

Fall, 1983

ABA Boccaccio Newsletter

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The regional representatives are appointed by the president. They are responsible for organizing meetings in their respective areas and also for gathering and forwarding material for the ABA Newsletter to the editors.

We are happy to announce that Professor John Ahern of Vassar College has been elected Vice President of The American Boccaccio Association.

The Committee to study plans for an ABA sponsored Lectura Boccaccii met twice in Italy this summer, in Florence on June 26th and at the Casa del Boccaccio in Certaldo on July 30th. We agreed to support Professor John Ahern's proposal (Newsletter, spring 1983) amending it only to increase the number of lectura per year and to shorten the time required for the publication of each volume. The matter will be brought to the vote of the ABA members at the Annual Business Meeting in New York.

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For your convenience we again include Professor Ahern's proposal.

Compared to scholarship on Dante's Comedy, scholarship on the Decameron is in its infancy. A glance at Esposito's and Kleinhenz's bibliography for 1939-1979 shows that many novelle have not recently received serious critical attention in Italian or any other language. Two decades ago this situation began to improve. The founding of Studi sul Boccaccio by Vittore Branca in 1963 marks a new era. In the sixth issue of SSB Anna Laura Lepschy's Bibliography of Anglo-American scholarship from 1945-1969 presented a negative picture in striking contrast to what would soon occur. In the past twenty years Boccaccio scholarship on the North American continent has blossomed. The founding of this Association is testimony of this. Readers of this newsletter are well aware of the outpouring of ground-breaking books, articles and translations which are transforming our understanding of the Decameron.

To help direct some of this energy I propose that the ABA organize a series of public readings of all 100 novelle as well as the cornice, to be published later in 10 consecutive volumes. There would be three readings a year at the annual meetings of the MLA, the AAUPI, and the International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo. The speaker would be charged to present in the span of an hour a lively, original and detailed reading of part of the Decameron to a broad academic audience. The published form of these readings would be longer, fuller and amply documented. The uniqueness and completeness of this enterprise would guarantee it a wide following among intelligent readers of Boccaccio, academic or not, undergraduates, graduate students, medievalists, Italianists and Boccaccio specialists. These volumes would soon become indispensable and would be certain of steady sales to college and university libraries, as well as public libraries here and in Italy.

I suggest the following time-table. This year at the annual meeting during the MLA convention in New York there would be open discussion of the project. At that time I will present a resolution that the President name two others to a Lectura Boccaccii Committee on which she will serve along with the Vice President and Secretary. By March 1, 1984 this Committee will submit to the members for voting a formal proposal that the ABA sponsor such a series. (To facilitate the work of this Committee, interested members could begin sending the President their ideas about this project now.) Assuming that this proposal would be accepted, the Committee would appoint the editor of the first volume, who in consultation with it would establish length and format and choose contributors from both established and junior scholars. Work published elsewhere would be avoided. The editor's task would be to stimulate new and original work, of the highest possible quality and employing a variety of critical methods. The first lectura could be scheduled for the 1985 meeting of the MLA.

Assuming three lecturae annually, and eleven lecturae in each volume, the First Day would be completed by spring 1988, and could appear in print sometime in 1989. The series would probably continue into the third decade of the next century. In this way it will stimulate scholarship on the entire Decameron for the next thirty or forty years. To increase the number of annual readings, or to make this solely a publishing venture without public readings might, I think, blunt the effectiveness of this enterprise.

The financing of these lecturae should be worked out volume by volume. When the first volume is well underway, we will have the information necessary to take the proposal to the foundations. The support of the ABA and the promise of solid library sales should make obtaining grants and finding a publisher not insurmountable tasks.

John Ahern
Vassar College

ELECTION OF PRESIDENT

Professor Weaver's present term as president of the ABA ends December 31, 1983. An election will be held at the annual business meeting scheduled for December 28 at 8:30 a.m. in the Senate Room, Sheraton Hotel. The term of office is for two years. Please attend, your participation in the election process is crucial.

CANDIDATES

Elissa Weaver, University of Chicago
Christopher Kleinhenz, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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BOCCACCIO SESSIONS - MLA ANNUAL MEETING - DECEMBER 28, 1983

Annual Meeting of the American Boccaccio Association I

8:30 - 9:45 a.m., Senate, Sheraton

Program arranged by the American Boccaccio Association.

Presiding: Elissa B. Weaver, University of Chicago

1. "Misogyny as Misreading: A Gloss on Decameron 8.7," Millicent Marcus, University of Texas, Austin

2. "Pius Theseus," James McGregor, University of Georgia

3. "Dante and the Filostrato," Janet Smarr, University of Illinois, Urbana

A brief business meeting will precede the presentation of papers.

Annual Meeting of the American Boccaccio Association II

10:15 - 11:30 a.m., Embassy, Sheraton

Program arranged by the American Boccaccio Association

Presiding: Paul Giordano, Rosary College, River Forest, Illinois

1. "Narrators in Boccaccio and Chaucer," SunHee Kim
Gertz, Susquehanna University

2. "Chaucer's Shipman's Tale and Decameron 8.1,"
Carol F. Heffernan, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

3. "Coleridge's 'Substantiation' of the Past: The
Garden of Boccaccio," Susan M. Luther, Vanderbilt University

4. "Dryden and Boccaccio", Rachel A. Miller, U.C.L.A.

The American Boccaccio Association's reception will follow the second session. Time and place will be announced at both sessions.

Also of interest:

December 29 - From Fabliau to Nouvelle: Delineation of a Genre
8:30 - 9:45 a.m., Chelsea Room, Sheraton.

"The Decameron and the Heptameron: Frame as
Structuring Device," Itala T. Rutter, University of Illinois, Chicago.

In the spring the ABA is sponsoring two sections at the American Association of Italian Studies Annual Meeting (formerly AAUPI). For more information on the Boccaccio sessions or the conference in general, contact Prof. Peter Bondonella, Center for Italian Studies, Ballantine Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

At this time we have not received information of other conferences where the ABA will sponsor sessions. Information regarding these conferences will be included in the spring Newsletter.

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BOCCACCIANA

Beginning with this edition of the Newsletter, the ABA will include a bibliography of recent studies on Boccaccio compiled by Professor Christopher Kleinhenz. This feature is limited to the Fall edition of the Newsletter and will complement bibliographical information submitted by members of the Association. Our thanks go to Professor Kleinhenz for this valuable contribution.

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- _____, "The Sweet New Style Reconsidered: A Gloss on the Tale of Cimone ("Decameron" V, 1)," Italian Quarterly, XXI, 81 (Summer, 1980), 5-16.
- NEEDLER, HOWARD I., "Song of a Ravished Nightingale: Attitudes toward Antiquity in Decameron X.8," in Literary Review, XXIII (1980), 502-518.
- OLIVAGNOLI, FRANCA CELLI, "'Spazialità' nel Decameron," Stanford Italian Review, III, 1 (Spring, 1983), 91-106.
- POOLE, GORDON, "Boccaccio's Caccia di Diana," Canadian Journal of Italian Studies, V, 3 (Spring, 1982), 149-156.
- RUTHERFORD, CHARLES S., "Troilus' Farewell to Criseyde: The Idealist as Clairvoyant and Rhetorician," Papers on Language and Literature, XVII, 3 (Summer, 1981), 245-254.
- STOREY, HARRY WAYNE, "Parodic Structure in 'Alibech and Rustico': Antecedents and Traditions," Canadian Journal of Italian Studies, V, 3 (Spring, 1982), 163-176.
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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Madison U. Sowell was recently elected to the Executive Council of the
Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association. Scholars interested in
reading papers on Boccaccio at an annual (March or April) meeting of the RMMRA
should contact Dr. Sowell (Department of French and Italian, Brigham Young
University, Provo, Utah 84602).

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BOOK REVIEW

Potter, Joy Hambuechen. Five Frames for the 'Decameron': Communication and Social Systems in the 'Cornice'. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982. pp. 230.

The reader of this volume will find a wealth of new readings (anthropological, sociological, and semiotic) potentially leading to new insights into the Dec., though he may be required to stretch his imagination to appreciate the parallels drawn by the author between medieval stories and, e.g., Javan theater (36), lobefinned fish (54), and the certain rituals of New Guinea (55).

After observing that B. lived in a transitional epoch marked by economic and social collapse climaxing in the plague of 1348, P. equates the cornice with the liminal phase of passage rites experienced by tribal and early agrarian societies. This stage entails a retreat from troubled society by a company of citizens who scrutinize their cultural cosmos with a view to regenerating a healthy society.¹ P. affirms that B. "more or less deliberately" drew "on certain frequent if not universal structures and formats that consciously or unconsciously act to confer ritual importance and solemnity on the group retreat"(27). Aspects of the frame tale corresponding to the pattern of liminal rituals are the following: a) the protagonists reflect oligarchical Florentine aristocratic society inasmuch as they are actual living citizens who have servants and establish a rotating rulership; b) the symbolic ritual aspects of the cornice include leaving the city from a sacred place (Santa Maria Novella) for a sacred space (formal gardens in the country) which, though outside the limits, nonetheless reflects the society during a sacred time not belonging to the everyday world (B. counts 10 days to the 15 of "real time"); and c) the frame protagonists are all on an equal footing. A further ritualistic element is the chastity of the protagonists, which insures a successful retreat (free from magico-religious dangers inherent in coitus), and will better prepare them to lead a revitalized society. The fundamental role of the symbolic acts of the exemplary cornice is to stabilize social relations in a time of social upheaval.

P. differentiates between B.'s increasingly solemn invocations to God in the "outer layer", where he is narrator, and the anticlerical stories of the "inner layer"; she further underscores the civic usefulness of the stories, which reflects B.'s hope of preserving old virtues in a new society. Although medieval exemplum is discredited by exaggeration or irony, B's tale of Filippo Balducci shows that stories teach and that church sermons should not be taken seriously, all of which leads smoothly into the next chapter's discussion on the need to desacralize the Church.

P. strives to sever B.'s concept of God from the church: B.'s story of the plague points up the failure of the religious system to perform its proper functions from a civic point of view, while God's wrath (symbolized in the plague) precipitates the liminal ritual of the cornice. P. bases her analysis of human communication on Roy A. Rappaport's anthropological study of discourse, which elucidates the social importance of the sacred. The function of the church is essential to the fabric of society insofar as its sanctity preserves the reliability of human communication. Social interactions must retain their orderliness lest messages lose credibility, lies be deemed trustworthy, and the further breakdown of society ensue. Ser Cepparello abuses the sanctity of the deathbed confession to save himself and his

from ill repute. The rebirth of society will be possible only when the church is desacralized.

Church liturgy is consciously avoided, while Christian ritual is not. The failure of the church warranted an attack through the medium of discourse, B.'s most powerful teaching method. In Frate Cipolla's sermon, the cornice audience learns first that the sanctity of the offices of the church certifies untruths, and second that relics lack divine power.

In Chap. 3, P. focuses on the semiotic and numerological "signifiers", pointing out that B.'s Christian desire to counter social crisis is evidenced in "the literary quality of the text". P. alludes to the theory of poesia in the Genealogia, the solemnity of the plague description, and the attention given to medieval rhetoric and classical works, as well as the frequent references to literary codes in the "outer layer" of the Dec. Since the frame protagonists function as symbols of exemplary lives (as in frescoes depicting a narrative), P. contends that B. emphasizes the semiotic aspect in order to call attention to the importance of the text. The series of gardens where the storytelling takes place is also a sign-function harking back to literary tradition and to the circle as the perfect form. Furthermore, the metaphysical dignity of the various numbers is incorporated in 18, 28, and 25, which B. mentions in reference to the age of the frame protagonists: and the sum of the numerals from 1 to 7 is 28, a "perfect" creation; 18 is the product of 6 and 3. None of the men is older than 25, the square of 5 (made up of the female 2 and the male 3); and 5 represents the world and its inhabitants in the Bible. The dualistic reading of the Dec. is suggested by the structured cornice creating a cultural model set against the chaotic world of the tales; thus the literary codes of the Dec. and the Prencipe Galeotto coexist.

Chap. IV deals with B.'s deliberate and non-deliberate sign-functions in the semiotic system of the cornice. The former, P. suggests, provide evidence concerning B.'s purpose in writing the book. The latter (unconscious) sign-functions reflect the changing models of the time and explain the tension in the Dec. between traditional and "revolutionary" values. Under the subheading "Codes and Their Modification in the Cornice", P. correlates the function of the cornice to Umberto Eco's definition of an aesthetic text, i.e., one which requires a reassessment of the content. Such reassessment in turn leads to a process of code-changing and new awareness of the world. The architectonic structure of the Dec. consists of 5 concentric "worlds", each connected formally to a "tale" told by the author.² B. highlights the "telling" in his book, thus revealing the eminently aspect of the work. The concentric form traditionally encloses something precious, but, in lieu of the nine heavens surrounding the Light of God, B.'s 5 circles have the world at center. Thus B. manipulates reassessment of the content, and substitutes the social for the sacred, the human world for the world-as-a-reflection-of-God.

Basing her findings on Lotman and Uspensky's classification of cultures as either expression-centered (viewing the world as a predetermined "text made up of signs") or content-centered (presupposing freedom of choice in content and its relationship with expression), P. interprets the Dec. as an instance of the former; but, with regard to antithetic systems, the work seems to be a product of the content-centered culture based on "order vs. disorder". The expression-centered

culture reflects the Middle Ages and the content-centered the Renaissance. She aligns herself with Mazzotta's idea of B. examining his world from "the marginal space of literature" in order to understand it.

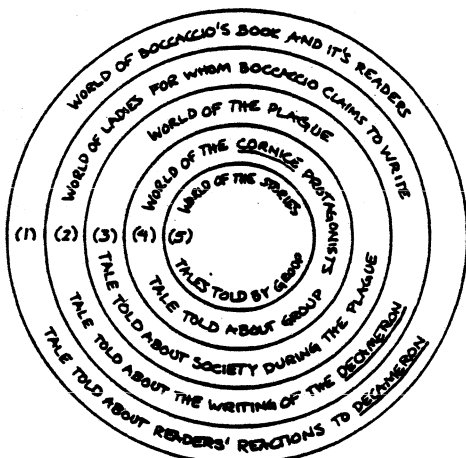
In Chap. V, P. shows that the fivefold structure enhances the value of the core stories, guards B. against accusations of sedition, and insulates the reader from the occasionally subversive stories. The Dec. focuses inward to the "lovesick ladies" and outward to the world of readers.³ B. manipulates his own structural device by "frame shifts" and "Frame breaks". The passage in which B. sets out his aim of narrating a hundred stories or fables or parables or histories has the reader confront frames 2, 3, 4, and (implicitly) 5; and the change in register from an elegant latinate style in the beginning of the Preface to the flippant remark at the end constitutes a frame break. The Defense in the Intro. to Day IV is metanarrative in essence; it opens in frame 2 with "dearest ladies" but very soon switches to frame 1, whose audience is being discussed along with that of 2. Moreover, B. has the frame 1 audience objecting to the fiction of 2 and calling on the ladies of 2 to defend him. The cornice protagonists shift easily from their world of frame 4 to 5; in the opening and conclusion of each day and by discussing the tales. The effect of these "frame shifts" and "breaks" is to bring this audience of frame 1 face to face with the frame 5 stories and draw them into the liminal experience (the re-education of society). Conversely, the stories reach back out from frames 4 to 1, through use of the canzone, through introductory comments, and through narrators being left within their confines (71 instances). Frame 2 is intertwined in the stories by 90 addresses to the "lovesick ladies", and by frame protagonists referring to each other's tales. Frame 5 stories are signifiers in 4 (e.g., Filostrato's fleeting reference to Alibech). To emphasize that frame ambiguity once more proves to be the keynote of the work and that the tales rebel against the aristocratic values aimed at by the author, P. cites Dioneo's allusion to VII, 1 and his quip about "bella roba" in X, 10 as frame breaks.

This book buttresses earlier interpretations of the Dec. with timely evidence from anthropology and semiotics. P.'s style is straightforward (though careful reading of the notes is essential). Her chief contribution, in my judgment, resides in having elucidated B.'s keen understanding of the importance of social interaction and human communication to the fabric of society.

Reviewed by Angela M. Iovino, Washington, D.C.

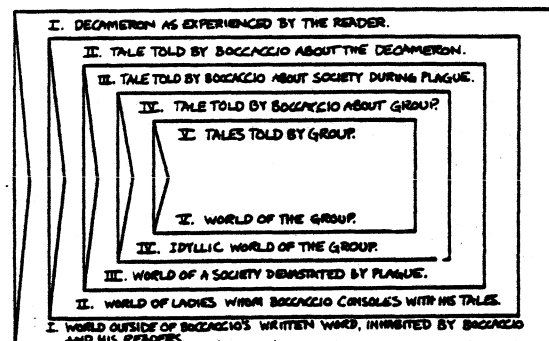
¹For a different analysis see Theodolinda Barolini, "The Wheel of the Decameron," Romance Philology 36 (1983), 521-39.

² Diagram, p. 96.



The structure of the Decameron is shown in the diagram.

³ Diagram, p. 121.



CALL FOR PAPERS

The American Boccaccio Association

BOCCACCIO SEMINAR

To be held at the MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION Annual Meeting

Washington D.C., December 27 - 30, 1984

We invite the participation of Boccaccio scholars and also that of other Italianists, comparatists, Chaucerians (who may want to extend the subject in a different direction and other scholars whose studies include the works of Boccaccio.

DEADLINE: March 10, 1984

Abstracts of no more than one page are to be sent to:

Professor Paul Giordano
Secretary-Treasurer
Department of Modern Foreign Languages
Rosary College
River Forest, Illinois 60305

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