On Time, Theologians, and Virgins. A Note on Decameron, ii. 7

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the interdiscursive connections between *Decameron*, II. 7, and one of the most debated *quaestiones de potentia Dei*, highlighting the parodic dimension of Boccaccio's discourse. In Boccaccio's story, which according to the intentions of the narrator Panfilo should demonstrate the infallibility of divine action, Alatiel 're-establishes' her lost virginity with a false account of her past adventures. In the first half of the fourteenth century, the topic of infallibility was closely associated with the consideration of God's omnipotence and related to the *quaestio* as to whether God can undo the past and restore virginity. Boccaccio borrowed from the *quaestio de corrupta* the motifs of chastity lost and restored, and of the possibility of erasing a past event. In this tale, parody does not issue from a reversal of the source but from abasement of the original theme: the power to annul a past event does not pertain to God, but is instead a human prerogative, which is exerted amongst humankind.

On the first two Days of the *Decameron*, Panfilo begins his tales with a long theological premise. This feature of Ciappelletto's and Alatiel's narratives is unique in the book, since Boccaccio does not focus on topical polemic against the clergy, as he does in presenting other stories, but on traditional theological themes. *Decameron*, I. 1 refers to God's mercy in potentially saving an unremorseful sinner or in fulfilling prayers addressed to false saints;[1] while Alatiel's story, from Panfilo's point of view, is supposed to prove the infallibility of divine action when God bestows upon His creatures what each of them needs.[2]

Between the end of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century, that is, from the condemnation of the Averroistic theses in 1277 to the condemnation of radical nominalism in 1347, we find that both topics were closely associated with the consideration of God's omnipotence and, in this context, related to two *quaestiones disputatae* with which any student of theology and any commentator on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* would have been familiar. The object of these enquiries was to understand whether God's power could be limited by His mercy or by His justice (and, of course, if it could be limited at all). For this purpose theologians attempted to resolve a curious case, namely the *quaestio* of whether God could save an impenitent sinner such as Judas. They also sought to understand whether divine omnipotence could be determined by the logical principle of non-contradiction, or by

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[1] 'Manifesta cosa è che, sì come le cose temporali sono tutte transitorie e mortali, così in sé e fuor di sé esser piene di noia, d'angoscia e di fatica e a infiniti pericoli soggiacere; alli quali senza niuno fallo né potremmo noi […] durare né ripararci, se spezial *grazia* di Dio forza e avvedimento non ci prestasse. La quale a noi e in noi non è da credere che per alcun nostro merito discenda, ma dalla sua propria *benignità*': Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Turin: Einaudi, 1987), I. 1, 3–4, henceforth *Decameron*; emphases mine, here and throughout.

[2] See *Decameron*, II. 7. 6.

God's infallibility, or by His providence.[3] With reference to this problem, theologians, students, and commentators on Peter Lombard pondered an even more curious case: can God restore virginity to a woman who has lost it: that is, can divine power undo the past?

The first of these questions can be easily recognized in Panfilo's words at the end of *Decameron*, I. 1, where he states that we cannot foresee whether or not God has received among the blessed a notary from Prato who is described as having Judas's characteristic traits.[4] The second, more specific issue, that of undoing the past and restoring virginity, is identifiable as the narrative motif on which the conclusion of *Decameron*, II. 7 is focused: here Alatiel erases her own past and 're-establishes' her lost virginity with a false account of her adventures.[5] In this tale, however, the reversibility of time is not only a thematic motif implicit in the girl's final speech, but also a formal constant. In this story of travels, abductions, and murders, where everything unfolds rapidly, if somewhat mechanically, narrative time itself, just like the experience of its main character, seems reversible. This is so, not only because Alatiel regains her lost maidenhood by means of her narrative, but also because her adventures reiterate the same diegetic scheme, as if in a sort of *mise en abyme* of the paradox of God and the virgin.[6]

My discussion of *Decameron*, II. 7 aims at outlining the interdiscursive connections between the novella and the paradox of restored chastity, and at highlighting the parodic dimension of Boccaccio's discourse.

Can God Restore a Woman's Lost Virginity?

Let us begin by briefly examining the chronological development of the *quaestio* as to whether God can renew virginity. The topic had been mooted for the first time by Saint Jerome, in a long, treatise-like letter to Julia Eustochium, in the spring of 384. Eustochium was the daughter of one of Jerome's aristocratic disciples, who lived in seclusion in one of the apartments of her Roman residence. Jerome encouraged the young woman to persist in this ascetic practice by addressing this short treatise *de virginitate* to her.[7] In his letter Jerome stated – openly, though with some trepidation at the theological boldness of his assertion – that not even God had the power to restore virginity to a girl who had lost it. He could of course remit the girl's sin and reintegrate her body, but He could not bestow on her the crown of virginity: 'Audenter loquor: cum omnia Deus possit, suscitare virginem non potest post ruinam. Valet quidem liberare de poena, sed non valet coronare corruptam' [I will say it boldly; though God can do all things, he cannot raise a virgin up after she has fallen. He is able to free one who has been corrupted from the penalty of her sin, but he refuses her the crown].[8]

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[3]In the philosophical debates of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the *quaestio de corrupta* and the consideration of the possibility of undoing the past were especially connected to the relationship between divine power and divine infallibility. The latter was understood both as the foreknowledge and the perfection of divine agency. For these topics I refer to Eugenio Randi, *Il sovrano e l'orologiaio. Due immagini di Dio nel dibattito sulla 'potentia absoluta' fra XIII e XIV secolo* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1987), pp. 24, 31.

[4]'Il quale [Ciappelletto] negar non voglio esser possibile lui esser beato nella presenza di Dio, per ciò che, come che la sua vita fosse scellerata e malvagia, egli poté in su lo stremo aver sì fatta contrizione, che per avventura Idio ebbe misericordia di lui e nel suo regno il ricevette: ma per ciò che questo n'è occulto, secondo quello che ne può apparire ragiono […]' (*Decameron*, I. 1. 89). On Ciappelletto's similarity to Judas, see Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio medievale e nuovi studi sul 'Decameron'*, 7th edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1990), p. 158.

[5]In *Boccaccio umanista. Studi su Boccaccio e Apuleio* (Ravenna: Longo, 2014), Igor Candido also suggests a link between *Decameron*, II. 7 and the paradox of restored virginity (p. 92).

[6]Although almost every reader of *Decameron*, II. 7 has remarked on repetitive structures in its narration, I refer particularly to Cesare Segre, 'Comicità strutturale nella novella di Alatiel', in *Le strutture e il tempo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 145–59, for an analytical approach to the iterative pattern of the plot.

[7]It is Jerome himself who describes his letter as a *libellus*, whereas titles such as *de uirginitate*, *de uirginibus*, *de uirginitate servanda* occur in several ancient manuscripts. See Saint Jérôme, *Lettres*, ed. and trans. by Jérôme Labourt (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1949), p. 110, note *ad locum*.

[8]Saint Jérôme, *Lettres*, p. 115 (*PL*, 22, 397); English translation from: Saint Jerome, *Select Letters*, ed. and trans. by Frederick A. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 62–63. Saint Jerome's epistle to Eustochium was also included in one of the most important sources of canon law, the *Decretum Gratiani*: see Jean-François Genest, *Prédétermination et liberté créée à Oxford au XIVe siècle. Buckingham contre Bradwardine* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992), pp. 77, 120. For further details on the *quaestio de corrupta* in canon law sources see also n. 25, below.

Around 1067 Peter Damian resumed the theme by centring his *De divina omnipotentia* on the paradox of virginity – the complete title is *De divina omnipotentia in reparatione corruptae et factis infectis reddendis opusculum*. Because the treatise was occasioned by a conversation at high table during one of Damian's visits to Montecassino, it was dedicated to the abbot, Peter's friend Desiderium, and to his monks. It is for this reason that two of the rare codices that transmit the booklet were preserved in the abbey's library.[9] Peter Damian recast the problem in the terms that would be employed by the entire subsequent tradition. From his point of view, the paradox of the virgin suggested two different questions concerning God's omnipotence, two pernicious doubts which only the *sapientes huius mundi*, well versed in dialectics but ignorant in God's eyes, could have raised: 1. Can God restore the woman's physical and spiritual integrity? 2. Can He undo the past?

> Virginem sane suscitari post lapsum duobus intellegitur modis: aut scilicet iuxta meritorum plenitudinem aut iuxta carnis integritatem.[10]

> [To be sure, for a virgin to be 'raised up' after falling is understood in two ways, namely, either with respect to the fullness of merit or with respect to the integrity of the flesh]

> Ad illud postremo quod in hac disputandi materia plures obiciunt sub sanctitatis tuae iudicio video respondendum. Aiunt enim: 'Si Deus, ut asseris, in omnibus est omnipotens, numquid potest hoc agere ut quae factae sunt, facta non fuerint?'[11]

> [I see I must respond finally to what many people, on the basis of your holiness's [own] judgment, raise as an objection on the topic of this dispute. For they say: 'If, as you assert, God is omnipotent in all things, can he manage this, that things that have been made were not made?']

Damian answered the first question readily and without hesitation – but then nobody, not even the perverse *sapientes mundi*, would ever have questioned that God can heal bodies with a miracle, and minds with His grace.[12] The second doubt was more challenging and required reasoning on the logical absurdity that Rome had never existed, even though it had in fact been founded.[13] Faced with this paradox, most of the theologians of the following generation (for instance, Anselm and Hugh of Saint Victor) would have conceded, although sometimes reluctantly, that after all not even God can bring it to pass that the girl in the example had never lost her maidenhood. His power could not annul the fact itself, but only its outcomes (loss of physical integrity, loss of the dignity intrinsic to virgins).

The argument put forward by Peter Damian, in his *De omnipotentia*, was very different. God can indeed undo the past, just as He can permit that only one of the future contingents will come about; this does not imply any curtailment of His infallible foreknowledge, for no future event occurs by necessity. By analogy, it is wrong to conceive past occurrences as necessary, because past, present, and future are co-present with God's eternity, and do not differ from one another:[14] 'Sicut ergo potuit

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[9]Although it remained almost unknown during the two centuries following its composition, Damian's booklet was read widely in the fourteenth century (Genest, p. 119). However, in his *Vita sanctissimi patris Petri Damiani*, probably written at Petrarch's request in 1361, Boccaccio does not connect Damian to Montecassino (whose library Boccaccio visited in search of manuscripts); nor does he refer to any of Damian's works. On the *Vita*, see Susanna Barsella, 'Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Peter Damian: Two Models of the Humanist Intellectual', *MLN*, 121 (2006), 16–48. On the manuscripts from Montecassino which may be connected to Boccaccio, see Emanuele Casamassima, 'Dentro lo scrittoio del Boccaccio. I codici della tradizione', *Il Ponte*, 34/6 (1978), 730–39.

[10]S. Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia e altri opuscoli*, ed. by Paolo Brezzi, trans. by Bruno Nardi (Florence: Vallecchi, 1943), pp. 66–68; English translation from: Peter Damian, *Selections from his 'Letter on Divine Omnipotence'*, trans. by Paul V. Spade (1995), <http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/damian.pdf>, p. 4.

[11]Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, p. 70; Peter Damian, *Selections from his 'Letter on Divine Omnipotence'*, p. 5.

[12]Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, pp. 68–70.

[13]'Non inepte possumus dicere quia potest Deus facere in illa invariabili et constantissima semper aeternitate sua, ut quod factum fuerat apud hoc transire nostrum factum non sit. Scilicet ut dicamus: Roma, quae antiquitus condita est, potest Deus agere ut condita non fuerit' (Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, p. 146).

[14]'Nec tempus intus in conspectu eius defluit, quod apud nos foris per exteriora decurrit; unde fit ut in aeternitate eius omnia fixa permaneant, quae non fixa exstrinsecus saeculorum volumina indesinenter emanant. […] Quid est ergo, quod ille non valeat de praeteritis omnibus vel futuris, qui videlicet omnia facta vel facienda sine ullo transitu defigit et statuit in sua praesentia maiestatis?' (Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, p. 96). In the fourteenth century, this argument became one of the issues most widely debated among theologians; see, for instance, the Augustinian Gregorius de Arimino, *In primo Sententiarum nuperrime impressus* (Venice: Bonetus de Locatellis, 1503), 145v; see also Magistri Guillelmi Altissidoriensis *Summa aurea*, ed. by Jean Ribaillier (Paris-Rome: Éditions du CNRS, Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1980), p. 214.

Deus, antequam quaeque facta sunt ut non fierent, ita nihilominus potest et nunc et quae facta sunt non fuissent' [Therefore, just as God was able, before all things were made, [to bring it about] that they would not be made, so no less is he able even now [to bring it about] that the things that were made had not existed].[15] Damian ascribed to the dialecticians against whom he argued the objections that would be raised over the next three centuries by many theologians, including Aquinas. One of these objections was, that God cannot undo the past because this conflicts with the principle of non-contradiction (if God could undo the past, a single given thing would simultaneously be and not be).[16] Further objections related to the coherence and perfection of the divine project of creation. First, if God had the power to undo what He once permitted to happen, He would be in contradiction with Himself; second, He would not act (that is: He would not have acted, if such a distinction of tenses could apply to divine a-temporality) according to His perfect goodness and providence. Why else would He destroy His own doings if not to revise and correct His past agency?

Peter Damian responded to these objections with one single argument: for a woman to have lost her chastity is evil, and evil is *prope nihil*. Hence, a God willing to obliterate such a past event would not contradict Himself, because God is not the cause of evil[17] – otherwise how could the thief, the perjurer, the murderer be rehabilitated?[18] For the same reason, His action is perfect and providential. Conversely, God would not cancel a past good, and to enquire if he may do so is as blasphemous as enquiring if God may destroy His own creations.[19]

Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and particularly from the 1320s onwards, the paradox of restored virginity or 'paradox of the virgin', became one of the most frequent *quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*, which were usually discussed in distinctions 42-44 of the commentaries on the first book of Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*, a mandatory assignment in the *cursus studiorum* of every student of theology.[20] The paradox is mentioned, for instance, in one of the volumes listed in the catalogue of the *parva libraria* of Santo Spirito in Florence: William of Auxerre's *Summa aurea*.[21] This treatise, written between 1215 and 1229, resumes the topics and arrangement of Lombard's *Sentences*, without being a commentary in the strict sense. In the *Summa aurea*, the *quaestio* 'Utrum Deus possit facere de corrupta incorruptam' may be found in chapter VI of book XI *de potentia Dei*, between the question 'Utrum Deus posset dampnare Petrum et salvare Iudam', which I presume to be implied in

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[15]Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, p. 148; Peter Damian, *Selections from his 'Letter on Divine Omnipotence'*, p. 9. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to determine whether Damian held the 'standard view' – that is, the idea that God could have created a different world in which the woman had never been corrupted and Rome never founded – or whether he instead held the 'outrageous view' that God can modify a past event even after this event has actually occurred. On these two different interpretations of the *De omnipotentia*, see Lawrence Moonan, 'Impossibility and Peter Damian', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 62 (1980), 146–63, and Randi, pp. 25–27.

[16]According to Peter Damian the principle of non-contradiction does not apply to divine power: 'Cum ergo Deus omnia possit, cur addubitas Deum hoc non posse, ut aliquid simul sit et non sit, si hoc fieri bonum est?' (*De divina omnipotentia*, p. 102).

[17]Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, p. 104.

[18]Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, p. 114.

[19]'Quando igitur quaestio ista proponitur ut dicatur: quomodo potest Deus hoc agere ut quod factum fuit factum non fuerit, respondeat sanae fidei frater, quia quod factum est, si malum fuit, non aliquid sed nihil fuit […]. Quod, si bonum fuit quod factum est, a Deo utique factum est […]. Atque ideo tale est quod dicitur: quomodo facere Deus potest ut quod factum fuit, factum non fuerit? ac si dicatur: potest Deus agere ut, quod fecit ipse, non fecerit?' Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia*, pp. 142–44.

[20]On the fortune of the *quaestiones* concerning the divine power of undoing the past, see William J. Courtenay, 'John of Mirecourt and Gregory of Rimini on Whether God Can Undo the Past', *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 39 (1972), 224–56, and 40 (1973), 147–74: 'The question re-entered the scholastic literature in the wake of renewed interest over the problem of future contingents, the importance of which increased steadily after 1320, becoming a major issue in the theological faculties of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries' (p. 148).

[21]Antonia Mazza, 'L'inventario della *parva libraria* di Santo Spirito e la biblioteca del Boccaccio', *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica*, 9 (1966), 1–74 (p. 53); at p. 61 William of Auxerre's *Summa aurea* is classified among the 'improbable' codices, that is, among those manuscripts 'che nessuna considerazione incoraggia ad annettere in qualche modo al Boccaccio, che non li cita o che è in ogni modo lontanissimo dalla sfera di interessi alla quale essi appartengono'. I believe that this point of view should be reconsidered in the light of recent research both on Boccaccio's library (Maddalena Signorini, 'Considerazioni preliminari sulla biblioteca di Giovanni Boccaccio', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 39 (2011), 367–95) and on Boccaccian intertextuality, especially as regards religious literature (Carlo Delcorno, *Exemplum e letteratura. Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989); Idem, 'Ironia/Parodia', in *Lessico critico decameroniano*, ed. by Renzo Bragantini and Pier Massimo Forni (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), pp. 162–91).

Ciappelletto's tale, and the paragraph devoted to the perfection of divine action, namely 'Utrum [Deus] possit aliquid melius facere quam faciat'.[22]

The same topic was addressed in a work which Boccaccio had very probably read when writing the *Decameron*: Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*. Aquinas considers the possibility that God may undo the past in the fourth article of *quaestio* 25 of the first part. In the *Summa theologiae* too, the paradox precedes the discussion 'Utrum Deus quae facit, possit facere meliora', which is to be found at article 6, a section focused on the relation between divine power and divine perfection. In the remarkable article that examines the possibility of undoing the past, Aquinas holds that divine power does not encompass contradiction because this is contrary to the nature of created things; hence God cannot undo the past, and for this reason cannot reconstitute virginity:

> Ad tertium dicendum quod omnem corruptionem mentis et corporis Deus auferre potest a muliere corrupta, hoc tamen ab ea removeri non poterit, quod corrupta non fuerit. Sicut etiam ab aliquo peccatore auferre non potest quod non peccaverit, et quod caritatem non amiserit.[23]

> [God can remove all corruption of the mind and body from a woman who has fallen; but the fact that she had been corrupt cannot be removed from her; as also is it impossible that the fact of having sinned or having lost charity thereby can be removed from the sinner.]

God can rebuild the woman's bodily integrity, He can redeem her sin, but He can no longer crown her as a virgin. He cannot undo the past, just as He cannot bring it about that a sinner has not committed his sin, though He can restore lost grace to the sinner and welcome him among the blessed. God's power does not apply to all that is past – that is, it does not apply to the principle of non-contradiction because for Aquinas the validity of the principles of logic is granted by God himself. And this is the only limitation on His omnipotence.

Alatiel and the Paradox of the Virgin

Though I cannot point to a specific source for the *Decameron* novella, the paradox of the virgin was a standard topic in books that were very widely read, such as commentaries on the *Sentences*. The question could be encountered in any library containing the basic texts of Scholastic philosophy, even those that were minimally stocked. It was a matter much debated in fourteenth-century theological controversies, and particularly in some of the cultural circles to which Boccaccio was linked, such as the Augustinian milieu.[24] Finally, it recurred in books that Boccaccio probably owned, such as the *Summa Aurea*, or which he had read before composing the *Decameron*, such as the *Summa theologiae*.[25]

Boccaccio may have borrowed from the *quaestio* the thematic motif of chastity lost and restored, of a past event erased, of the woman who regains the 'crown' due to virgins as a result of an annulment of the past. *Post-factum*, Alatiel marries a king, the king of Algarve, as she was about to do *ante-factum* when she was rightfully entitled to that crown as a virgin princess. Moreover, as we have seen, in writings concerning divine power the *quaestio de corrupta* was usually addressed immediately after enquiry concerning the salvation of the sinner, or was interwoven into the same paragraph, and was related to the topics of divine infallibility and goodness, which return as accessory motifs in Panfilo's

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[22]The *Summa aurea* resolves the *quaestio* as follows: 'Unde Ieronimus loquitur cum suppositione praeteriti, cum dicit: Deus non potest de corrupta facere virginem; non enim potest facere cum suppositione praeteriti, potest tamen secundum se cum sit omnipotens' (p. 215).

[23]Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa theologiae*, in *Opera omnia, iussu impensaque Leonis XIII edita* (Rome: Typographia Polyglotta, 1888), IV, I, q. 25, a. 4 ad 3, p. 296B; English translation from: Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947), I, 259. Aquinas also addresses the paradox of the virgin in one of his *quaestiones quodlibetales* (*Quaestiones de quolibet*, V, q. 2, a. 1).

[24]Courtenay, p. 148: 'Most of the elements of the problem […], including *pro* and *con* arguments, were accessible to the fourteenth century through sources readily available in almost any scholastic library'. On the fortune of the paradox in Augustinian milieus see also Daniela Ciammetti, *Necessità e contingenza in Gregorio da Rimini* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011), pp. 194–216.

[25]It should be noted that, especially in the fourteenth century, the paradox of the virgin was connected to the distinction between God's *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, widely used also in canon law. With regard to this topic, some canon law sources also mentioned the *quaestio de corrupta* (Randi, pp. 33–36). Hence Boccaccio may also have become aware of the paradox through his legal studies.

long presentation.[26] In the short passage from the *Summa theologiae* quoted above, the two paradoxes of the virgin and the sinner are directly connected. Through a rapid and extremely clear association of thoughts, Aquinas explains that God's power does not apply to either of the two cases, for the same logical reasons.

It has not been necessary so far to enter into the details of this complicated theological dispute, and I do not wish to do so now. What in general may be said to emerge from this controversy is a variance between liberty and perfection, omnipotence and infallibility, which gives rise to paradoxical outcomes. A Divinity capable of undoing the past, renewing virginity, or cancelling the sinful act itself, gains in power but loses in perfection, gains in liberty but loses in justice.[27] For fourteenth-century theologians, this contradiction was not easy to resolve. In the *Decameron*, however, women seem to be one step ahead of theologians, since they can restore their lost virginity without any need for divine intervention, but rather by using the arts of narrative and representation to undo the past. What is more, certain wicked notaries from Prato also seem to be one step ahead, since they contrive to be proclaimed saints by the same means. The tales of Ciappelletto and Alatiel are symmetrical not only because of their long theological introductions, but also as regards the narrative structure of their conclusions. In both those conclusions, facts – lost virginity, sins committed – are reversed by means of a sophisticated communication strategy, which in Ciappelletto's case also includes body language. Panfilo's introduction to Alatiel's adventures relates to the ideas of fortune and providence. Within a thematic framework derived from Juvenal's satire x, he argues that, as the things that we usually desire are never safe from the blows of fortune, none of them really makes us happy.[28] Many seek riches and honours, believing that in their possession they will enjoy the highest happiness; but once they attain their goal, instead of the expected happiness, they find only unhappiness and death. Yet it is not only these traditional *bona fortunae* that are exposed to misfortune, but the more desirable *bona corporis*, such as beauty and strength, may also bring about ruin.[29] Therefore, with regard to these sorts of goods, we should dispose ourselves to receive and desire only as much as God's infallible providence has determined to bestow upon us:

> E acciò che io partitamente di tutti gli umani disiderii non parli, affermo niuno poterne essere con pieno avvedimento, sì come sicuro da fortunosi casi, che da' viventi si possa eleggere: per che, se dirittamente operar volessimo, *a quello prendere e possedere ci dovremmo disporre che Colui ci donasse, il quale solo ciò che ci fa bisogno cognosce e puolci dare*. (*Decameron*, II. 7. 6)

Thus, the charming ladies of the *brigata* should not wish to be too fair, nor seek too eagerly to increase their natural beauty. The better to persuade them of this point, Panfilo tells the story of the ill-fortuned Alatiel, whose mesmerizing beauty causes her to become the lover of nine different men in the course of four years.[30] Giancarlo Mazzacurati and Lucia Battaglia have observed that

[26]See *Decameron*, II. 7. 6. The topic of God's infallibility is mentioned in a passage of X. 8, where the capacity of the gods to undo the past is called into question: 'vogliono alcuni esser di necessità ciò che ci si fa o farà mai, quantunque alcuni altri sieno che *questa necessità impongano a quel ch'è fatto solamente*. Le quali oppinioni se con alcuno avvedimento riguardate fieno, assai apertamente si vedrà che il riprender cosa che frastornar non si possa, niuna altra cosa è a fare se non volersi più savio mostrar che gl'iddii, li quali noi dobbiam credere che con *ragion perpetua e senza alcuno error* dispongano e governino noi e le nostre cose'.
[27]See Randi: 'È fra quella Scilla e questa Cariddi che la distinzione [between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta*] si trova a navigare, espressione essa stessa della difficoltà di conciliare infallibilità con onnipotenza' (p. 31).
[28]See Giuseppe Velli, 'Memoria', in *Lessico critico decameroniano*, pp. 222–48 (pp. 244–48).
[29]In a traditional Aristotelian classification, with which Boccaccio was familiar, riches and honours are exterior goods and particularly *bona fortunae*; no wonder therefore that they are exposed to the vagaries of fortune. More desirable than these are *bona corporis*, such as health and beauty, which occupy an intermediate position between exterior and interior goods, that is, moral and intellectual virtues. See *Aristotelis Ethicorum libri*, in S. Thomae de Aquino, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, in *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII edita* (Rome: ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969), XLVII, 41 (1098b): 'Divisis itaque bonis tripliciter et his quidem exterius dictis, his autem circa animam et corpora, circa animam principalissime dicimus et maxime bona'; S. Thomae, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*: 'Peripatetici autem [...] posuerunt bona quidem exteriora esse minima bona, bona autem corporis quasi media, sed bona principalissima ponebant bona animae' (p. 42). Following this classification, Panfilo shapes the conclusion of his premise as a climax.
[30]See *Decameron*, II. 7. 7.

the argumentative link between Panfilo's thesis and the example he chooses to illustrate it is rather problematic.[31] Alatiel does not wish to be beautiful nor does she endeavour to enhance her natural charms; her beauty is nothing more than the gift of He who infallibly knows 'ciò che ci fa bisogno', but nevertheless it causes her downfall. Hence the ironic inflexion of *Decameron*, ii. 7's conclusion, in which Alatiel undoes her own past and reverses what has been decreed for her.

At the tale's beginning, Alatiel's father, the sultan of Alexandria, sends her off to become the bride of the king of Algarve. Following a shipwreck off the coast of Majorca, she falls into the hands of Pericone da Visalgo. Pericone is a gentlemen, not a king, and becoming his mistress is the first of Alatiel's misfortunes, as Panfilo points out: 'A questo gran piacere di Pericone e di lei, non essendo la *fortuna* contenta d'averla di *moglie* d'un *re* fatta divenire *amica* d'un *castellano*, le si parò davanti più crudele amistà' (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 31). Pericone is the first of the series of eight lovers who betray and kill for Alatiel's beauty during four years of wandering across the Mediterranean world. These years, however, do not influence future events nor are they represented as a discontinuity between distinct phases of Alatiel's biography. In Panfilo's account of her story, her adventures are only an extra-temporal pause between two moments of her experience (her departure, and her return back to her father's home), which are so similar as to seem identical – a *mise en abyme*, as it were, of the theme of time's reversibility.[32]

Thus, at the end of a circular journey from east to west, which ultimately leads her back to her starting point, Alatiel reverts in all respects to her initial condition. The courtier Antigono, whom she meets in Baffa, plays a crucial role in the happy conclusion of her story. She asks for his help to be restored to her 'pristine estate' ('Se vedi [...] da potermi in alcun modo *nel mio pristino stato tornare*, priegoti l'adoperi' (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 100)). By this, however, Alatiel simply means that she wants to be sent back to her father in an honourable way ('subita speranza prendendo di dover potere ancora nello *stato real* ritornare' (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 92)): as a princess, that is, not as a merchant's wife – and before that as the mistress of castellans, dukes, princes, kings, and servants. Boccaccio instead ironically obliges his readers to take her plea literally, following a device typical of humorous literature: Antigono will keep his promise to the letter, by regaining for her not only the social status she had lost, but even her former maidenhood.

Alatiel's renewed virginity is quickly rebuilt, by re-telling her journey through ports, castles, and bedrooms as a pious pilgrimage through monasteries and other holy sites. Initially her account is not too far from the truth: Alatiel briefly reports having been shipwrecked (but she locates this event at Aiguesmortes, and not in Maiorca, where it had in fact taken place),[33] and how she soon became the object of desire not just of one, but of two young men, who tried to rape her.[34] Nevertheless, very soon her narration turns toward the reproduction of conventional literary models, in particular, as Franca Ageno and Daniela Delcorno Branca noted, by reverting to the *topos* of the virgin saved from ravishment in chivalric romances.[35] Fortunately, the two young men's criminal intent is thwarted by the arrival of 'quatro uomini, [...] nel sembiante assai autorevoli', who, after a long consultation, pull her onto one of their horses and carry her to a convent:

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[31]See Giancarlo Mazzacurati, *All'ombra di Dioneo. Tipologie e percorsi della novella da Boccaccio a Bandello*, ed. by Matteo Palumbo (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1996), p. 55; Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Scrivere un libro di novelle. Giovanni Boccaccio autore, lettore, editore* (Ravenna: Longo, 2013), p. 35.

[32]In *Decameron*, ii. 7, the representation of time recalls the 'adventure' chronotope, outlined by Bakhtin as an extra-temporal narrative sequence, in which no changes occur in the characters, despite all the adventures they undergo: see Michail Bachtin, *Estetica e romanzo*, ed. by Clara Strada Janovič (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), pp. 233–58.

[33]'Padre mio, forse il ventesimo giorno dopo la mia partita da voi, per fiera tempesta la nostra nave, sdruscita, percosse a certe piagge là in Ponente, vicine d'un luogo chiamato Aguamorta, una notte' (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 106).

[34]'Avendo me contrastante due giovani presa e per le trecce tirandomi, piagnendo io sempre forte, avvenne che, passando costoro che mi tiravano una strada per entrare in un grandissimo bosco, quatro uomini in quella ora di quindi passavano a cavallo' (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 108).

[35]See Franca Brambilla Ageno, 'Una fonte della novella di Alatiel', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 10 (1977–78), 145–48; Daniela Delcorno Branca, *Boccaccio e le storie di re Artù* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1991), pp. 19–22. The latter notes how 'Alatiel si presenta al padre in veste di "pucele" arturiana la cui verginità è stata salvata nel folto del bosco dal provvidenziale intervento di quattro cavalieri che l'hanno condotta al sicuro in un monastero, l'*abaie de nonains*, altra stazione obbligata dell'universo arturiano' (p. 22).

> dopo lungo consiglio postami sopra uno de' lor cavalli, mi menarono a uno monastero di donne secondo la lor legge religiose [...] e con gran divozione con loro insieme ho poi servito a San Cresci in Valcava, a cui le femine di quel paese voglion molto bene. (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 109)

At this point the mixture of truth and falsity in Alatiel's narration becomes compellingly comic: she transforms her four years of adventurous wanderings into a prolonged sojourn in a nunnery, but also reports how during her time there she worshipped the preposterously named Saint Crescent-in-Hollow, who is greatly honoured by women of western countries and whose name clearly contains an obscene *double entendre*. In addition to observing this strange devotion, which she picked up amongst western women, Alatiel also followed other local customs so as to gain the affection of the abbess and the nuns, who grew very solicitous for her honour:

> E assai volte in assai cose, per tema di peggio, servai i lor costumi: e domandata dalla maggiore di quelle donne, la quale esse appellan badessa, se in Cipri tornare me ne volessi, risposi che niuna cosa tanto disiderava. Ma essa, tenera del mio onore, mai a alcuna persona fidar non mi volle […], se non forse due mesi sono, venuti certi buoni uomini di Francia con le lor donne, de' quali alcun parente v'era della badessa, e sentendo essa che in Ierusalem andavano a visitare il Sepolcro […] a loro mi raccomandò. (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 111–12)

According to her false account, Alatiel travelled to Cyprus in the company of some worthy and pious kinsmen of the abbess, on their way to visit the Holy Sepulchre with their wives. Antigono points out the edifying aspects of this account, in order to enhance them:

> Solamente una parte v'ha lasciata a dire, la quale io stimo che, per ciò che bene non sta a lei di dirlo, l'abbia fatto: e questo è quanto quegli gentili uomini e donne, con li quali venne, dicessero della onesta vita la quale con le religiose donne aveva tenuta e della sua virtù e de' suoi laudevoli costumi. (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 117)

Finally, after convincing Alatiel's father of his daughter's virginity by means of this spurious story, she is delivered back into the hands of the king of Algarve as the virgin that she had been before several lovers and many a perilous adventure:

> E essa, che con otto uomini forse diecemilia volte giaciuta era, allato a lui si coricò per pulcella e fecegliele credere che così fosse; e reina con lui lietamente poi più tempo visse. E per ciò si disse 'Bocca basciata non perde ventura, *anzi rinuova come fa la luna*'. (*Decameron*, ii. 7. 121–22)

At the end of the tale, Alatiel renews her virginity just as the moon renews its cycle. Through this final reference to restored chastity and the reversibility of time, Boccaccio parodies the *quaestio* of the virgin in the same way as in *Decameron,* i. 1 he parodies the *quaestio* of the sinner – those readers who could grasp the allusion must have found the comedy of both *Decameron* tales irresistible. If we compare them to Nastagio's story and to its witty reinvention of Elinando's *exemplum*,[36] for instance, we may observe that, in these two narratives, parody does not issue from a reversal of the source, but from the abasement of the original theme.[37] The power to annul a past event or to sanctify an obstinate sinner is not attributed to God, but rather to a girl and to a notary of questionable morals; it is a *human* prerogative, which may be exerted only among their fellow humans. It is, moreover, a power which may be exerted by lying; or, if we wish for a more nuanced formulation, which coincides with the fascination of storytelling: it may falsify reality but it saves the reputations of both Ciappelletto and Alatiel, just as it saves the narrators' lives in the *cornice*.

For those readers who were able to detect Boccaccio's allusion, a comic effect must also have been generated by the radical simplification of theological subtleties, from the refusal to look at them closely or take them seriously. The meaning of this denial, however, is not simply parodistic. Both tales refer to the same argumentative scheme, which Millicent Marcus, Franco Fido, Francesco Bruni, and Lucia

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[36]On Boccaccio's rewriting of this *exemplum* in *Decameron*, v. 8, see Cesare Segre, 'La novella di Nastagio degli Onesti (*Dec*. V viii): i due tempi della visione', in *Semiotica filologica. Testo e modelli culturali* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), pp. 87–96; Bodo Guthmüller, 'Inferno cristiano e mitologia di Amore nella novella Nastagio degli Onesti (*Dec*. V. 8)', *Rassegna europea di letteratura italiana*, 25 (2005), 9–21 (pp. 15–17); Michelangelo Picone, 'La civiltà cavalleresca in due novelle del "Decameron" (V. 8 e 9)', *Rassegna europea di letteratura italiana*, 32 (2008), 37–56 (pp. 44, 47–50).

[37]On parody in the *Decameron*, see Branca, pp. 335–46; Luciano Rossi, 'Ironia e parodia nel *Decameron*: da Ciappelletto a Griselda', in *La Novella italiana. Atti del Convegno di Caprarola* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1989), i, 365–405.

Battaglia have identified through different methodologies and for different interpretive purposes.[38] Boccaccio suspends judgment on religion and implicitly declares that what Dante had done thirty years before with the *Divine Comedy* is now impossible. Not only does he not experience Dante's miraculous *visio*, which, *exceptionally*, makes God's inscrutable action visible, but he also suggests that we may be wrong whenever we try to discern that action by proclaiming saints. We may not know whether God can sanctify an obdurate sinner or restore virginity. Therefore, we should follow a salutary prescription, which is both ethical *and* literary, and direct our attention to human actions and acts, since humanity sometimes, exceptionally, may actually undo what has already been done.

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[38]See Millicent Marcus, *An Allegory of Form. Literary Self-Consciousness in the 'Decameron'* (Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1979), pp. 11–12; Franco Fido, *Il regime delle simmetrie imperfette. Studi sul 'Decameron'* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988), p. 59, and Idem, 'The Tale of Ser Ciappelletto (I. 1)', in *The 'Decameron' First Day in Perspective. Volume One of the 'Lectura Boccaccii'*, ed. by Elissa Weaver (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: The University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 59–76 (pp. 69, 71); Francesco Bruni, *Boccaccio. L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1990), pp. 118–19; Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Boccaccio* (Rome: Salerno editrice, 2000): 'dichiarati inconoscibili i destini escatologici degli uomini in *Dec.*, I 1, e dichiarate indistinguibili tra loro le tre fedi praticate dal mondo noto in *Dec.*, I 3, le successive novantotto novelle si limiteranno a "descrivere" l'infinita "varietas morum" degli esseri umani' (p. 199).