fifteenth century of Antonio Manetti (among others), continuing through to Agnolo Firenzuola and the *Heptaméron*, first published in 1558 and routinely attributed to Marguerite de Navarre, the tone and tenor of the author's voice is often distinctly different from that of *canzonieri* and sonnets, distinctly more down to earth—in a word, prosaic. The naturalism of Renaissance painters and the earthiness of the *novelle* might be expected to show some affinity, or even synergy; however, painters were not likely to gain status by association with prose, since vernacular prose was considered a relatively lowly endeavor. As Dante explained it, the poets had greater license than prose authors, and only they could readily employ rhetorical devices.<sup>3</sup> Dante's writing, even his prose writing, is full of imagery; it comes as no surprise that he sometimes drew as a way of musing.<sup>4</sup> More than any other author of his time, arguably, he was visually inclined. When describing the structure of one of his poems, he even refers to the secondary stanza as "like a maidservant."<sup>5</sup> Dante set an example of vivid imagination, which benefited not only Petrarch and his adherents, but also Boccaccio and his. Lorenzo il Magnifico describes Boccaccio as a poet, which he was, though the label is likely meant as an honorific as much as an identification, since Lorenzo goes on to talk about the book called the *Decameron*.<sup>6</sup>

Comedy and its cousin, general irreverence, are as common in the *novelle* as they are scarce in the poetry of the period; allegory is not generally at home in *novelle*; and anti-clericalism is more evident than religiosity. Not only the tone and tenor, but the eye is different: the prose writers are more likely to describe the local details of contemporary life, to set the stage for the reader and to delineate character by helping the reader to visualize clothes, furnishings and quotidian behavior, including interactions with servants, which have many parallels to what we see in the visual arts. Various generally-held presuppositions, anxieties, and resentments are exposed in *novelle* that we would extract with difficulty if at all from other sources, which tended to emphasize the ideal, the orderly and the officially endorsed. For instance, if we read the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*,<sup>7</sup> we get an anodyne perception of lepers quite opposed to that of Masuccio's *Novellino* (ca. 1460). In one of Masuccio's stories, a tragedy that involves murder and threatened rape by the lepers, the narrator addresses the reader with these words: "I picture to myself the fearful image of those lepers standing around the miserable girl, with their eyes bloodshot and brows peeled, their noses eaten away, their cheeks swollen and blotched with different colors, their lips twisted and rotten, their hands filthy, paralytic, and contorted."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the author concludes, "whenever I see a leper or recall this deed, then I always picture before my eyes the two poor youngsters closely embraced in that stall and dead, rolled in filth and stained with their own blood."<sup>9</sup> The reader is meant to be affected by the imagery rather than primarily by the recording of speech. The male protagonist never says a word in direct

<sup>2</sup> Again, the literature is vast, but see, *inter alia*, [3,4].

<sup>3</sup> ([5], p. 49).

<sup>4</sup> ([5], *Vita*, p. 63). Boccaccio is thought by some to have made marginal illustrations in his manuscript of the *Decameron*; see ([6], esp. p. 91). See also ([7], Teil I, Band I, pp. 137–38 and Band II, pp. 113–14), for illustrations to the *Commedia*. Those for the *Decameron* are bust-length portraits. The manuscript was once owned by Pietro Bembo. See also, n. 57, below.

<sup>5</sup> "una stanza quasi come ancilla de l'altre," ([5], p. 33).

<sup>6</sup> "Chi ha letto Boccaccio, uomo dottissimo e facundissimo, facilmente giudicherà singulare e sola al mondo non solamente la invenzione, ma la copia ed eloquenzia sua. E, considerando l'opera sua del *Decameron*, per la diversità della materia ora grave, ora mediocre ed ora bassa, e contenente tutte le perturbazioni che agli uomini possono accadere d'amore ed odio, timore e speranza, tante nuove astuzie ed ingegni, ed avendo ad esprimere tutte le nature e passioni degli uomini che si truovono al mondo; senza controversia giudicherà nessuna lingua meglio che la nostra essere atta ad esprimere," ([8], pp. 135–36). For a later reflection on the distinction between *poesie* and *novelle*, see ([9], p. 124). That the distinction between prose and poetry could be slight, see ([10], p. 25). The bibliography on Boccaccio is of course vast, but see recently [11]. For a broader introduction, see [12]. For an exemplary study of Boccaccio's imagery, see ([13], pp. 269–75). And for the parallel development of the *facetiae*, see [14].

<sup>7</sup> ([15], No. 25, pp. 96–99), admittedly also prose.

<sup>8</sup> ([16], p. 101).

<sup>9</sup> ([16], p. 103).

speech (the girl, Martina, has three occasions to speak); even his death occurs, we are told, before he can utter the word “Alas!” We are meant to visualize him fully in his handsome appearance and honorable behavior and then to contrast that with his sorry end amidst the rapacious lepers.

It is, however, particularly the portrayals of women, of clerics and of the peasantry in *novelle* that may help us to look at their more circumscribed appearances in the visual arts with at least the potential for either a touch of cynicism or sympathy that we might not otherwise muster and that may actually be in tune with the times. Admittedly, the *novelle* can offer only guideposts, not glosses. Still, the tendency to think of Poliziano when looking at Botticelli’s *Primavera* deserves to be balanced by remembering Griselda when one looks at the same painter’s portrait of a woman dressed in brown (Galleria Palatina, Florence, Italy). If an awareness of cultural “thickness” is our goal, it is irresponsible to ignore the *novelle*. As today much of our experience is filtered through our experience of photography, so that when we observe the natural world our sense of framing, for example, tends to be conditioned by the conventions of landscape photography, so readers of *novelle* may have observed society around them in ways that partly reflected the norms of that genre. In other words, it is not sufficient to describe the *novelle* as realistic without acknowledging the porousness of that concept; *novelle* may have both reflected and helped to form not only the dominant social norms but also a range of responses to those norms.

Some of our meatiest anecdotes about artists come from the pages of *novelle*: notable tales about Giotto, Brunelleschi and Leonardo, some of them essential to our understanding of them as artists, others to our grasp of them as personalities. Bandello’s description of Leonardo’s occasionally marching across the town of Milan from his project on the equestrian monument to make a mark or two on the wall in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie and then leave; or alternatively, to paint from dawn to dusk without break; or on another day to spend an hour or two on the scaffolding examining the figures without touching the wall, or going several days without working on it at all; these *ricordi*, inserted as preface to a *novella* (those prefaces functioning as an authentic touch even relative to the realism of the *novelle*, an expression of confidentiality amidst the colloquial flavor of the *novelle* themselves), bring us as close to understanding something about the man and what made him a pivotal figure in the history of art as we are likely to get.<sup>10</sup> If we extend our reach from short stories to dialogues, the evidence is even richer. The Michelangelo who refuses to come to lunch with friends in Rome because he had to go home and contemplate death, as related by Donato Giannotti,<sup>11</sup> puts flesh on the bones of the personality described by Condivi and Vasari in terms of a lasting devotion to the teachings of Savonarola.<sup>12</sup> In Giannotti’s dialogue, we see Michelangelo through the eyes of his contemporaries, as Bandello allows us to see both the world Leonardo saw every day and to share in seeing Leonardo himself in that context. In addition, Michelangelo’s role in this literary dialogue about Dante helps to substantiate the claims in both Vasari and Condivi that Dante and Petrarch were lifelong mainstays of the artist’s intellectual life. Vasari’s very reliance on anecdote may be a distant effect of the tradition of storytelling, oral as well as written, and many times, those anecdotes provide food for the visual imagination. Those of us who are willing to identify the figure of Heraclitus in the *School of Athens* as a crypto-portrait of Michelangelo are likely to recall the description in both biographers of his ascetic ways, including leaving his boots on for so long that when they finally came off, the skin peeled off with them. With that in mind, that poorly-dressed, booted figure next to a block of stone, inserted belatedly into the composition, representing the frowning philosopher, makes more sense as a portrait of Michelangelo than not.

<sup>10</sup> LVIII as lead-in to a tale about Fra Filippo Lippi amidst the pirates, derived from Vasari’s 1550 edition ([17], pp. 264–65).

<sup>11</sup> “io mi voglio star’ da me,” “io non mi voglio tanto rallegrare,” “bisogna pensare alla morte,” he says when invited to lunch after detailed discussion of the timeline of Dante’s *Inferno* ([18], pp. 31–33).

<sup>12</sup> Vasari mentions Savonarola only after Condivi’s *Life* was published; in Condivi’s words, “al qual egli ha sempre avuta grande affezione, restandogli ancor nella mente la memoria della sua viva voce.”

Such instances offer a precious opportunity to gauge the ambient in which the artists worked, the degree and formality or lack thereof of the respect in which they were held, as well as how temperamental and how worth indulging they were understood to be. The *novelle* give us glimpses of artists interacting with contemporaries who are neither fellow artists nor patrons, as biographies generally do not. Boccaccio tells a story (VI,5) of Giotto's being splattered by mud while riding through the rain with a friend in old capes and hats borrowed from a peasant and bantering between the two of them about how disreputable they look, all prefaced by a description of the greatness of Giotto's *ingegno* combined with the modesty of his personal comportment.<sup>13</sup> Sacchetti shows us Giotto knocked down by a pig and taking it in good humor, for instance, allowing that after all the pig bristles he has used in his brushes, he can only be grateful to the beasts (whereas Dante gets irascible with the ass-driver and blacksmith who sing his verses inaccurately as they work).<sup>14</sup> Often, the theme is the championing of true merit over apparent status, with a distinctly Florentine tincture in the loyalty to the idea of true nobility apart from aristocratic birth.<sup>15</sup> Sacchetti tells how Giotto puts in his proper place a peasant who presumes to have a coat of arms, by depicting armor on the shield rather than a coat of arms, and moreover having his apprentice finish the job.<sup>16</sup> Brunelleschi's rather cruel jest in "The Fat Woodcarver", convincing the said woodcarver that he actually is someone else, with the ultimate result that he is shamed and leaves for Hungary for many years, begins in the suspicion that Grasso has snubbed them by not coming to their dinner, they being "men from the governing class and from among the masters of the more intellectual and imaginative of the crafts."<sup>17</sup> Vasari comparably tells anecdotes about how clever artists respond to the presumption of clients, particularly ones who aspire above their rightful station. Leonardo's father sends away a peasant with a simple substitute for the marvelous *Medusa* the young Leonardo had painted on his shield. Since artists themselves were often presuming above their "rightful" stations, these situations of their defending the social status quo by putting down social upstarts are as noteworthy as the contrasting situations in which they demand more respect and recompense than their patrons mean to offer. Artists were not simply rebels, these stories assert reassuringly; they were, however, persons of self-respect and dignity beyond what might be expected of their normal social station. Donatello destroys a portrait bust when the patron refuses to pay what he asked, which is presented to the reader by Vasari as an indicator of deficient magnificence on the part of the patron. Michelangelo induces Angelo Doni to pay twice the sum he first asked for his *Tondo*, after an initial demur. Vasari tends to emphasize how in the end, the artists were well recompensed; the earlier stories often focus on the artist's wit and masterful control of the situation, qualities we often encounter in the characters of the *novelle*.

The drama of artistic reputation is only latent in the history of the images themselves; we must turn to these prose sources to have any more direct access. The *novelle* allow us to contextualize such stories about artistic prerogative relative to stories about the gallant condescension shown by rulers to peasants, for instance in Bandello's tale (II,xlvi), in which Massimigliano, King of Bohemia, while out hunting, is asked by a peasant to help him reload his horse, whose load of wood had fallen

<sup>13</sup> His accomplishment is described in terms of his aiming for a more discerning public: "avendo egli quella arte ritornata in luce, che molti secoli sotto gli error d'alcuni che più a diletta gli occhi degl'ignoranti che a compiacere allo 'ntelletto de' savi dipignendo intendevano," ([19], p. 383). This is a story recalled by ([20], p. 33), who is distinctly not sympathetic to Giotto's declining to be called "maestro," p. 21. He belongs, of course, to a different era; the year after *Galateo* was published (1558), the *Decameron* was placed on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*.

<sup>14</sup> ([21], LXXV, p. 52; CXIV, CXV, pp. 84–87); see also, [22–24]. ([25], pp. 49 and 245, n. 28), glosses Vasari's use of the adjective *baronesche* in the first Proemio to the *Vite* by reference to Boccaccio's description of the Baronci family, whose faces look misshapen as in drawings by small children, *Decameron*, VI, 6 (where the adjective does not appear), oddly citing in support of this a 1929 edition of Vasari that makes no reference to Boccaccio and merely explains the adjective as "strano" (recent dictionaries make no particular comment).

<sup>15</sup> That this is not exclusively a Florentine theme, see Bandello's story of Giulia, below, n. 28.

<sup>16</sup> LXIII ([21], pp. 39–41).

<sup>17</sup> ([26], pp. 171–72).

off. Bandello is careful to tell us that although Massimigliano was a handsome and seemly person, when he hunted, he wore ordinary clothes and so could be mistaken for someone of ordinary rank. Massimigliano (“il buon imperadore”) not only helped, but took orders from the peasant. Moreover, when his followers returned and his rank was revealed to the frightened peasant, Massimigliano gave him money and privileges, thereby demonstrating his “*pietosa cortesia e liberalità*.”<sup>18</sup> Michelangelo, when he helped out artists, not only his near-peers (e.g., Sebastiano del Piombo) or members of his inner circle (such as Marcello Venusti and Ascanio Condivi), but especially in the case of peasants in need of a design (such as Menighella and the stone carver Topolino), or when he won the informal contest as to which artist could draw the clumsiest stick figures,<sup>19</sup> was performing a role potentially reminiscent of such lordly largesse as celebrated in *novelle*.

Not only are we treated to verbal portraits, sometimes of artists for whom we have little by way of visual portraits, but the inclusion of such biographical tidbits is an intriguing clue that artists might well have read these stories and delighted in them. And so the question naturally arises, whether *novelle* may have spurred or shaped the imaginations of painters, quite apart from their seeing the same daily sights as the authors? Did the way prose authors saw the world enlarge the possible options of visual artists and/or their viewers? Could they learn something about depicting horror from reading Masuccio or how to indicate feminine grace by reading the right bits of Boccaccio? Additionally, how adaptable were the visual conventions of the time to incorporating such mundane levels of observation? Michelangelo, for instance, was quite insistent (as reported by Francisco de Hollanda) that a proper artist would not be distracted by the plethora of things seen in the world, but would hone in on what was most beautiful, *i.e.*, the ideal human figure.<sup>20</sup> Although he can scarcely be taken as typical, he does stand as an example of how impervious to the observation of vivid details a visual artist might be. Dante’s description of his first view of Beatrice is likewise notable for the absence of detail: she was dressed as was appropriate for a girl of her age; that is about the extent of what this master of visual description has to say.<sup>21</sup> *Novelle* are often narrated in terms of conversational exchanges rather than imagery.

The proposition under consideration here is not that artist would often come to *novelle* for subject matter, but that the patterns of thinking to which *novelle* belonged were highly compatible with the emphasis on imitating nature in the visual arts (observation was valued), and reading *novelle* may have occasionally added some breadth to how artists thought about the project of imitating nature. This ought not be limited to looking for earthy notes of realism amidst scenes of domestic life, for these are sparse in the visual arts, even if profuse in *novelle*. Instead, we might well remember Boccaccio’s seven spirited maidens of the *Decameron* when we look at the ethereal Villa Lemmi frescoes of Botticelli now in the Louvre, commissioned for the Tornabuoni family, both that of the young man surrounded by women who are his superiors (*Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts*), even if they are personifications, and the young woman, rather plainly and modestly dressed, who greets Venus as a kind of sister figure (*Venus and the Three Graces Presenting Gifts to a Young Woman*, ca. 1485). Capable women are a staple of the *novelle*, and the women we see in Renaissance art are not all modeled on the type of the demur Virgin.

The *novelle* center on persons, much more than on describing buildings or landscape.<sup>22</sup> Churches are often merely called venerable. The most favored exterior setting is a pleasant garden, with long pergolas or fountains sometimes appreciatively mentioned. On the other hand, Bandello does

<sup>18</sup> ([17], p. 376). Cf. Giovanni da Prato’s story, “Berto and More,” ([27], pp. 56–63).

<sup>19</sup> ([28], pp. 475–76).

<sup>20</sup> “In Flanders they paint, with a view to deceiving sensual vision, such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill...all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skillful selection or boldness and, finally, without substance or vigor,” ([29], p. 34).

<sup>21</sup> “apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e necto, sanguigno, cinta e ornata a la guisa che la sua giovanissima etade si convenia.” ([5], p. 2)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. [30], “Seduction and Family Space,” Ch. 9.



describe at some length a richly-appointed bedroom, including the furniture, the velvet, the silk, the embroidery, the gold threads and some paintings by Leonardo (I,iii). Usually the prefaces set the scene more than the stories themselves do: we are told of people gathering in a large room to while away the hot afternoon in August playing boardgames and making music,<sup>23</sup> for instance, or of feasting and dancing, but specifics of how things look are scarce; they are more often simply approved of than described, as though what they would have looked like should go without saying.

Decorum demands, after all, that what is suitable is generally agreed, and to some extent, this applies to people, as well as to their physical surroundings and personal appointments: it is precisely because of such consensus about norms that the idea of individual excellence could have such impact. Michelangelo was excellent by breaking rules, and this was epoch-making.<sup>24</sup> It was not, however, a totally new idea. The assumption against which Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528) militates is that being a good courtier was a matter of fulfilling the routine expectations, rather than Castiglione's more ambitious project of functioning in relation to an ideal. Brunelleschi had set an important precedent for ambition, exceeding by far what had been considered normal and even excellent. The story about how he boldly smashed the egg to make it stand on end didn't really prove his ability to complete the dome over crossing the the Florentine Duomo, but it did demonstrate his resolution and boldness. Manetti's story of Brunelleschi's tomfoolery with Grasso is not merely testimony of his jovial and witty spirit, but implicitly a witness to his ability to manipulate Florentines' perceptions of what was real.<sup>25</sup> As with his lost panels demonstrating linear perspective construction, his fabrication of illusion is utterly convincing, or persuasive, to borrow a word from rhetoric. Brunelleschi functions as a wizard, though in a world without magic, a world in which the ability to manage his laborers counts for as much as his demonstration with the egg for his patrons. Manetti shows us Brunelleschi among his peers on an ordinary couple of days; it is a valuable aperçu. When Brunelleschi is amused, Manetti tells us, he is "as happy as a scratched piglet."<sup>26</sup> One could not get much more down to earth than that. Still, what he looked like, what he wore, what his voice was like or his characteristic posture, these things we are not told, only a tantalizing reference to "the self-confident grin that came so naturally to him".<sup>27</sup> (Much later, and with a certain reluctance, Vasari admits both of Brunelleschi and Giotto that they were ugly men).

The question about the relevance of *novelle* to Renaissance painting includes the possibility that part of what Renaissance viewers brought to their experience of art was familiarity with that mode of storytelling and even their recollection of specific well-known examples. Boccaccio may not have been alone in sensing the potential for incongruous undercurrents in the familiar scene of a gorgeous Gabriel alighting in the chamber of the Virgin Mary. Boccaccio's story of the Venetian friar cum seducer who dressed up as Gabriel, Frate Alberto (IV,2), may be a kind of response to Annunciation paintings, and it may also be that those who had read Boccaccio might have brought a touch of cognitive dissonance to their subsequent experience of such paintings. The reader, in other words, may have learned a less respectful and docile attitude from *novelle*, whether or not they were meant to teach that. On the other hand, what could be a better gloss on a Renaissance portrayal of Lucretia than to read the sad tale of a similar contemporary episode, one that, interestingly, involved a peasant girl rather than a well-born woman? Bandello explicitly compares the story of 17-year-old Giulia da Gazuolo (I,viii), raped in a wheat field on a hot 29 May, who then drowns herself in the Oglio

<sup>23</sup> ([17], p. 386).

<sup>24</sup> As Vasari describes the goal of art in the Proemio to the Third Part, "una licenza che, non essendo di regola, fusse ordinata nella regola e potesse stare senza fare confusione o gustare l'ordine."

<sup>25</sup> He builds in this on precedents in Boccaccio's stories about the painters Calandrino, Bruno, and Buffalmacco, still remembered in Castiglione's *Courtier* (II,xlix,lxxxix) and in Bandello's *Novelle* (II,10); Sacchetti also has stories about Buffalmacco. On Buffalmacco and a possible link to the Pisa *Triumph of Death* and *Last Judgment* frescoes, see ([31], pp. 231–32). On Boccaccio's linkage between painters and deceit or trickiness, see [32]. Gilbert also considers the licentiousness of Boccaccio in the context of his use of painters as characters.

<sup>26</sup> ([26], p. 203).

<sup>27</sup> ([26], p. 173).

River, to that of Livy's Lucretia, except for her lowly birth. Nevertheless, he speaks of her "*generoso e virile spirito*". Given her suicide, she could not be buried in sacred ground, but Bandello reports there were plans to make a bronze sarcophagus and a marble column in the piazza in her honor; her rapist, a servant from Ferrara, escaped punishment. He concludes by saying that, perhaps after all, her example is even more worthy than Lucretia's because of her lowly birth; nature ought to have provided her a better one, he somewhat daringly comments.<sup>28</sup> The victim is characterized in some detail, from her sickly little sister to the few nice things she has to put on in preparation for her suicide. The sympathy and admiration expressed both by Bandello and, indirectly, by the townsfolk ("*tutte le donne ed anco degli uomini del paese con molte lagrime onorata*") helps us in that complex task of trying to understand what then constituted a normal range of thinking about issues of gender and class and may have helped form the attitudes with which the Renaissance public approached images to which such issues pertained.

In some instances, Boccaccio's stories were illustrated, most famously in Botticelli's panels of Nastagio degli Onesti, but also in an eponymous master's three paintings of the (to us, almost unreadable) story of Griselda, ca. 1494, now in the National Gallery, London.<sup>29</sup> Petrarch's Latin version had been illustrated in German editions beginning in 1473.<sup>30</sup> Such illustrations offer us a guide as to how a contemporary reader might have imagined the stories, but also demonstrate unequivocally that visual imagination was in large part the province of painters rather than writers. The woodcut artist(s) focuses on the figures almost exclusively, and these but cursorily delineated; the woodcuts' interest lies primarily in the very fact that they exist, in their relatively early date and in the choice of which scenes to visualize, including, for instance, the seemingly inessential though poignant scene of Griselda's father giving her back her old clothes after she has been dismissed by her husband.<sup>31</sup> The painter of the Griselda panels provides us with architecture, sculpture, still life, a variety of animals, landscape and a panorama of the gaudy decorativeness of personal attire; amid all of which panoply, the story can be picked out, though just barely. The text does grant a crucial role to the people ruled by Gualtieri who want him to find a wife and produce an heir, but the vast entourage in the painted panels is largely decorative. The viewer is entertained by sights in a way the reader had not been, for the reader was kept hard on the trail of the narrative itself. The story is delivered more through dialogue than description; the paintings show actions and greatly elaborate the settings.

The sum effect is that the paintings look much like other paintings of their ambient and function, rather than reflecting the rather extraordinary content of the *novella*, the concluding story of the *Decameron*, a narrative, which, admittedly, consists of repeated humble compliance on the part of the female protagonist rather than any visually useful reaction. Griselda is distinctively and importantly the heroine of the story, the character who is tested and proves resolute, but she remains throughout a passive heroine. Like the Virgin, her status is humble; she is raised up by her being chosen and yet remains an example of humility.<sup>32</sup> She endures faithfully, like Job; she is a personification of dutifulness brought down to earth and made narrative. The text in the end calls her husband very wise (*savissimo*), but Griselda the wisest of all (*sopra tutti savissima*). Her story, told by a male character (Dioneo), is introduced as featuring a man of more modest station than the preceding stories and, so, less distant from the auditors, though his example is branded a negative one. It shows, says Dioneo,

<sup>28</sup> He concludes, "ma assai nobile è tenuto chi è de la virtù amico e chi l'onore a tutte le cose del mondo prepone," ([17], p. 133). The incident is already mentioned in Castiglione's *Courtier*, (III,xlvii), as being then quite recent, the plans for the monument already abandoned.

<sup>29</sup> ([33], pp. 230–33), made for a Spannocchi wedding in 1494. See also [34–36], in which last, see esp. Massimiliano Rossi. "I dipinti—Introduzione: la novella di Sandro e Nastagio." II, pp. 153–63, 214–26.

<sup>30</sup> On the first printed illustration for the *Decameron* (1492; it had first been published without illustration in 1470–71), see [37]. The Italian woodcuts include more contextual supplement to the figures than the German ones.

<sup>31</sup> ([38], pp. 220–44, 320–21).

<sup>32</sup> We may detect a faint echo of how Petrarch's sonnets to Laura end in a hymn to the Virgin.

senseless brutality. As indeed it does, although all ends happily with a festive banquet. The stories in the *Decameron* are all meant as distractions from the horror of the plague, and the volume is explicitly addressed to noble young ladies (meaning of good birth rather than titled), so perhaps, we ought not be overly shocked that a tale of female perseverance of saintly dimensions occupies the place of honor at the conclusion.

The Nastagio degli Onesti story (V,8), painted *ca.* 1483 on four spalliera panels (the first three now in the Prado, the final panel in a private collection), is thought to have been commissioned to honor a wedding in the Pucci family.<sup>33</sup> The story, told by the girl Filomena, one of the fictional narrators in the *Decameron*, is meant to exhort members of the fair sex not to be hard on their suitors. Nastagio, a very wealthy young man, is in love with a woman of higher rank, who has spurned his advances and on whom he has been squandering his vast though not unlimited resources. He moves from Ravenna to Classe, where he lives in the woods in a pavilion as a sort of anti-ascetic. He encounters a horseman with mastiffs who pursues a naked woman. Nastagio tries to defend her, but is cautioned by the knight, Guido degli Anastagi, that what he is witnessing is the enactment of a divine punishment: that he had committed suicide when rejected and his beloved had exalted over this, so that both were condemned to repeated enactments of this hunt, culminating in gouging out of the heart of the girl and its being tossed to the dogs, whereupon she recovers and the hunt begins anew, moving from one site of their unhappy courtship to another. Nastagio convinces his beloved to marry him by arranging that she witness the spectacle on the following Friday, and thereafter, all women of Ravenna became more tractable, or so we are told. Botticelli heeds the description of the pine wood (although the shape of the pine trees is questionable, they do have cones), and even the description that the climax takes place during the final course of the meal, as they eat fruit and sweets. The setting with the sea visible in the background is appropriate for Classe, and furthermore, the sea is mentioned by Boccaccio. The dogs at the banquet even gnaw on the girl's haunches, as Botticelli described; the extraction of her heart from her back is as described in the text. Botticelli does not make the knight particularly swarthy; his horse is white rather than black; and it seems that Nastagio explains the circumstances of the spectacle to the diners rather than the knight's doing so. The crucial plot element, that the girl is of nobler lineage than her suitor might be difficult to ascertain from the imagery (though the suitor is boyish in his appearance and relatively simple in his attire),<sup>34</sup> as would the detail that she, having seen the punishment of her predecessor, is willing to do whatever Nastagio wants, and it is his decision to preserve her honor by marrying her. This may be alluded to in the exchange on the far right of the third panel, in which it seems her servant confers with Nastagio. Botticelli, while indebted to Boccaccio, is by no means limited by the text. The question, instead, is whether he was at all liberated by the text: to observe from daily life, to think in terms of elapsing time, to set the display of emotion within a complicated and potentially distracting environment, so that the viewer's sense of reality is not based on one character's expression of an emotional state. Additionally, to this, we may answer a tentative yes, since the Nastagio panels do stand out within Botticelli's oeuvre and not merely on the basis of their rather appalling story. The *mise-en-scène* is what matters as much as any one character's compositional dominance.

*Novelle* abound in descriptions of young lovers and more specifically of young men and women appraising one another by their looks and manner of behavior. The visual exchanges set up by images, both internally and in relation to the gaze of the viewer, parallel the way women view men and *vice versa*, in life as in literature. Boccaccio's Cimon, when he sees "a most beautiful girl, attired in so flimsy

<sup>33</sup> the wedding of Giannozzo di Antonio Pucci with Lucrezia di Piero di Giovanni Bini, a marriage brokered by Lorenzo de' Medici. The sweets at the wedding feast have been identified by Herbert Horne as appropriate for such an occasion ([39], pp. 47–51).

<sup>34</sup> The same is true of a pen drawing in the British Museum by Girolamo Romanino, c. 1540 (see the detail reproduced with the abstract: Girolamo Romanino, "Boccaccio's Nastagio degli Onesti," det., pen and ink and black chalk, Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. (SL,5237.116, AN101282001)).



a dress that scarcely an inch of her fair white body was concealed", is suddenly "transformed from a country bumpkin into a connoisseur of beauty."<sup>35</sup> Bandello describes how Romeo and Giulietta fall in love by sight alone, before they have been able to hear one another's voice or hold hands;<sup>36</sup> it is the stuff of Leonardo's Paragone, in which he expounds the power of sight. Class is nearly as prevalent a theme as desire and inextricable from it. The business of mutual appraisal permeates the plots of *novelle*, and by this, I do not refer so much to a Baxandallian calculating of the volumes of headgear, as a psychological cat and mouse game between potential partners, a process that often involves intercessions by the servant class. If we read the *novelle* for the sake of comments about class and status, some of the details provided will not readily be corroborated in pictures. For instance, the mother in one of the tales (VII,8) describes the *nouveau riche* merchant who has married her daughter as the sort of person, though a "country yokel" who might "wander about the street in rags and tatters, their trousers all askew, with a quill sticking out of their backsides."<sup>37</sup> She even goes so far as to characterize such persons as presuming to invent a coat of arms for themselves, just as those fellows we meet in stories about Giotto and Leonardo did. The mother's tone is clearly derogatory, a nuance difficult to match in pictures. Much of the historical information these texts relay is embedded in tone, and so, more or less lost to the visual arts. Sometimes, that tone is a painful asset: Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* is shocking to present-day sensibilities in its explicit disregard for the lives of servants in the opening sequence that sets off the occasion for storytelling; the servants lost in the hazards of travel will easily be replaced, it is said.

Although always refracted through the lens of fiction, the *novelle* brought literature closer down to earth. Their typical process of imitation was distinctly non-Zeuxian, edited not for the sake of ideal beauty, but for maximizing the impact on the reader, a theory that if applied to visual art sounds more Baroque than Renaissance. The desired impact was often comedic, but we have only to remember the sad tale of the basil plant in which the lower-class lover's head is buried (Boccaccio [IV,5], the basis of Keats' "Isabella, or The Pot of Basil", 1818) to realize that love did not always end in happy marriage, but sometimes in death and despair. Sensationalism and melodrama hover close in more *novelle* than only Masuccio's, and those stories tend to produce the most memorable mental images.

The question here is whether the prose visual imagination may have affected how Renaissance visual artists worked (possibly even to the extent of helping to determine the direction in which style developed, *i.e.*, toward something we would call Baroque), as well as whether it may have affected what viewers brought to their experience of visual art. That the answer to the former is in some part affirmative is indisputable: we need only read Leonardo's notebooks to see how he imagines his Deluge in pen on paper and then in chalk and pen on paper, or how he talks to himself by writing on paper about how figures at the Last Supper might act, in supplement to his preparatory sketches. His jottings, which include no dialogue, fall considerably short of *novelle*; there is not anything else quite like them. Some are based on stories in Pliny or memories of Aesop. The jottings about the Last Supper are essentially stage directions for a painter, though in the case of the Deluge writings, what starts as instructions and reminders to himself builds up to achieve an operatic visionary quality, including such details as the transformation of corpses from floating into sinking bodies.<sup>38</sup> To imagine narrative, whether painted or written, is to calculate the effect on a viewer, as a painter who adheres to the iconic tradition need not. As for how reading may have affected viewing, we can well imagine that Aretino's description in his published letters of being reminded of Titian's sunsets by being out

<sup>35</sup> (V,1) ([40], p. 368). Artists responded to this very visual story: see [41]; and Paris B.N., ms. It. 482, f. 102r. It is included in the frieze in the architecture of Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* (Uffizi, Florence).

<sup>36</sup> Of Romeo: "sentendogioia inusitata in contemplarla, tra sé propose far ogni suo sforzo per acquistar la grazia e l'amor di quella;" and Giulietta, "sentiva non so che dolcezza al core che tutta di gioiso et estremo piacere l'ingombrava," (II,9) ([17], p. 283. Cf. (I,27), Diego and Ginevra, pp. 172–74).

<sup>37</sup> ([40], p. 531). Della Casa was still concerned about anyone's appearing with a quill stuck behind an ear ([20], p. 61).

<sup>38</sup> ([42], p. 182; see also, pp. 80–114, 139–46, 176–83); ([43], pp. 180–93, 228–44).

in the evening and seeing nature's colors might well have given birth to a conversational topos.<sup>39</sup> Aretino's notorious letter of 1547 about the unseemliness of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* seems to have helped to incite what would only shortly before have been unthinkable: namely, the censoring of a work by Michelangelo.<sup>40</sup> Writing was powerful, and in the case of Aretino it often started with looking at painting.

On the other end of the spectrum, St. Catherine of Siena received her stigmata while praying to a painting of the Crucifixion in 1375. She had doubtless seen images of St. Francis praying to the Crucified Christ and had read about how St. Francis was addressed by a painting of the Crucifixion (although uneducated, she managed to learn to read and write). Her religious experience would seem to have been conditioned both by her reading and by her familiarity with images, and the subsequent formation of her biography similarly reflects the available visual and verbal conventions. An early manuscript arguing on behalf of her canonization (ca. 1418) is illustrated in the margins; one could scarcely find better evidence of the synergy of prose and visual imagination [45]. This is not to say that all of her experience was modeled on pre-existing paintings; her letters are full of imagery, and some of it is as directly taken from life as anything in *novelle*, for example when she recommends to the Queen of Naples that she imagine her duty to God as like the servant who washes out dirty jugs.<sup>41</sup> Seeing was powerful, and it often affected verbal expression.

St. Catherine on the early end chronologically and Aretino on the later end both demonstrate the effective braiding together of various types of visual experience, whether of nature, art or prose. Their reactions to art doubtless owed much to their pre-existing verbal habits and reading; even the worldly Aretino was well-read in devotional reading and thus familiar with its effusive responses to images whether virtual or real. No firm barrier separated the secular from religious habits of reading and imagination. Different as St. Catherine and Aretino are, their readers might be expected to bring something from prose to their experience of art, and back again: painting is at least like prose as it is like poetry. The development of a more literate public, and a more widerangingly literate public, was a *sine qua non* for the way in which the art of the period, as well as reactions to art, developed.

A distinctive stylistic element of the *novelle* from Boccaccio to Bandello is their conversational flavor and the seemingly effortless lifelikeness that yields (we may recall Donatello's imploring his *Zuccone* to speak, as Vasari tells us, for then it would be truly like life). Both Boccaccio and Bandello announce, unabashedly, their lack of stylistic ambition. In this, their prose resembles devotional literature, but whereas the devotional literature assumes that a certain intensity of experience can be conveyed without stylistic refinement, the *novelle* opt for a kind of nonchalance, a (proud) disregard for artfulness, that might strike us as distantly related to Castiglione's concept of *sprezzatura*. Perhaps a lack of stylistic ambition almost went without saying for those who wrote in the vernacular; nevertheless, both authors make a point of it. Boccaccio tells, in the prologue to the fourth day, how he has written "not only in the Florentine vernacular and in prose, but in the most homely and unassuming style it is possible to imagine."<sup>42</sup> True, Boccaccio's modesty has its artful aspect, and he even allows as how the Muses may have helped him occasionally, seeing that the women for

<sup>39</sup> "Oh, how beautiful were the strokes with which Nature's brushes pushed the air back at this point, separating it from the palaces in the way that Titian does when painting his landscapes!," letter to Titian, May 1544 ([43], pp. 225–26).

<sup>40</sup> ([44], pp. 226–28).

<sup>41</sup> ([46], pp. 111–14). See also [47,48]. For the debate on how literate she actually was, see Catherine Mooney, "Wondrous Words: Catherine of Siena's Miraculous Reading and Writing according to the Early Sources," ([49], pp. 263–90), and Jane Tylus, "Writing versus Voice: Tommaso Caffarini and the Production of a Literate Catherine," ([50], pp. 291–312). And on what makes an image believable.

<sup>42</sup> ([40], p. 284); "le presenti novellette...non solamente in fiorentin volgare ed in prosa scritte per me sono e senza titolo, ma ancora in istilo umilissimo e rimesso quanto il più si possono," ([19], p. 241). This is disputed early on (1525) by ([51], p. 119): "Che come che gli alcuna volta, massimamente nelle novelle, secondo le proposte materie, persone di volgo a ragionare traponendo, s'ingegnasse di farle parlare con le voci con le quali il volgo parlava, nondimeno egli si vede che in tutto 'l corpo delle composizioni sue esso è così di belle figure, di vaghi modi e dal popolo non usati, ripieno, che meraviglia non è se egli ancora vive, e lunghissimi secoli viverà."

whom he writes resemble those Muses. Addressing the reader, Bandello expresses his modesty even relative to Boccaccio's, since he does not write in the Florentine vernacular, but (like Castiglione) the less esteemed Lombard. Nevertheless, he is confident that the content of his stories will please the reader.<sup>43</sup> Further, in his letter introducing Part One to his protectors Ippolitta Sforza and Alexander Bentivoglia, he apologizes that should they find in his writing parts that seem rough or badly expressed, they ought to blame his ignorance and inability, his being Lombard raised, rather than his lack of will to do well.<sup>44</sup> Again in Part Two, responding to his detractors, he avers to having no style: "*Io non ho stile, e lo conosco pur troppo. E per questo non faccio profession di prosatore.*"<sup>45</sup> (We might be reminded of Michelangelo's poetic disavowal of the Sistine Ceiling: "*Non sendo in loco bon, né io pittore*"). Nevertheless, he continues, stories can delight even if they are not elegantly told. Additionally, his stories are, he claims, true: "*non sono favole ma vere istorie.*" (Boccaccio had similarly responded indignantly to criticisms that his tales were not accurate; the veracity claim took precedence for him over the stylistic one).<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Bandello goes on to say, although the stories may describe misdeeds (as, he notes, does even the Bible), their mere narration does not condone them. The theory of the *novelle*, implicit in Bandello's words, seems to require both delight and verity; if there is a lesson to be gleaned, the reader is solely responsible for its extraction.<sup>47</sup>

Boccaccio is defensive about the truthfulness of his stories with cause; his stories sometimes sound more as if they might almost have been real than as if they really were. They are earthy rather than out-and-out realistic, and we are constantly brought back to the framing narration lest we enter too thoroughly into a world of fiction in which amorous dalliance is the rule. It may well be that Boccaccio was more thoroughly Florentine than the exiled Petrarch, that his inclination toward bluntness or toward a pithy and unpolished confidentiality is a Florentine trait as much or more than it need be characteristic of prose. Boccaccio's storytelling may remind us of the stories told about Cosimo Pater Patriae, earthy, but emphatically for the sake of a certain ideology appropriate to this fledgling republic and his political ambitions in it, rather than the product of an unedited or naive realism. Ultimately, the stories help us to visualize a world in which love is the dominant force: accordingly, young women are exceedingly prominent, the very world view rejected by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, in which fear trumps love. Though even when Machiavelli brings his perspective abruptly back down to earth from the frivolities of *novelle*, his dichotomy of love or fear comes straight out of the love literature he himself knew well, poetry as well as prose. In that world of courtship, the opposite to love is usually fear rather than hatred, fear of rejection, but also of death. Additionally, the metaphor of rulership is prevalent in the literature of amorous power struggles, as is the metaphor of the hunt.

When Machiavelli's contemporary Baldassare Castiglione writes his very high-minded and basically Platonic dialogue about the ideal courtier, he states at the outset his disinclination to follow the model of Boccaccio (although love is ultimately his theme). Not only is Tuscan not his native tongue, not only is Boccaccio's Tuscan a little old-fashioned by his time, not only is the subject matter quite different, but, Castiglione observes chidingly, Boccaccio little knew how to assess which was his own best work. In his letter of dedication, Castiglione explains that Boccaccio too little esteemed what he wrote when "guided solely by his own natural genius and instinct, without care or concern to polish his writings."<sup>48</sup> It is as though Castiglione explains the essence of what he admires in the

<sup>43</sup> "E se bene io non ho stile, che confesso, mi sono assicurato a sciver esse novelle dandomi a credere che l'istoria e cotesta sorte di novelle possa dilettere in qualunque lingua ella sia scritta," ([17], p. 88).

<sup>44</sup> ([17], p. 92).

<sup>45</sup> ([17], p. 327).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. ([5], p. 50). Antonio Manetti begins his *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi* by averring that the story of Grasso should be read as "vero e non come favola," ([52], p. 45); and Piccolomini's tale is labelled "historia," and said to be based on real events.

<sup>47</sup> Boccaccio does promise in his Prologue that, in addition to "succour and diversion" there might be found some "useful advice;" ([40], p. 3).

<sup>48</sup> presumably referring to the *Decameron* as Boccaccio modestly presents it ([53], pp. 4–5). "assai meglio scrisse quando si lassò guidar solamente dall'ingegno ed istinto suo naturale, senz'altro studio o cura di limare i scritti suoi, che quando

ideal courtier as derived from his appraisal of Boccaccio's style: the best being that which is done insouciantly. Additionally, as Boccaccio expressed his admiration for Giotto (VI,5), so Castiglione for Raphael and Michelangelo: his book he calls a portrait of the court of Urbino, yet one unable to compete with work by Raphael or Michelangelo.<sup>49</sup> Castiglione not only admires painting, but he explicitly thinks about his prose as like a painting, specifically, as like a portrait.

In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio describes beautiful places that are the very opposite of a court like Urbino, though similarly a beautiful place at which highly articulate men and women talk together. The first villa the young Florentines sojourn at is adorned with paintings of pleasant scenes, whole "delectable gardens and meadows lay all around, and there were wells of cool, refreshing water." The young men and ladies are delighted by the fresh rushes and linens that have been prepared for them at their country retreat by the nearly invisible and apparently disease-free servants, the details of all of these pleasant aspects are convincingly described rather than merely conventional: "they saw the tables ready laid, with pure white tablecloths and with goblets shining bright as silver, whilst the whole room was decorated with broom blossom."<sup>50</sup> We are even assured that the beds were well made.<sup>51</sup> Marguerite of Navarre explicitly leans on Boccaccio's admired description of a *locus amoenus*: "the meadow, which was looking so beautiful and fair that it would take a Boccaccio to describe it [more literally, to paint it] as it really was."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, at least among writers, we may take it that Boccaccio's prose offered a standard for descriptive richness combined with an admirable artlessness.

Still, the purely ideal does not lend itself to wit and laughter. Therefore, in a genre meant to amuse, a balance must be struck between the ideal and the accidental, the mistaken, the ugly or the precarious. Boccaccio's setting, the villa, is ideal, as are the young people who narrate ("a worthy band;" "una onesta brigata"); the stories themselves tell of problems. The stories are "bitter as well as pleasing."<sup>53</sup> The inconveniences of real life may intrude into any *novella*, whether lighthearted or heavy. In *De duobus amantibus historia* (1444) by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (the future Pope Pius II), when Euryalus dresses up as a laborer to gain access to Lucretia (before unveiling himself dressed in the purple and gold befitting his station as a courtier favored by Emperor Sigismund), he is shown as slightly ridiculous.<sup>54</sup> She, by contrast, is described as wearing a thin and clingy gown, not an unaccustomed sight in the world of *novelle*.<sup>55</sup> He fears that his disgrace will be all the greater if he is discovered in his disguise; his somewhat unseemly terror, as well as his lowly disguise are among the signals the author sends that this tale of passion can be read, on one level, as a warning against illicit love rather than a recommendation on behalf of joyous romp. The author takes his opportunities to berate the unfaithfulness of women, despite featuring a heroine who is faithful—albeit, adulterously—unto death. She protests her arranged marriage to an unworthy husband, though admittedly a husband who is Sienese rather than the foreigner, a Frank, she prefers; her opinion that German men were more handsome would not have gone over well in Italy, we may presume. More significantly and surprisingly, the author inveighs against the licentiousness and

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con diligenza e fatica si sforzò d'esser più culto e castigato," p. 26. It ought to be noted that in the very same letter of dedication Castiglione expresses concern over the rough state in which his own writing has been shared beyond the limits he thought he had set (and by no less a person than Vittoria Colonna) [54].

<sup>49</sup> "questo libro come un ritratto di pittura della corte d'Urbino, non di mano di Raffaello o Michel Angelo, ma di pittor ignobile e che solamente sappia tirare le linee principali, senza adornar la verità de vaghi colori o far parer per arte di prospettiva quello che non è," ([54], p. 25).

<sup>50</sup> ([40], pp. 19–22).

<sup>51</sup> "letti ben fatti e così di fiori pieni." ([19], p. 25)

<sup>52</sup> ([55] p. 69); ([56], p. 10): "qui estoit si beau et plaisant qu'il avoit besoin d'un Bocace pour le depaindre à la vérité." See further on Marguerite's diffidence toward images [57].

<sup>53</sup> "piacevoli e aspri casi." ([40], p. 5)

<sup>54</sup> ([58], pp. 55–56); ([59], pp. 61–63).

<sup>55</sup> ([58], pp. 62–63); ([6], p. 109), suggests that the illustrated printed *Decameron* (first edition, 1492) was a factor in the development of the Venetian reclining nude.

immorality of the wealthy.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the beauty of the protagonists and of their clothing and accessories, including Euryalus's horses, are lovingly described; the couple's amorous delight is quickly and discretely alluded to, helped by classical allusion; the taking of food and drink afterwards is deemed worth mentioning, though without enough detail to visualize it. Lucretia's death both supports the conclusion that she has been punished and proves the sincerity of her love. Piccolomini's is a complex, if short, text; one that both conforms to social conventions of the time and yet insinuates a kind of reproof of the same. Some details, such as the description of the old bawd whose use as a messenger insults Lucretia, or the failed plot to use a visit to Lucretia's mother to arrange a rendezvous, or the description of how the lovers observe each other at the beginning, seem quite believable as realistic elements, as is the uneventful cessation of the affair, after Euryalus follows the Emperor on his travels elsewhere and eventually marries a young, beautiful, and supposedly chaste girl, though that she is said to be of Ducal rank perhaps exceeds the bounds of ordinary expectation. Piccolomini's literary imagination is in parts highly visual, and when it is visual, it tends to be rather more independent of antique reference than elsewhere. Like the painters of his time, the *novella* author appealed to observations from daily life to enhance the credibility of his narrative. Although attention to the non-ideal and unbeautiful remained a lesser strand in the visual arts, it was an important element in the work of artists as different as Mantegna and Leonardo and one which tied their efforts to the writers of *novelle*.

Attractive comportment was more consistently touted than physical beauty. From Petrarch to Giovanni della Casa, this was a matter for much discussion, both explicitly and implicitly. The active life called for what would become known as *savoir faire*. As artists studied to make their figures more elegant, so too did citizens, courtiers and the occasional canon strive to make a good impression, according to quite different norms from those that had characterized the previously, more highly rated contemplative life. For Petrarch as writer, this meant that one aspired to emulate the fine examples of antiquity, the richness of Ciceronian Latin, for example; for della Casa, being admired at court was the goal. However, the basic notion was that style served as a marker of class, be it intellectual or social class.

Boccaccio resisted some of Petrarch's emphasis on style as the product of imitation; his vernacular prose efforts were without significant precedent and they were not always very polite nor written suavely. Yet, he was no rebel: he shared the generally accepted idea that rough manners needed to be polished. It is the theme of the story of Cimon (V,1), who is reformed by love and made civilized. As this example illustrated, Boccaccio's world is distinctively female, as della Casa's is not. Seven women leave Florence for rural retreat, and only three men.<sup>57</sup> The most frequent butts of jokes are priests and husbands, *i.e.*, men. Boccaccio's women are seldom portrayed as not able to get what they themselves want, at least for a time (Bandello's world is less benign, but then, it is not all hinged to dread of the plague). When decorousness is invoked, it usually seems to involve quite abstract public (*i.e.*, male) opinion, perceived as a threat rather than espoused as a principle. Boccaccio's women are remarkably spirited and competent.

In his Conclusion, a naughty Boccaccio actually claims he deserves as much freedom as painters: "no less latitude should be granted to my pen than to the brush of the painter, who without incurring censure, of a justified kind at least, depicts Saint Michael striking the serpent with his sword or his lance, and Saint George transfixing the dragon wherever he pleases; but that is not all, for he makes Christ male and Eve female, and fixes to the Cross, sometimes with a single nail, sometimes with two,

<sup>56</sup> "humiles tantum casas habitat castitas solaque pauperies affectu sano tenetur et quae domus se coercet modico. Dives aedes nescit pudicitia." ([58], pp. 14–15)

<sup>57</sup> For a charming pen drawing of the group gathered, sitting on the ground, see ([60], Pl. XVI, Paris, B.N. 482, c. 1360–1400, also pp. 107–28, esp. 113–14). See also ([61], esp. Pl. 70 for a miniature (c. 1450–75, Bodleian Holkham misc. 49-H), which shows the girls seated on the floor of Santa Maria Novella, pp. 212–13, 338). It is an image that calls to mind images of the Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* or the *Madonna of Humility*, though it might be equally valid to wonder whether, when viewers looked at images of the Virgin, they recalled gatherings in the shade similar to this.



the feet of Him who resolved to die thereon for the salvation of mankind.”<sup>58</sup> As interesting as it may be to us to note that Boccaccio did not need Freud in order to find phallic references, it is just as vital to realize that he is daringly thinking of his prose as like a painting, long before painters developed the habit of comparing themselves with poets. If authors like Castiglione and Boccaccio thought of their work in pictorial terms, surely some painters honored them reciprocally, and not merely by making illustrations, but more importantly, by thinking of themselves as like writers, as crafting thought, as well as imagery.

Erich Auerbach found in the *novelle* evidence of a distinctively fervent and individualistic outlook on mundane life. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in particular, once one got through the grim though essential opening frame, set forth a version of contemporary life that was radically lighthearted, cheerful and sensuous. In his later book, *Mimesis*, Auerbach dwelt on the story of Frate Alberto pretending to visit a married Venetian woman (she being none-too-bright) in the guise of the angel Gabriel. Frate Alberto is utterly ruined as a result of his rather ingenious deception, unintentionally betrayed by the woman in question, due to her vanity and garrulousness. Auerbach gives full credit to Boccaccio’s consummate artistry, to his manipulation of a realistic style for the ends of art: “here is a man whose conscious grasp of the principles of art enables him to stand above his subject matter and to submerge himself in it only so far as he chooses, a man who shapes his stories according to his own creative will.”<sup>59</sup> Auerbach cites Pulci, Boiardo, and Ariosto as having subsequently initiated a new more fantastical phase, a reversion to courtliness (though implicitly much bound to the concrete in its dutifulness to local ruling families, one might add).<sup>60</sup> For Boccaccio, heir to the *dolce stil nuovo*, the ameliorating element is love, not present in the opening with its chilling description of plague, but dominant thereafter—love, with all its rights and responsibilities quite distinct from traditional propriety: “it is in him [Boccaccio] that the world of sensory phenomena is first mastered, is organized in accordance with a conscious artistic plan, caught and held in words.”<sup>61</sup> Lorenzo il Magnifico said that the lesson of the poetic tradition, which he traced back to Guido Bolognese (Guinizelli), was the identification of *gentilezza* and love,<sup>62</sup> visible and invisible aspects of the same essence. Boccaccio made love the stuff of prose, as well as of poetry, and Lorenzo, for one, acknowledged the importance of his accomplishment. For a Renaissance painter to try to convey *gentilezza* was to share in and also to shape his contemporaries’ sense of reality.

Auerbach described the public for Boccaccio as “the urban aristocracy...which derived a well-bred pleasure from life’s colorful reality wherever it happened to be manifested.”<sup>63</sup> Auerbach also observes how bourgeoisie morality, barely heeded in Boccaccio, by the subsequent century has reasserted itself and tamed the behavior of women above the servant class. Exceptions do exist, for instance, Aeneas Silvius’s *Euryalus and Lucretia*, that lusty tale in which the female protagonist does as she likes, a woman who calls to mind for Auerbach the real-life extraordinary personalities of Caterina Sforza, Isabella d’Este and Vittoria Colonna.<sup>64</sup> Bandello in the sixteenth century actually admits that adultery is a fault in men, as well as in women.<sup>65</sup> So although the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not without their feisty women and unconventional men, yet it remains generally true

<sup>58</sup> ([40], p. 799) McWilliams’s notes lay out the sexual double entendres here. McWilliams thinks Boccaccio implies a phallic reference with the word *chiodo*, related to *chiavare* (to screw), and Boccaccio’s tone supports the claim. “Alla mia penna non d’essere eno d’autorità conceduta che sia al pennello del dipintore, il quale senza alcuna riprensione, o almen giusta, lasciamo stare che egli faccia a san Michele ferire il serpente con la spada o con la lancia ed a san Giorgio il dragone, dove gli piace, ma egli fa Adamo maschio ed Eva femina, ed a Lui medesimo, che volle per la salute dell’umana generazione sopra la croce morire, quando con un chiovo e quando due i piè gli conficca in quella;” ([19], p. 660).

<sup>59</sup> ([62], p. 213).

<sup>60</sup> ([63], p. 14).

<sup>61</sup> ([63], p. 216).

<sup>62</sup> ([8], p. 129). See further [64].

<sup>63</sup> ([63], p. 218).

<sup>64</sup> ([62], pp. 35–38).

<sup>65</sup> ([17], p. 327).

that Boccaccio's stories, dedicated to flesh and blood women rather than to the Muses, distinctively describe a world in which men and women compete for power, and compete as equals. The seven women (aged 18–27) and three men (young, but all at least 25) who escape the city together, all of them linked by courtship or kinship, are considerate of one another and yet of many minds.

That ideal, the being of many minds compatibly together, yet with real friction, was the engine behind the development of the Renaissance dialogue, which often managed much better than Plato to avoid collapsing into a single point of view. That in turn provided a model for the gathering around a work of art, whether an altarpiece in San Giovanni e Paolo, as in Lodovico Dolce's *L'Aretino* (1557), or discussing at home (possibly with some engravings at hand), in the bedroom of a recovering friend as a distraction from the heat, as in Gregorio Comanini's *Il Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting* (1591). The premise for a culture dedicated to the idea of individuality was belief in the viability of more than a single point of view. If there was an incipiently secular and/or democratic aspect to Renaissance culture, it is to be found here, in this plurality of thought, and moreover of thought whose intellectual pedigree was more distinguished than mere opinion. Boccaccio's authorial broadmindedness is founded in his willingness to see the world through a roving point of view, that of man or woman, peasant or aristocrat, all of them subject to the overriding principle that love, a rather an earthly and un-Platonic variety of love, defines value; or as Auerbach aptly put it: "The literature of society acquired what it had not previously possessed: a world of reality and of the present,"<sup>66</sup> and with it, a narrator, Boccaccio, whose perspective included a note of malicious and delicious irony.<sup>67</sup> (One cannot help but think ahead to William Makepeace Thackeray, grounded in Napoleonic history yet recognizing throughout both the piteousness and the ridiculousness of the social interactions he describes).

Surely, the new visual art, the art that already included some homey details in Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes, particularly in the uppermost register depicting the Life of the Virgin, shared in that dedication to "a world of reality and of the present", long before the intervention of the oil medium? In predellas, in tondi and in long fresco cycles, do we not begin to get what Auerbach found in the *Decameron*: such a wealth of imagery that implies an infinity more, so that one's reading provides the stuff of mental representation, and potentially for its own sake: "*nicht als exemplum einer Lehre, sondern als Bild der Welt.*"<sup>68</sup> Likewise Lorenzo il Magnifico praised the *Decameron* for its range in expressing all of the types and emotions of humans.<sup>69</sup> Those attending crowds in paintings are not always merely decorative; sometimes, they offer vignettes of the ordinary, before Raphael and the grand manner edit out the ordinary. They are as intriguing as the marginalia in medieval miniatures, a glimpse around the side of the mask of artistic convention. If we still had Masaccio's *terra verde* and chiaroscuro fresco showing the dedication of the Carmine (including a portrait of Brunelleschi wearing clogs), we might already be more attuned to a synergy between the descriptive powers of the *novelle* and that of visual artists.<sup>70</sup>

Lacking Masaccio's group portrait fresco, how might we detect the signs of Boccaccio's readership among the contemporary viewers of the visual arts? How discern in the imagery of women, of landscape, of garden, of dancing and feasting a dedication to the thoroughly mundane, even, if we want to follow Auerbach, a view of the mundane that might encompass not only the trivial, but also the tragic (and certainly Renaissance love poetry often encompasses premature death and the resultant pain and sorrow)? We might suppose that Carpaccio's oil painting of women on the rooftop waiting tediously (Museo Correr, Venice), while the men fish in the lagoon (Getty Museum,

<sup>66</sup> ([63], p. 219); or as he put it in his first scholarly publication in 1921: "Boccaccio's ganzes Wesen war eine Art immanente Ethik der sinnlichen Liebe," ([62], p. 30).

<sup>67</sup> ([63], p. 221). On Alberti's early use of the term *ironia*, see ([65], p. 125).

<sup>68</sup> ([62], p. 46).

<sup>69</sup> He was himself the author of a *novella*, "Giacoppo." ([8], p. 136).

<sup>70</sup> See, e.g., the painting by Michele da Verona of a *Betrothal*, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, or the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. Cf. [66], which attempts to connect the so-called *Simonetta* with Boccaccio's imagination.

Los Angeles), invokes the world of prose fiction as surely as Botticelli's Venuses and Virgins summon up more ethereal literary examples, as well as Raphael's *Lucretia* more tragic ones.<sup>71</sup> Might we even go so far as to suppose that Boccaccio, distant as he is, provides a *sine qua non* for Mona Lisa's unflinching outward gaze, which has indeed some element of the tragic in it (and tragedy does lurk in the *Decameron*), even if we decline to go quite as far as Walter Pater in seeing there "the soul with all its maladies"? The question is not simply of secular subject matter, but of a secular style, of works of art that salute the world of the senses as emphatically not requiring allegorical extenuation. The writers and readers of *novelle* typically see the world not as a place tending toward any ideal, *telos*, or completion, but as a field for contesting control. By hook or by crook, someone gets what he or she wants in those stories. There is no fate, no mystery in the short story, but a sense of direction and of closure that often is considerably less final than death. If Mona Lisa in her portrait has thoroughly thrown off the obligation to make a claim about virtue, if Mona Lisa appears to us as thoroughly an individual, a individual of will, and not a type, we may credit there some small, indirect debt to Boccaccio's powers of characterization and the effect of his stories on how Florentines thought about their lives, even long afterwards.

Auerbach proposes that the origin of Boccaccio's art lies in the Florentine love of language,<sup>72</sup> rather as art historians of his era used to trace naturalism in art back to St. Francis and a new love of looking at nature. In this modern reiteration of the Paragone, we may well wonder why we need to choose, for certainly by the time of Giotto and Boccaccio, the *leggiadria* of women is a visual good often saluted and celebrated in words. When Giotto painted the Virgin Mary in the top register of the Arena Chapel, processing after her wedding, surely, he was striving to convey *leggiadria* like that Dante, Boccaccio, and others variously would prompt their readers to imagine. The effects of light we see in Masaccio's painting are comparable to those Lorenzo later hailed verbally in both poetry and prose, saying that the eyes are the most valuable sense, giving us access to the most beautiful thing of all, which is light.<sup>73</sup> How could a painter such as Leonardo not strive to do better in representing shadow and light when such was the opinion of a powerful patron? Lorenzo admires light for its own, earthly beauty. Additionally, if light was an important motif in the poetry of Petrarch and his followers, it figures also in *novelle*. *Lucretia in De duobus amantibus historia*, for instance, has golden hair and eyes like the Sun.<sup>74</sup> By the time of Sannazaro, the observation of light effects is no longer confined to aspects of the human figure ("*la bella aurora cacciò le notturne stelle*", "*la biancheggiante alba*", "*le tenebre de la oscura notte*"). Vision is becoming a process of seeing, more akin to thinking, not a simple matter of recognition.

In one of Boccaccio's stories (I,8), a man known for his greed and miserliness is reformed by the mere suggestion for a painting. He asks for a subject that will amaze those who see it in his grand hallway and is told to have *la cortesia* depicted.<sup>75</sup> Chagrined and chastened by this indirect criticism, he promises to have it painted in such a manner that the viewer will understand that he, Ermino, knows thoroughly what *cortesia* is. All of this transpires in words only and without much verbal description at all, only that the house is quite beautiful ("*assai bella*"). We are left to our own imaginings of what this painting of *Cortesia* might look like. Although the *novella* might, on the one hand, remind us of Alberti's later instruction that merely the verbal component of an *istoria* can impress, even before its visualization, nevertheless, the *novella* also attests to how seriously fourteenth-century Italians were willing to take pictures as a means of broadcasting ideas. The basic

<sup>71</sup> On Girolamo Parabosco's *I diporti* (1551), which describes a group of men who halt during fishing on the lagoon to tell stories to one another, see ([67], pp. 58–61).

<sup>72</sup> "Die florentinische Freude am eleganten Wort: dies ist der formale Ursprung der europäischen Novelle." ([62], p. 40)

<sup>73</sup> "Sono cagione ancora gli occhi di farci conoscere la più bella cosa che possono conoscere i sensi, cioè la luce." ([8], p. 237)

<sup>74</sup> "Comae illi copiosae et aureis lamine similes," "oculi tanto nitore splendentes, ut in solis modum respicientium intuitus hebetarent." ([58], pp. 4–7)

<sup>75</sup> This and other *novelle* that mention domestic paintings are listed by ([68], p. 15). The story is remembered by della Casa ([20], p. 38).

issue is often persuasiveness rather than lifelikeness, and pictures were held to be very persuasive; in the case, even the verbal idea for a painting was highly persuasive. Visual art could personify words and make concepts visible; images might also suggest qualities via their style and reinforce the values invoked, whether *leggiadria*, *gentilezza*, or *bontà*.<sup>76</sup> It may have been that the Renaissance public so valued the visual arts because they admired *leggiadria*, *gentilezza*, *bontà* and also *autorità* as quotidian qualities, and they recognized them when they saw them in paintings. In other words, they admired in art what they admired in life, and in some cases, what they admired in life they had learned to esteem in *novelle*.

We may even go so far as to suggest that Michelangelo's *Night* would have been as unthinkable without the precedent of Boccaccio as the *Dawn* without Petrarch,<sup>77</sup> both being extraordinarily licentious for their setting without in the least meaning to shock. The *Dawn* expresses a Petrarchan yearning, and the *Night*, a female sexuality well past innocence, a thing quite familiar to readers of *novelle*, but not yet to viewers of visual art and not common in poetry. According to Michelangelo's own jottings (more prose than poetry), *Night*, as Time, has killed Giuliano (or more literally has led him to death, together with Day).<sup>78</sup> The iconography of the two female figures thus might be thought to recall, abstractly, the Temptation and Expulsion, understood as the Fall into mortality through sexuality, a theme established in particular by the worldly-wise figure of *Night*, so unlike anything in ancient art and more like many of the female characters in Boccaccio: canny and rapacious as an owl, capable of wearing a mask, and, most of all, experienced.<sup>79</sup>

Frictions of class and of female decorum such as those we find in Boccaccio are relevant also to Donatello's *Judith* (late 1450s), for instance: the image of a woman (specifically, a widow) killing a man of position, analogous to *Night* killing Giuliano. The city herald wanted the *Judith*, that statue with its complicated inscription about the fall of the proud, commissioned by the class-disrupting Medici,<sup>80</sup> moved out of its prominent position by the door to the Palazzo della Signoria, because it showed a woman killing a man. Biblical as Judith is, she has many soulmates among the determined women of the *Decameron*. Leonardo's caricatures offer yet another instance of a possible analogue to the sometimes merciless humor of the *novelle*. Leonardo, a pioneering advocate of taking one's sketchbook everywhere, based both drawings and writings on what he saw. In the caricatures, he looked at nature boldly and fastened on its faults and failings. In general, the manner in which the *novelle* repeatedly show persons testing the limits of rules in the course of daily life, offers a parallel to artists' gradually increasing boldness in defying the rules, from Giotto with his "O" to Brunelleschi with his egg to Michelangelo with his reputation for capriciousness. More generally still, *novelle* share with the visual arts a dedication to the pleasures of perception, whether of verdant meadows or stately buildings or, most of all, beautiful men and women occupied in negotiating with one another and working their way around the elderly and the impoverished who variously hinder or help.

Renaissance art historians ignore the world of the *novelle* at their peril. The question is not which particular texts provided a source for visual artists, but the rather more amorphous issue of how the arts of a period assimilate both ideas and habits of the eye, often more or less in tandem with one another. Writers and artists both strove to imitate the life they witnessed around themselves, even as they were affecting the thoughts and perceptions of their readers and viewers, whether they did so deliberately or inadvertently.

<sup>76</sup> As per Michelangelo's comment on Donatello's *St. Mark* ([69], pp. 53, 71). The words quoted in the last instance are "uomo da bene."

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Lodovico Dolce. *L'Aretino* [1557], in which Michelangelo's work is compared with Dante's, Raphael's with Petrarch's. Michelangelo's poetry is, much of it, much indebted to Petrarch.

<sup>78</sup> "El Di e la Notte parlano, e dicono: 'Noi abbiàno col nostro veloce corso condotto alla morte el duca Giuliano,' " ([70], p. 55, c. 1520).

<sup>79</sup> The Eve in Michelangelo's *Temptation and Expulsion* on the Sistine Ceiling appears similarly once as young, and after Eden, as much aged. He also responded to criticism of the youthfulness of the Virgin in the *Pietà* of 1500 as signifying her virginity, her inexperience.

<sup>80</sup> "Regna cadunt luxu surgent virtutibus urbes caesa vides humili colla superba manu," ([71], pp. 198–205).

In our turn, if we can understand viewing pictures and reading *novelle* as richly—though sometimes capriciously—intertwined complements, then we may begin to conceive of the history of art as a complex entity assembled from a range of cultural properties, molded as members of the creative class may choose.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The contemporary artist Corin Sworn has expressed interest in Italian tales of mistaken identity, especially as relayed in the *Commedia dell'arte*. For a general consideration of visualizing on the basis of reading, based on mostly twentieth-century examples, see [72], and for an attempt to update Boccaccio, see the film *Boccaccio '70*. 1962, with segments directed by Fellini, Visconti, de Sica, and Monicelli, writing by Italo Calvino and Cesare Zavattini, *inter alia*.



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